

Notes & Outlines

COLOSSIANS

J. Vernon McGee

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WRITER: Paul (Colossians 1:1)

DATE: About A.D. 62

CHURCH AT COLOSSE:

Paul had never been to Colosse when he wrote this epistle (Colossians 2:1). He was in Ephesus for about two years where he had his most fruitful ministry (Acts 19:8-19). Colosse was 75 to 100 miles east of Ephesus, and visitors from Colosse had heard Paul and had come to know Christ. Apparently Philemon was one of these. A church came into existence in Colosse (Philemon 2). Epaphras was the minister of the Colossian church (Colossians 1:4-8; 4:12, 13). Paul intended to visit there when he was released from prison (Philemon 22). Paul wrote to this church as though it were his own.

PROBLEM AT COLOSSE:

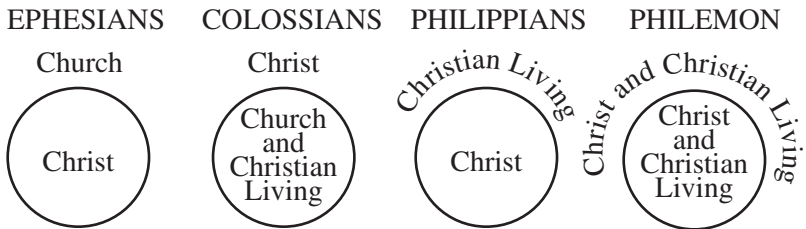
Colosse, located in southwest Phrygia in Asia Minor, near Laodicea, was beset with oriental mysticism. Gnosticism had evidently intruded with its Greek pantheistic philosophy of the demiurge.

| GNOSTICISM | PAUL'S ANSWER |
|--|-----------------------------|
| (1) They had an exclusive spirit (were aristocratic in wisdom). | Col. 1:28 |
| (2) They held speculative tenets on creation — that God did not create the universe directly, but created a creature who in turn created another creature, until one finally created the physical universe. Christ was considered a creature in this long series of creations. | Col. 1:15-19; 2:18 |
| (3) Their ethical practice was asceticism (influenced by Greek Stoicism) and unrestrained licentiousness (from Greek Epicureanism). | Col. 2:16, 23 Col. 3:5-9 |

MESSAGE OF COLOSSIANS:

Colossians is the chart and compass that enable the believer to sail between the ever-present Scylla and Charybdis. “Pure Christianity lives between two dangers ever present: the danger that it will evaporate into a philosophy — philosophies of the atonement...and the danger that it will freeze into a form” (Dr. Scofield). Jesus said that He is the water of life. He did not say that He was the ice of life; He did not say that He was the steam of life. We are not told to add something to Christ nor to subtract from Him.

The message of this epistle can best be seen by comparing it with other prison epistles.



Subject: Ephesians — the body of believers, called the church, of which Christ is the Head

Colossians — the Head of the body who is Christ; the body is only secondary (Colossians 1:18)

Theme: Philippians — Christian living is the theme and the periphery of the circle where Christ is the center.

Colossians — Christ is the theme and the periphery of the circle where Christian living is the center.

Philippians emphasizes the *kenosis* — Christ became a Servant (Philippians 2:7).

Colossians emphasizes the *pleroma* — Christ is the fullness of God (Colossians 2:9).

“Thou, O Christ, art all I want; more than all in Thee I find” (Charles Wesley).

OUTLINE:

I. **DOCTRINAL**, Chapters 1, 2

In Christ, the fullness (pleroma) of God, we are made full.

A. Introduction, Chapter 1:1-8

B. Paul's prayer, Chapter 1:9-14

C. Person of Christ, Chapter 1:15-19

D. Objective work of Christ for sinners, Chapter 1:20-23

E. Subjective work of Christ for saints, Chapter 1:24-29

F. Christ, the answer to philosophy, Chapter 2:1-15

(for the HEAD)

G. Christ, the answer to ritual, Chapter 2:16-23

(for the HEART)

II. **PRACTICAL**, Chapters 3, 4

*Christ, the fullness of God, poured out in life through believers.
(Breaking the alabaster box of ointment in the world.)*

A. Thoughts and affections of believers are heavenly,
Chapter 3:1-4

(The believer's heart should be in heaven where his Head is.)

B. Living of believers is holy, Chapters 3:5 — 4:6

*(In all relationships — personal, social, marital, parental,
capital and labor — the believer should manifest Christ.)*

C. Fellowship of believers is hearty, Chapter 4:7-18

*(Roster of faithful workers similar to Romans 16 and
Hebrews 11.)*

COMMENT:

I. **DOCTRINAL**, Chapters 1, 2

In Christ, the fullness (pleroma) of God, we are made full.

