

TTB - Colossians & Philemon

Time and Location

- **[SLIDE -TIMELINE]** During Paul's third journey into the Gentile world, he spent almost three years living in the city of Ephesus (52-55 CE). We talked about this a few weeks ago in our lesson on the book of Ephesians. For at least two years, Paul taught and disciplined the believers in Ephesus in the lecture hall of Tyrannus.
- **[SLIDE -MAP - wide]** The area we are talking about is modern-day Turkey
- **[SLIDE -MAP - tight]** About 100 miles East of Ephesus, the Lycus River meets the Maeander River in the Lycus valley. Three important cities occupied the valley: Laodicea, Colossae, and Hierapolis. The Romans controlled these cities as part of the Province of Asia. Hierapolis and Laodicea faced one another from opposite sides of the valley, with the Lycus River flowing between them. Colossae sat a few miles further upstream.
- **[SLIDE - HOT SPRINGS]** Hierapolis was well known for its geothermal hot springs, which create these very interesting terraced structures made from the hard, limestone water that comes out of the springs.
- Colossae, on the other hand, had cold water springs.
- We'll come back to talk about these cities later when we get to the book of Revelation, because later in the first century they were under the authority of John the Apostle, and Jesus gave John some messages to give to the believers in these cities, including this one to the Laodiceans:
 - I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth. (Revelation 3:15-16)
- In addition to the hot springs, the Lycus Valley was a great place to raise sheep, and Colossae was known for special red wool called *colossinum*.
- All three towns were destroyed by earthquakes in 17 CE and in 60 CE, but were rebuilt each time.

Community

- The communities of believers in the Lycus valley were not founded by Paul.
- Colossians 1:7 indicates that the believers in Colossae (and the other cities) were taught about the gospel by a Gentile man named Epaphroditus (Ἐπαφρόδιτος), who went by the shortened form Epaphras.
- Epaphras was a disciple of Paul. Paul calls him "our beloved fellow bond-servant" (Colossians 1:7), "a bond-servant of Christ Jesus" (Colossians 4:12), and "my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus" (Philemon 23)
- Epaphras was originally from Colossae. Paul says in Colossians 4:12, "Epaphras, who is one of your own..."
- There was a strong Jewish community in Laodicea. The city itself was founded by the Seleucid Greek king Antiochus II around 260 BCE and named for his wife Laodice. He populated the city with about 2,000 Jewish families from Babylon and Mesopotamia, and the Jewish presence in Laodicea continued into the first century.
- The believers in Laodicea met in the home of a woman named Nympha (Colossians 4:15).
- Meanwhile, the believers at Colossae met in the home of a wealthy Colossian named Philemon, who led the community along with a deacon named Archippus (Colossians 1:1-8, 4:17).

- As we will see, it appears that the Colossian community was mostly comprised of Gentiles.

Context of the Letter

- **[SLIDE -TIMELINE]** About a decade later, when Paul was in prison in Rome during the reign of Nero, Epaphras came to visit him, or was for some reason imprisoned with him, and told Paul some troubling news from Colossae about some teachings that the community there was being led astray into.
- We will come back to this as we look at chapter 2, but it's important to understand, just going into the book of Colossians, that Paul is worried about the Colossian believers being led astray into teachings that contradict the Torah and the teachings that Paul taught Epaphras.
- The epistles to the Colossians and the Ephesians were delivered by Tychicus:
 - Colossians 4:7–9 — As to all my affairs, Tychicus, our beloved brother and faithful servant and fellow bond-servant in the Lord, will bring you information. For I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts; and with him is Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of your own. They will inform you about the whole situation here.
 - Ephesians 6:21–22 — Now, so that you also may know about my circumstances as to what I am doing, Tychicus, the beloved brother and faithful servant in the Lord, will make everything known to you. I have sent him to you for this very purpose, so that you may know about us, and that he may comfort your hearts.

Introduction (1:1-12)

- Colossians 1:2 — “saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ”
 - Jews and Gentiles
- Colossians 1:4 — “love which you have for all the saints”
 - Exemplified in their gift to the Jewish believers in Jerusalem
- Colossians 1:9 — “that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding”
 - **wisdom (chochmah), understanding (binah), and knowledge (da’at).**
 - We find these three words in different places throughout the Bible, but one of the key locations is in Proverbs 3:19–20 — “The LORD by *wisdom* founded the earth, by *understanding* He established the heavens. By His *knowledge* the deeps were broken up.”
 - **[SLIDE]** Wisdom = חכמה, *chochmah*
 - Wisdom generally refers to the capacity of reason with a moral component to choose the good and reject evil. The Proverbs describe biblical wisdom as the antithesis of wickedness and folly.
 - **[SLIDE]** Understanding = בינה, *binah*
 - Understanding presents insight into the complex, the ability to conceptualize beyond the obvious surface of a problem and propose a solution, and the discernment to tell the difference between one thing and another.
 - **[SLIDE]** Knowledge = דעת, *da’at*

- Knowledge pertains to the realization of truth, spiritual revelation, and experience of other things and beings outside of oneself.

