

Really Useful Guides

Colossians and Philemon

Derek Tidball

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The Bible Reading Fellowship

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Contents

1	Why read Colossians?	7
2	Start here	11
	What do we know about Colossae?	11
	Epaphras: the church planter	14
	The church at Colossae	15
	Why did Paul write to them?	16
	The key message of Colossians	21
3	Guide to the contents	27
	Two outlines: rough and detailed	27
	Introduction, 1:1–14	30
	Main message, 1:15–23	32
	Implications for Paul's ministry, 1:24–2:5	34
	Implications for their spiritual maturity, 2:6–15	37
	Implications for freedom from other religious claims, 2:16–23	41
	Implications for personal living, 3:1–17	42
	Implications for social relationships, 3:18–4:1	49
	Final encouragements, 4:2–6	52
	Closing greetings, 4:7–18	54

4	Colossians among other New Testament writings	59
	Colossians: similarities and differences	59
	Colossians and Ephesians	62
	Colossians and other celebrations of Christ	63
5	The continuing message of Colossians	67
6	Colossians: questions for reflection and discussion	75
7	Philemon	79
	Who's who?	79
	What's the story?	81
	How does Paul handle it?	82
8	The continuing message of Philemon	85
9	Philemon: questions for reflection and discussion	91
	Further reading	93

1

Why read Colossians? A personal reflection

I confess I got to know the letter to Colossians as a stepping stone to the more demanding letter to Ephesians. The letters have much in common, but Colossians is slightly easier and shorter, so I thought it would be a good starting point. I wasn't sure I was ready to climb Everest, but the shorter Annapurna might be a good practice climb. But once I read and studied Colossians, I became completely captivated by it.

Colossians is full of rich teaching about Jesus Christ and spells out the very practical implications for everyday living of who he is and what he has achieved. It is not unique in what it claims about Jesus, although it offers fresh insight into him, but it is one of the clearest writings in the New Testament and it immediately goes on to spell out the implications for us and to say, 'Therefore...'

It speaks powerfully to our own day for several different reasons:

- It addresses an age of religious pluralism, somewhat like our own.
- It expresses the good news of Jesus in fresh ways which especially speak to those who feel oppressed in life.
- It deals with questions of 'spirituality'.
- It confronts the theme of power and the powers which may drive our society.
- It works out what it means to acknowledge Jesus as Lord in very down-to-earth terms as far as our personal characters, our church relationships and our living in our families, workplaces and the wider world are concerned.

And it does all this succinctly, without a wasted word!

While its reach is broad, it never loses its focus on Jesus, who is the key to creation and the new creation, and to redeeming fallen humanity and our broken world.

Whether you want to learn what is the essence of the Christian faith, or whether you are a long-standing Christian, this is a letter which will speak to you. It

tells us about the basic gospel but with a view to helping us to become mature in our faith. As one ancient leader in the church said about the Bible generally, this is a place where sheep can safely paddle in the shallows and elephants can swim in the depths.

I hope you are not only captivated by the letter, but by Jesus the Christ with whom it is concerned.

We combine our guide to Colossians with an introduction to the short note to Philemon, as has become customary for reasons we will mention later.

2

Start here

Colossians is an unusual letter because Paul's letters are mostly written to churches he had planted or to people who were close friends. Colossians is an exception, as is Romans. Although he hadn't visited Colossae, he obviously knew the church and its needs well, and cared enough to write to them, to help them mature in their faith in Christ.

What do we know about Colossae?

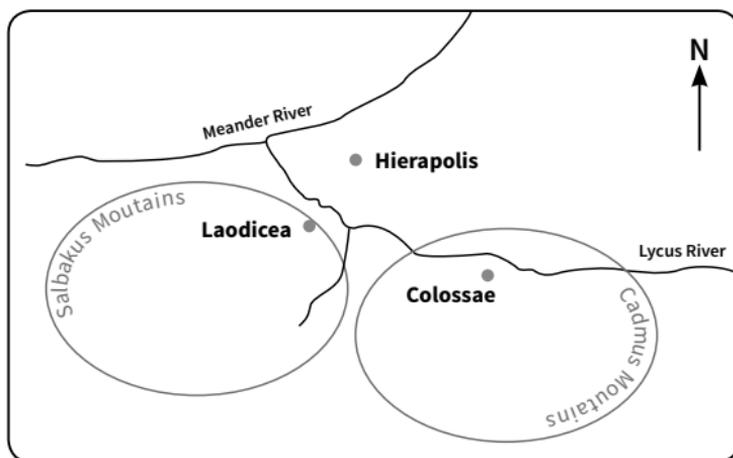
Colossae was a little town in what we now know as southern Turkey. It was about 190 kilometres east of Ephesus, with the towns of Laodicea and Hierapolis nearby. The river Lycus ran through it, which was rich in minerals with the result that its fields were fertile pasture for sheep. Those sheep produced a particularly fine quality of wool, for which the town was renowned.

Its prosperity and significance were also due to its being situated at the major crossroads where the east-west and north-south trade routes of the Roman Empire crossed. By Paul's day, those roads had been rerouted and, while Laodicea had benefited from this, Colossae had suffered. So Colossae had certainly seen more prosperous days, leading one scholar to conclude that it was 'the least important church' to which Paul wrote.

Another important factor, which has a bearing on the background to Paul's letter, is that the area was subject to earthquakes and the river was liable to flooding. Its geological context, then, provoked a sense of instability, uncertainty and even fear. The town, according to some reports, was destroyed by an earthquake, along with Laodicea and Hierapolis, in the early 60s AD, around the time Paul was writing to them.



Asia Minor: major trade routes



Lycus Valley

Epaphras: the church planter

If the town was now off the main route, how was the church in Colossae established? The letter tells us that Epaphras, who came from Colossae, took the gospel back home with him (1:7, 4:12). While we cannot be sure, it is often thought that Epaphras came to faith in Christ through Paul's missionary activity in Ephesus and, having discovered the good news himself, with Paul's encouragement (1:7), naturally shared it with his family and associates on his return home.

We know little of Epaphras. His name is a Gentile one and is associated with the worship of Aphrodite. So, it is likely that he was converted to Christ from a family who worshipped the Greek goddess of love and beauty. We cannot tell where he came in the social pecking order but, piecing together some hints, some think he might have been a slave.

By the time Paul wrote to the church, we know that Epaphras had returned to be with him in his imprisonment and had become a valued member of his team (1:7). He was noted for being assiduous in serving Christ generally, and in his praying and working for the church in Colossae in particular (4:12–13).

In telling Paul about the progress of the gospel at Colossae, Epaphras had raised an issue which, if uncorrected, was likely to be disastrous for the future well-being of the church. It is this issue (which we will explore in a later section) that caused Paul to write to them. Perhaps some felt he had let the church down by telling Paul it was not a perfect church, since Paul seems to write a little defensively about him, assuring the church that Epaphras was ‘wrestling in prayer for you’ and ‘working hard for you’ so that they ‘might stand firm in the will of God, mature and fully assured’ (4:12–13).

The church at Colossae

There are two things about the social make-up of the church worth mentioning before we look at the reason for Paul’s letter. First, Colossae was populated by those associated with sheep farming and its attendant trades like the dyeing and selling of wool. So, few of those who joined the Jesus community would have been educated and many would have been illiterate. That, however, does not stop Paul sharing some very deep theology with them. He does not shy away from it, assuming they would not understand it, but stretches their hearts and minds in what he writes.



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