A. Introduction, Chapter 1:1-8

v. 1 — Paul's standard opening associates his name with that of Timothy, who may have visited Colosse.

v. 2 — He does not mean to differentiate between the saints and the faithful. They are the same people.

v. 3 — Paul gives thanks directly to "God...the Father." This is His redemptive provision (John 3:16). Gnosticism did not believe one could go directly to God, but rather through the emanations of God.

vv. 4, 5 — Paul links the trinity of graces for believers:

Faith — past
Love — present
Hope — future

v. 6 — “World” is *kosmos*, meaning the Roman world. Vincent considers this hyperbole. Gospel preaching had already far-reaching results. It reveals the universal character of the gospel.

“Fruit” is produced in those who believe.

v. 7 — Epaphras may have been the founder of the church, as some suppose.

v. 8 — “Love” is the fruit of the Spirit.

B. Paul’s prayer, Chapter 1:9-14

v. 9 — Paul put the Colossians on his prayer list.

“Knowledge” is *epignosis*, superknowledge. The Gnostics boasted that they had superknowledge. Here Paul confines it to the will of God, which is expressed in the Word of God. It gives “wisdom and spiritual understanding.” “Wisdom,” in all its forms occurs forty times in this epistle.

v. 10 — “Worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing” means that they would not be obsequious to man.

“Increasing in the knowledge of God” — a Christian should not be static but alive and growing in the Word of God.

v. 11 — Strength and power come from God and are produced by the Holy Spirit in patience, longsuffering, and joyfulness.

v. 12 — God, by His grace, has given us an inheritance with the saints in light.

v. 13 — We have been delivered from the kingdom of Satan (Ephesians 2:2) into the kingdom of “the Son of his love” (ASV). This is the present aspect of the kingdom of God.

v. 14 — Forgiveness is always associated with the blood of Christ. God does not arbitrarily or sentimentally forgive sin. “Redemption” is *apolutrosin*, meaning to set free an enslaved people.

C. Person of Christ, Chapter 1:15-19

This section on the person of Christ is the answer to all heresy con-

cerning His person. One of the first heresies was Arianism. Arius of Alexandria said that the Lord Jesus Christ was a creature. The Council of Nicaea, A.D. 325, answered this heresy: “The Son is very man of very man, and very God of very God.” Later Socinus propagated this heresy that Jesus was not God. This is the basis of Unitarianism and some of the cults, including Jehovah’s Witnesses.

There are nine marks of identification of Christ that make Him different and superior:

v. 15 — (1) “Image” (*eikon*; Hebrews 1:3; John 1:18). He could not be the image of God unless He *was* God.

(2) “The first-born of all creation” (*prototokos*; John 1:14, 18; 3:16). God is the everlasting Father; the Son is the everlasting Son. His position in the Trinity is that of Son. “First-born” indicates His priority before all creation. His headship of all creation does not necessarily mean He was born first (Hebrews 1:6; Revelation 1:5; Romans 8:29). In incarnation He is the Son of God in a new sense. The angel’s announcement to Mary was, “...That holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35). Christ is the same in substance, equal in power and glory with the Father.

v. 16 — (3) “By him were all things created” clears up any question about Christ being the Creator or a creature in verse 15 (cp. John 1:3; Hebrews 1:2).

There are two kinds of creation — “visible and invisible.” There are different gradations of rank in spiritual intelligences: “thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers.”

(4) He not only created all things, they were created *for* Him.

v. 17 — (5) “He is before all things” — in the preincarnate Christ, all fullness dwells. In the incarnate Christ, all fullness dwells.

(6) He holds all things together. He maintains creation. He directs it. “Consist” (*sunesteken*) is to hold together (cp. Hebrews 1:3).

v. 18 — (7) “He is the head of the body, the church” (cp. Ephesians 1:22). He is the firstborn from the dead. He is the only One who has been raised in a glorified body (cp. Psalm 2:7; Acts 13:33; Hebrews 1:5, 5:5; Revelation 1:5).

(8) “That in all things he might have the pre-eminence” — the will of Christ must prevail throughout all of God’s creation.

v. 19 — (9) The fullness (*pleroma*) was at home, the full-fullness. Jesus was 100% God — not 99.44%.

Relationship to the Father, v. 15

Relationship to creation, vv. 16, 17

Relationship to the church, vv. 18, 19

Relationship to the cross, v. 20

D. Objective work of Christ for sinners, Chapter 1:20-23

v. 20 — Christ “made peace through the blood of his cross” (cp. Romans 5:1). God is not a big policeman waiting around the corner ready to pounce on the sinner. God has His arms outstretched and is saying to the sinner, “Come, and I will give you redemption rest.” Reconciliation is toward man. God is reconciled by the cross of Christ. He is asking man to be reconciled to Him (2 Corinthians 5:18-20).