Who is Jesus? (1:13-20)

- [explain the text]
- Saul's mystical encounter with Yeshua had pushed him past merely accepting Yeshua as the Messiah. Saul insisted, "He is the Son of God." Saul understood Yeshua of Nazareth to somehow be the human embodiment of the unseen God: "The image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (Colossians 1:15). "In Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form ... and He is the head over all rule and authority" (Colossians 2:9-10). [TSA 8.16]

The Gentiles and Paul's Ministry (1:21-29)

- 1:21 — You gentiles used to be hostile to these ideas about Jesus, you were engaged in evil deeds.
- 1:22-23 — Now you are holy, set apart, but you need to keep on walking in faithfulness to God.
 - Hope of the gospel = resurrection from the dead
- 1:26 — Mystery of the gospel
 - Because Colossians and Ephesians were written around the same time, it is helpful to see what Paul says in Ephesians about the "mystery" of the gospel in order to understand what he means here in Colossians.
 - **[READ Ephesians 3:1-9]**
 - **[SLIDE]** In essence, this is Paul's Gospel, the good news to the Gentiles:
 - Gentiles can, *as Gentiles*, be saved from the wrath of God, the Day of the Lord, that is coming, and gain access to the Kingdom of God.

True Wisdom (2:1-5)

- 2:2-3 — "Christ Himself, 3 in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge"
 - **[SLIDE]** Proverbs 8:22-23 — "The LORD created me [Wisdom] at the beginning (*reisheet*) of His way, Before His works of old. From eternity I was established, From the beginning (*reisheet*), from the earliest times of the earth.
 - The Hebrew in this verse connects Wisdom with the work of creation in Genesis 1.
 - **[SLIDE]** In the beginning (*beresheet*) God created the heaven and the earth. (Genesis 1:1)
 - The early Aramaic paraphrases of the Torah, called the Targums, took this idea to the next level by directly connecting the personified Wisdom of God to the story of creation in their paraphrase of the text.
 - **[SLIDE]** "From the beginning, with Wisdom the LORD created and perfected the heavens and the earth." (Genesis 1:1, *Targum Neofiti*)
 - **[SLIDE]** "In Wisdom the LORD created." (Genesis 1:1, *Targum Yerushalmi*)
 - Other Jewish sources from the first century also connect the **Wisdom** of God with the **Word** of God, or the **Logos**.

- **[SLIDE]** Genesis Rabbah 1:1 — The word “Beginning (*reshit*, ראשית)” does not refer to anything except the Torah, as it says [regarding Wisdom in Proverbs 8:22], “The LORD possessed me at the beginning (*reshit*) of His way.”
- **[SLIDE]** Philo said, “The Law (Torah) is nothing else but the divine Logos prescribing what one should do and prohibiting what one should not do.”
- This is what the Apostle John was also doing in the first chapter of his gospel.
 - **[SLIDE]** John 1:1-5 — In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him not even one thing came into being that has come into being. In Him was life, and the life was the Light of mankind. And the Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not grasp it.
- This is also in keeping with the ancient prophecies about the Messiah. Isaiah talks about how the Spirit of the Lord, the Holy Spirit, would rest on the Messiah, and what that would mean for him:
 - Isaiah 11:1–2 — Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, And a Branch from his roots will bear fruit. The **Spirit of the LORD** will rest on Him, The spirit of **wisdom** and **understanding**, The spirit of counsel and strength, The spirit of **knowledge** and the fear of the LORD.

The Colossian Heresy (2:6-23)

- Early church writers attribute Simon Magus and his followers with the invention of Gnosticism. Scholars use the term “Gnosticism” loosely as an academic label that categorizes a broad variety of early Christian heresies that all shared certain common elements. The word Gnosticism is built on the Greek word Gnosis (γνῶσις), which means “knowledge.” Paul coined the term in 1 Timothy 6:20–21. [TSO 50.21]
- Daniel Lancaster says, [TSO 3.7-8]
 - The new teaching in Colossae espoused a complex angelology similar to the hierarchies of the aeons in Gnosticism. New teachers offered mysterious, secret teachings and knowledge. They delighted in the adoration of angels. They taught that “the Son of God” descended as only one of many angelic emanations of the unseen and unknowable God. They taught that He ranked highly among the thrones, dominions, rulers, and authorities, but they denied that the fullness of deity dwelt within Him. They claimed to have received secret knowledge directly from visions. They insisted that the body and all worldly pleasures are impediments to the salvation of the divine soul. They taught the Colossians to take on severe asceticism and self-abasement in order to chastise the flesh and liberate the soul. They contradicted the Torah and warned against Judaism. They issued “commandments and teachings of men,” which were based on “philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to the Messiah” (Colossians 2:8, 2:22). They taught against enjoying the physical world. They said, “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!” (Colossians 2:21). They criticized the Colossian believers for their fleshly indulgence in food and drink on biblical holy days, new moons, and Sabbath days (Colossians 2:16). Their teaching had “the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body” but all their ascetic ideals were “of no value against fleshly indulgence” (Colossians 2:23). The heresy at Colossae seems to represent an early form of Gnosticism.
- Colossians 2:8 — “elementary principles of the world”

