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Introduction to "Colossians"

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Colossians

In his Epistle to the Colossians, the apostle Paul contends with false teachers who were introducing pagan elements into the church that sought to eclipse the role of Christ. In response, Paul declares that Christ is supreme over both material and spiritual realities (1:18; 2:19) and sustains all things (1:17). Because He is God (1:15) and in Him the “fullness” dwells (1:19), people need not seek any other intermediary in their desire to communicate with God.

AUTHOR

The epistle of Colossians lists both Paul and Timothy as senders (1:1; cf. 1:23; 4:18), though the overall style of the letter and the language are very similar to other Pauline letters. While Colossians does have several words unique to it, that may be because of the specific situation it deals with. Some scholars claim that certain theological themes such as Christology and ecclesiology are different and more advanced than in other epistles. However, they are not necessarily new ideas, just explained in more depth because they are relevant to the specific discussions in the Colossian church. Also, early Church Fathers such as Tertullian and Irenaeus supported Pauline authorship of the letter.

DATE

The apostle composed Colossians while he was in prison (4:3, 18) in Rome around AD 60–62. Similarities to Ephesians and the same people mentioned in Colossians and Philemon, who are with Paul (4:7–17; cf. Phil. 2, 10, 23, 24), indicate that both letters were written around the same time. An earthquake destroyed Colossae and other neighboring cities around AD 61, which means Paul must have composed Colossians shortly before that.

AUDIENCE

Although Paul himself did not establish the church in Colossae, the region was probably evangelized during the time of his ministry in Ephesus (AD 52–55; Acts 19:10). The apostle seems to have converted Epaphras, who then took the gospel to his native Colossae (1:7; 4:12, 13). A small town during Roman times, overshadowed by the nearby cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis, its population consisted mainly of Phrygians, Greeks, and some Jews. Most of the church members seem to have been Gentile converts (1:27). Not only were they receptive to the gospel, they also received praise for their love in the Spirit (1:4–6, 8; 2:5).



Date of writing
ca. AD 61

PURPOSE AND MAIN THEMES

Epaphras visited Paul in prison and brought generally encouraging news about the believers in Colossae (1:7, 8; 2:5). But he also informed Paul of false teachings that some had introduced in the church, and the apostle now deals with them. The discussion in 2:8-23 indicates what those teachings entailed. They seem to have been of Jewish origin (2:11, 16), but with a tendency toward asceticism and mysticism (2:18, 23). An essential theme of the epistle is the exaltation of Christ. As the Creator and the Redeemer, He is the sole mediator between God and humanity (1:15-20; 2:10-15). Paul also discusses the cosmic implications of Christ's death and resurrection, and what that means for believers here and now (1:12-13; 2:20, 21; 3:1-4).

STRUCTURE

After Paul's customary introduction and thanksgiving (1:1-14), the apostle describes the majestic nature and glory of Christ, the one in whom "all the fullness" of God is pleased to dwell (1:19). After explaining Christ's preeminence in both creation and redemption (1:15-2:5), he then turns to how believers should live in light of what God has done and wants to do in their lives through the risen Christ (2:6-4:6). The letter then ends with a list of greetings and a closing benediction (4:7-18).

As you read through Colossians, note how many times Christ is mentioned and the way Paul describes Him in all of His divine glory and majesty.

OUTLINE:

- I. Introduction (1:1-14)
 - A. Greetings (1:1-2)
 - B. Thanksgiving (1:3-8)
 - C. Prayer for Their Continued Growth (1:9-14)
- II. Christ's Work and Paul's Ministry (1:15-2:5)
 - A. The Preeminence of Christ in Creation and Redemption (1:13-23)
 - B. Paul's Ministry for the Colossians (1:24-2:5)
- III. Counsel for Living the Christian Life (2:6-4:6)
 - A. Exhortation for Steadfastness in Christ (2:6-7)
 - B. Warning against False Religion (2:8-23)
 - C. Living for Christ (3:1-17)
 - D. Rules for Christian Households (3:18-4:1)
 - E. Final Exhortations (4:2-6)
- IV. Conclusion (4:7-18)
 - A. Personal Remarks (4:7-9)
 - B. Final Greetings (4:7-18a)
 - C. Benediction (4:18b)

ARCHAEOLOGY

The cities of Laodicea, Hierapolis, and Colossae were all in the Lycus valley in Asia Minor and along the main trade road from Ephesus and Sardis to the Euphrates. Although small and unimportant in comparison to Laodicea, Colossae was home to the cult of the mother goddess Cybele. Her worship involved fertility rites, ascetic practices, and ritual mutilation. Also, coins from Colossae depict the cults of Isis, Sarapis, Mithras, Demeter, and the sun and moon gods Helios and Selene. Such cultic practices may have influenced the false teachings in the church. Unfortunately, not much excavation has been done in the city, so we have to depend on literary sources for more information.

1 Thessalonians

First Thessalonians is one of Paul's most affectionate letters. The apostle was thankful that although persecution forced him to flee Thessalonica in the middle of the night (Acts 17:5-9), the believers in the city had remained faithful to Jesus. He wrote his first epistle to them to encourage and guide them in their new faith.

AUTHOR

Paul, Silas (Silvanus), and Timothy appear in 1 Thessalonians 1:1 as the authors of the epistle. The church in Thessalonica knew them well, and a salutation from all three would have been encouraging to local believers. The first-person plural ("we") appears throughout the epistle, which does not happen in the other co-authored Pauline letters. At the same time, some verses employ the first-person singular as well, suggesting that Paul was the primary writer.