“All things” is limited to all things appointed for reconciliation (in just such a way as “the loss of all things” is limited to what things Paul had to lose [Philippians 3:8]).

“Things in heaven” indicate that not only must we be made ready for heaven, but heaven must be made ready to receive us. The Lord Jesus said, “I go to prepare a place for you” (John 14:2). By the incarnation, God came down to man; by the blood of Jesus, man is brought up to God. Notice that it does not add, “things under the earth” (cp. Philippians 2:10).

v. 21 — “Enemies in your mind” reminds us that there is mental alienation from God as well as moral alienation. This explains the fierce antagonism to God on the part of some so-called intellectuals.

v. 22 — “Body of his flesh” is an explicit declaration, as Docetic Gnosticism stated that Christ suffered in appearance but not in a real body.

“Unblamable” means *without blemish*. This was the requirement for a sacrificial animal.

“Unreprovable” means *unaccusable; unchargeable*. “It is God that justifies.”

v. 23 — This is not conditional, based on the future. It is not something that shall be if something else is. Rather, this is the “if” of argument, often used by Paul. It could be translated, “*Since* ye continue in the faith....”

E. Subjective work of Christ for saints, Chapter 1:24-29

v. 24 — A free translation could be, “Now I, Paul, rejoice in the midst of my sufferings for you, and I am filling up in my flesh that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ for His body’s sake, which is the church.” It was necessary to fill up that which was lacking of the suffering of Christ.

- (1) There are sufferings of Christ that we cannot share:
 - (a) Human suffering;
 - (b) Suffering as the Son of God;
 - (c) Suffering as the sacrifice for the sins of the world.
- (2) There are sufferings of Christ that we can share:
 - (a) Suffering for righteousness’ sake;
 - (b) Suffering in the measure we identify ourselves with Christ for the proclamation of the gospel. (See author’s tape, “The Unfinished Sufferings of Christ.”)

v. 25 — “Dispensation” is *economy*; *stewardship*.

vv. 26, 27 — “Mystery” is a *sacred secret*. This looks forward to the day when we shall be like Him (1 John 3:2). We are in Christ down here at present.

vv. 28, 29 — “Perfect in Christ Jesus” means *complete*. This was the goal of Paul.

F. Christ, the answer to philosophy, Chapter 2:1-15 (for the HEAD)

There were five errors that endangered the Colossian church:

- (1) Enticing words, vv. 4-7
- (2) Philosophy, vv. 8-13
- (3) Legality, vv. 14-17
- (4) Mysticism, vv. 18, 19
- (5) Asceticism, vv. 20-23

v. 1 — “Conflict” is *agony* — called *prayer agony* by MacPhail.

Laodicea was located on the river Lycos, next to Colosse. It was much more prominent than Colosse. Before 250 B.C. it was called Diosopolis. Here, in 364 A.D., the council to determine the canon of Scripture met (Revelation 3:14-22).

“As many as have not seen my face in the flesh” makes it obvious that Paul had not been to Colosse.

v. 2 — “Heart” indicates the entire man, the whole propulsive nature of man. “Knit together” is *compacted* (with the thought of instruction).

“Full assurance” is *under full sail*.

“Mystery of God” is *Christ in His incarnation*. “He was very God of very God and very man of very man.”

v. 3 — We may go to Christ for wisdom and knowledge. “Next to knowledge is knowing where to find out.”

v. 4 — “Beguile you” means to *victimize you*. “Enticing words” are *oratory* or *sweet talk*.

v. 5 — “Order” is a military term, meaning *to stand shoulder to shoulder*.

“Steadfastness” is a *solid front; immovable*. Paul is commending them for their faithfulness in the face of overwhelming odds against them.

v. 6 — “Received” a person, Jesus Christ.

v. 7 — “Rooted” as a tree, a living thing.

“Built up” as a house

“In the faith” is *by your faith*.

v. 8 — “Beware” is *look out!*

“Lest any man” — notice that Paul mentions no names.

“Spoil” is *booty* in a Roman victory parade.

“Philosophy” — a true philosopher is a seeker after the truth. Christ is the answer. False philosophy is like a blind man looking in a dark room for a black cat that isn’t there.

“Tradition of men” — Christ condemned religious rulers for this.