- Not Torah. Why would Paul say that the Torah, which came from God, was the “elementary principles of the world? He is talking about the false teachings of the pagans.
- Colossians 2:11–12 — “circumcised with a circumcision performed without hands”
 - So, as we discussed in our study on Galatians, the issue Paul constantly encountered among Gentile believers was the question of whether Gentiles were obligated to undergo legal conversion, symbolized by the act of circumcision, in order to be saved.
 - Remember, Paul’s Gospel is that the Gentiles can be part of the body of faith, part of what in Ephesians 2 he calls the “commonwealth of Israel,” without needing to become Jewish.
 - Paul is using the same metaphor here. You don’t need to convert, you’re already part of the family.
- Colossians 2:14 — “having canceled the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us”
 - Not the Torah, but the actual decrees of God against the ungodly
- Colossians 2:16-17 — This passage is traditionally interpreted in a negative way. The Blue Letter Bible outline of Colossians says that this is part of Paul’s “Warning Against Judaic Ceremonialism.”
 - But that does not make sense in the context of Paul’s teaching about the authority of the Torah or the teachings of the apostles in Acts 15.
 - The logical perspective to take on this passage is that Paul means they should not allow someone to judge them **for keeping these practices**.
 - Part of the reason many people read the text in that negative way is because of words being added into the text by translators. For example, in verse 17 the NASB introduces the word “only”

The New Self (3:1-17)

- 3:1 — “Therefore” - as a result of the above....
- 3:11 — There is no “distinction”
 - Paul repeatedly emphasized “there is no distinction” in regard to entrance into the community of Messiah, into the kingdom, and into the World to Come, precisely because there is a distinction in all other regards. (see <https://ffoz.org/messiah/articles/there-is-no-distinction>)

Relations to Others (3:18-4:1)

- Similar to Ephesians 5:22-6:8

Closing Thoughts and Greetings

- 4:2 — “Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it”
 - The Greek text says “the prayer”. This is the same in Acts 1:14, Acts 6:4,
- 4:5–6 — “Your speech must always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt”
- 4:7-9 — Tychicus and Onesimus
- 4:10–11 — Paul’s three Jewish companions
 - Aristarchus was a Jewish disciple from Thessalonica who accompanied Paul on his travels from Ephesus all the way to Rome. (Acts 20:4, 27:2) He is first mentioned as one of those seized by an

angry mob in Ephesus (Acts 19:29). Paul described him as a fellow worker in Philemon 24. Tradition says that Aristarchus was martyred in Rome under Nero.

- Barnabas' cousin Mark — Who wrote the gospel of Mark. A very ancient tradition asserts that Mark was Peter's "interpreter".
- Yeshua who is called Justus — Nothing else is known of this specific Jewish believer.
- Paul's Gentile companions
 - Epaphras - we talked about him before
 - 4:14 — Luke had medical training: "Luke, the beloved physician." Luke became one of Saul's most loyal companions and, ultimately, the chronicler of his work. Eusebius also mentions that Luke was a physician:
 - Luke, by birth an Antiochene and by profession a physician, was for long periods of time a companion of Paul and was closely associated with the other apostles as well. So he left us examples of the art of healing souls which he learnt from them in two divinely inspired books. (Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 3.4.6) [TSA 12.21]
 - Demas — Little is known about Demas. Initially he supported Paul's ministry and was mentioned both here and in Philemon 24. However, in 2 Timothy 4:10 (about 4 years later) Paul writes that Demas deserted him because of his love for the present world.

Philemon

- Written by Paul and Timothy
- To Philemon
 - Leader of the congregation in Colossae
 - Wife Apphia
 - Deacon Archippus
- Onesimus
 - Colossians 4:9 says that Onesimus was sent by Paul to (along with Tychicus) deliver the letter to the Colossians.
 - v. 10 — Paul describes him as "my son Onesimus, whom I fathered in my imprisonment"
 - Paul led him to the Messiah
- From *The Sent Ones*, Lesson 32-33, page 15:
 - In the same year that Paul arrived in Rome, a powerful earthquake shook the Lycus Valley. The city of Colossae, only sixteen miles upstream from the Hierapolis, suffered heavy damage from the earthquake as well. Eusebius says that the quake destroyed Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis. The smaller and less affluent city of Colossae lacked the prestige and wealth to rebuild in a significant manner. The earthquake marked the beginning of the city's decline.
 - Sometime around the time of the earthquake, perhaps taking advantage of the confusion caused by the quake, Onesimus fled from his owner. Apparently, he took some valuables from the house before he left.

- The situation with Onesimus created a difficult problem for Paul and Epaphras. The solution required a delicate strategy. On the one hand, they may have felt that they had a biblical obligation to protect Onesimus. The Torah forbids returning an escaped Jewish slave to his master:
 - You shall not hand over to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you. He shall live with you in your midst, in the place which he shall choose in one of your towns where it pleases him; you shall not mistreat him. (Deuteronomy 23:15–16)
- On the other hand, Roman law forbade aiding and abetting a fugitive slave. Furthermore, Philemon would certainly find out that they had his slave. What would he say when he learned that the Apostle Paul harbored that thief and fugitive?