DATE

First Thessalonians is one of the earliest preserved Pauline letters. It seems that the epistle was written during his second missionary journey when Silas and Timothy rejoined Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:1, 5) in AD 50, about four to six months after Paul was forced to leave Thessalonica (1 Thess. 2:17; 3:1, 2, 6; cf. Acts 17:10-15).

AUDIENCE

Paul and Silas evangelized Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-10). According to Acts, Paul first worked in the synagogue there, and the first converts were Jews, Gentile God-fearers, and some prominent women (Acts 17:4). Luke's account seems to mention only the highlights of Paul's ministry in Thessalonica. The epistle seems to have a more Gentile audience in mind (1:9, 10). Also, we get the impression that he remained there longer than the three weeks mentioned in Acts since he received support from his friends in Philippi (Phil. 4:16). Probably his work as a tent-maker while in the city gave him access to fellow artisans and manual laborers, some of whom would have accepted the gospel message (2:9; 4:11).

PURPOSE AND MAIN THEMES

Paul writes the epistle to encourage and strengthen the faith of the young church. The new life that the believers now led was very different from their old one, and they appear to be already the target of hostility (1:6; 2:14; 3:1-5). But even amid such difficulties, Timothy reports that they were dedicated, faithful, and loving (3:6). Paul reinforces the importance of being faithful to God, even though society opposed the Christian way of life, by contrasting believers and unbelievers (4:3, 5, 13; 5:3-8). The



Date of writing
Ca. AD 50-51

epistle' readers should seek God's approval rather than that of fellow human beings (1:2, 3; 2:4, 6; 4:1).

Eschatology is another central theme in 1 Thessalonians. Paul emphasizes the importance of living a faithful life while waiting for the Day of the Lord (3:12, 13; 5:4, 23). Also, it seems that the death of their loved ones had distressed some believers (4:13, 18; 5:11). Paul seeks to comfort them and to clarify his teachings on the resurrection and Christ's second coming (4:13–5:11).

STRUCTURE

Thankful for Timothy's report of the faithfulness of the Thessalonians and their high regard for him, in his introduction, Paul commends the new converts for their faith, love, and hope amid persecution (1:2-10). As he begins the main body of his letter, Paul defends his ministry from the charges of his Jewish opponents (2:1-12) and then praises the Thessalonians for accepting his message as the very word of God (v. 13). He then reminds the new believers in Thessalonica, who appear to have been mostly pagan converts (1:9-10), of the importance of living a life free from sexual immorality (4:1-8).

In the next section of the letter, Paul addresses several misunderstandings connected to the Second Advent. Some of the believers were taking extreme positions regarding the Second Coming, arguing that they should no longer work but await the Lord's coming in idle expectancy (vv. 9-12). Others were grieving over loved ones who had died since accepting the gospel message, fearing that they could have no part in the resurrection when Christ returned (vv. 13-18). And still others were trying to relieve their anxiety about the Advent by trying to ascertain the precise time it would occur (5:1). Paul encourages the believers to put aside their idleness, take hope in the resurrection of the righteous dead at the return of Christ, and, instead of speculating about the time of the end, live life in light of the certainty of it.

As you read 1 Thessalonians, reflect on the encouraging words that death in this world need not be feared, for it is not the end of life forever because of the resurrection of Christ and the promise of His soon return. It is just a temporary event from which the followers of Jesus Christ would be brought back to life when He returns.

OUTLINE

- I. Introduction (1:1-10)
 - A. Greetings (1:1)
 - B. Thanksgiving (1:2-10)
- II. Paul's Ministry in Thessalonica (2:1-16)
 - A. Paul's Motive (2:1-9)
 - B. Paul's Behavior (2:10-12)
 - C. Paul's Thankfulness (2:13-16)
- III. Paul's Longing to Revisit the Thessalonians (2:17–3:13)
 - A. Hindered by Satan (2:17-20)

- B. Timothy's Mission (3:1-5)
- C. Timothy's Report (3:6-13)
- IV. Living to Please God (4:1-12)
 - A. Sexual Purity (4:1-8)
 - B. Brotherly Love (4:9-12)
- V. The Promise and Hope of Christ's Return (4:13–5:11)
 - A. The Resurrection Hope (4:13, 14)
 - B. Resurrection and Translation (4:15-18)
 - C. The Unknown Time of Christ's Return (5:1-11)
- VI. Final Admonitions (5:12-22)
- VII. Conclusion (5:23-28)
 - A. Personal Remarks and Instructions (5:23-27)
 - B. Benediction (5:28)

ARCHAEOLOGY

Thessalonica was an important military and commercial port during Hellenistic and Roman times and the capital of the province of Macedonia. Paul would have traveled along the Via Egnatia from Philippi to Thessalonica when he first evangelized the region (Acts 17:1). Idolatry pervaded the city as the people worshipped traditional Greco-Roman deities such as Dionysus. Also, archaeological finds such as inscriptions and carvings indicate the presence of several mystery cults, including those of Isis, Sarapis, and Osiris. The Kabiros cult, unique to Macedonia and Thrace, was the official patron deity of the city. Though the details of the mystery cult are unknown, evidence from inscriptions and statues shows that its followers worshipped him as a deity who died, now lives in heaven, and would return again sometime in the future. Possibly the cult's beliefs caused some misunderstandings among Thessalonica Christians about Christ's return. Therefore, Paul had to dedicate more time to explain Christian eschatology to avoid syncretism with pagan beliefs.