“Rudiments” (*stoicheion*), the ABCs.

v. 9 — “Fullness” is *pleroma*. This is a clear-cut statement of the deity of Christ.

v. 10 — “Complete in him” may be translated, “Ye are ready for the voyage of life in Him,” picturing a sailing ship out on a voyage.

v. 11 — The real circumcision for today is the new birth (cp. Galatians 6:15; John 3:3).

v. 12 — Identification with Christ is the meaning of being “buried with him in baptism” (see notes on Romans 6:1-5).

“Risen with him” — Lord Lyndhurst, lord chancellor of Great Britain and one of the sharpest legal minds of all time, said: “I know pretty well what evidence is; and I tell you, such evidence as that for the resurrection has never broken down yet.”

v. 13 — It is not the improvement of the old nature, but the impartation of a new nature.

v. 14 — Since the Law was given to discipline the old nature, and the believer is given a new nature, the Law as a way of life was removed *per se* by the cross of Christ.

v. 15 — The spiritual victory that Christ won for the believer is of inestimable value.

G. Christ, the answer to ritual, Chapter 2:16-23 *(for the HEART)*

v. 16 — A believer is not to observe ordinances that are only ritual and liturgical, as they have no present value (cp. 1 Corinthians 8:8-13).

v. 17 — “Shadow” is *picture; a photograph*. All of the rituals of the Law were pictures of Christ. Now that Christ has come, we have the reality, the person of Christ, and we no longer need pictures.

v. 18 — Paul is here condemning the Gnostics who made a pretense of wisdom.

“Intruding into those things which he hath not seen” is a pretense. The American Standard Version translates it, “Dwelling in the things which he hath seen.”

v. 19 — “Not holding the Head” indicates a loose relationship to Christ. Therefore they do not grow spiritually.

v. 20 — “If ye be dead” might better be translated, “Since ye have

died (when Christ died), do not return to pre-cross living.”

“Ordinances” are *fads*.

v. 21 — This is separation, according to many. Actually this is monkey business — the three little monkeys see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.

v. 22 — These are part of the passing fashions of the world.

v. 23 — This is “the pride that apes humility” (Juvenal).

“Not in any honor” means it is not of any value.

II. PRACTICAL, Chapters 3, 4

*Christ, the fullness of God, poured out in life through believers.
(Breaking the alabaster box of ointment in the world.)*

A. Thoughts and affections of believers are heavenly, Chapter 3:1-4

(The believer’s heart should be in heaven where his Head is.)

v. 1 — “Be risen” is *were raised* — when Christ was raised, we were raised (Romans 6:4, 5).

v. 2 — “Affection” is *mind* — think about things above.

v. 3 — “For ye are dead” is *for ye have died*— when Christ died, we died.

v. 4 — This is the guarantee for the future. We have died with Him; we have been raised with Him. We are in Christ. When He appears, we appear.

B. Living of believers is holy, Chapters 3:5 — 4:6

(In all relationships — personal, social, marital, parental, capital and labor — the believer should manifest Christ.)

Chapter 3

v. 5 — “Mortify” is *put to death; put in the place of death*.

“Members” refers to the energies and activities of the old man (Romans 8:6-8). Paul deals with specific sins:

“Fornication” refers to physical and spiritual fornication.

“Uncleanness” includes thoughts, words, looks, gestures.

“Inordinate affection” is *passion* (ASV); *lust*.

“Evil concupiscence” is *evil desire* (ASV).

“Covetousness” is *must-have-more-ness*.

v. 6 — God judges sinners for these sins, and God must judge believers for committing them.

v. 7 — This is the condition of believers before they were saved.

v. 8 — “Put off” as a garment.

“Malice” is *congealed anger*.

“Filthy communication” is *foul* communication — both abusive and filthy.

v. 9 — “Put off the old man” — the old man is not to control the life of the believer. Garments in Scripture are habits. We use the same expression today when we speak of riding habits or walking habits. The old man is to be put off, taken off as a garment.

v. 10 — “Put on the new” garment or habit. Nature abhors a vacuum. Putting off is not enough; we must live in the new man by the power of the Holy Spirit.

v. 11 — Christ is all in all. He is a catalyst that brings together individuals and groups who are separate and makes them one in Christ. A catalyst is a substance that is placed with elements that are opposed and brings them together in a new compound.

v. 12 — As he labeled the things of the old man that were to be put off, here he labels the specifics that go with the wardrobe of the new man. “Tender mercies” may be translated *a heart of compassion*. These all are the fruit of the Holy Spirit (cp. Galatians 5:22, 23).

v. 13 — This is the basis on which the believer is to forgive, rather than the legal basis given in the so-called Lord’s Prayer (cp. Ephesians 4:32).

vv. 14, 15 — “Love” and “peace” are both fruits of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22).

v. 16 — “The word of Christ” — “Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you” (John 15:3).

“Dwell” is *be at home* — be given the run of the house. Many folk praise the Bible but do not study it. Juvenal said, “Virtue is praised and left to starve.” This verse is fulfilled only in a Spirit-filled heart (see Ephesians 5:18-20). Of 2nd century believers, Pliny wrote to the Emperor in A.D. 112: “They meet together before day to sing a hymn to Christ as God.”

v. 17 — This is the Christian life, the *summum bonum* of life.

vv. 18-22 — See notes on Ephesians 5:22 — 6:9.

v. 23 — Christian service is that which is done to please Christ rather than men.

v. 24 — For this he will receive a reward.

v. 25 — If the believer attempts to please men, there is no reward.

Chapter 4

v. 1 — Both masters and servants must give an account to the Master in heaven (Ephesians 6:9). “Just and equal” is not to level down, but to level up.

vv. 2-6 — Here are three more areas of Christian conduct which are important:

(1) “Prayer” (vv. 2-4). Persevere in prayer. Like breathing, inhale (prayer), exhale (thanksgiving). Pray for the preaching of the gospel.

(2) “Walk in wisdom” (v. 5). The public walk is another important factor.

(3) “Speech” (v. 6). We should not be boring, but enthusiastic!

C. Fellowship of believers is hearty, Chapter 4:7-18

(Roster of faithful workers similar to Romans 16 and Hebrews 11.)

This section is similar to Romans 16. It is a roster of believers who lived, moved, and had their being in the pagan culture of the Roman Empire. They lived for God in a heathen society.

vv. 7, 8 — Tychicus was evidently the pastor of the church in Ephesus (Ephesians 6:21; Acts 20:4; 2 Timothy 4:12).

v. 9 — Onesimus was a slave of Philemon in Colosse. He had run away to Rome. Paul led him to Christ and had returned him to Philemon as a brother (see Epistle to Philemon).

v. 10 — Aristarchus (Acts 19:29) was a friend of Paul. Mark (Acts 15:37) made good (2 Timothy 4:11).

vv. 12, 13 — Epaphras was the minister at Colosse, but at this time was in prison. He had now a ministry of prayer.

v. 14 — Luke was the beloved physician.

vv. 15-18 — Personal greetings and injunctions.

v. 18 — “Remember my bonds” was evidently the motto of many believers who began to witness after Paul was imprisoned.

These notes, prepared by J. Vernon McGee, are for the purpose of giving assistance to the listeners of the THRU THE BIBLE RADIO program. They are to be used with the Bible and will be more meaningful as you look up all the Scripture references. Due to the necessary brevity of both notes and broadcasts, a list of recommended books is included for those wanting a more detailed study. These books may be obtained from a Christian library or bookstore or ordered from the publishers.

RECOMMENDED BOOKS:

- Harrison, Everett F. *Colossians: Christ All-Sufficient*. Chicago, Illinois: Moody Press, 1971.
- Hendrickson, William. *Exposition of Colossians and Philemon*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1965.
- Ironside, H. A. *Lectures on the Epistle to the Colossians*. Neptune, New Jersey: Loizeaux Brothers, 1929.
- Kelly, William. *Lectures on the Epistle to the Philippians and Colossians*. Oak Park, Illinois: Bible Truth Publishers, n.d.
- Kent, Homer A., Jr. *Treasures of Wisdom: Studies in Colossians and Philemon*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1978. (Excellent.)
- King, Guy H. *Crossing the Border*. Fort Washington, Pennsylvania: Christian Literature Crusade, 1957. (Devotional.)
- Moule, Handley C. G. *Colossians and Philemon*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1893. (This is a reprint from *The Cambridge University Bible for Schools and Colleges*. This helpful series also covers Romans, Ephesians, and Philippians.)
- Nicholson, William. *Oneness with Christ*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1903. (Devotional.)
- Robertson, A. T. *Paul and the Intellectuals*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1928.
- Thomas, W. H. Griffith. *Studies in Colossians and Philemon*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1973. (Excellent.)
- Vine, W. E. *Philippians and Colossians*. London: Oliphants, 1955. (This is an excellent treatment.)
- Wiersbe, Warren W. *Be Complete*. Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1981.
- Wuest, Kenneth S. *Ephesians and Colossians in the Greek New Testament*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1953.

SAMPLE SUMMARY FOR EACH CHAPTER
(for your personal study)

1. Theme of chapter—
2. Most important verse—
3. Most prominent word—
4. Teaching about Christ—
5. Command to obey—
6. Promise to claim—
7. New truth learned—



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