



## Summary of Colossians

### Introduction

Paul wrote his letter to the Colossians during a time of imprisonment, probably in Rome. The church at Colossæ was likely established during Paul's third missionary journey as he ministered for three years in Ephesus. It appears that Paul did not personally establish the church there, but instead a Colossian named Epaphras travelled to Ephesus, responded to Paul's Gospel message, and returned to share the good news in Colossæ.

It seems that Epaphras had joined Paul in Rome and had reported his concerns over some form of false teaching that was having a detrimental impact on the church in Colossæ. Paul writes to counteract the claims of the false teachers and to encourage the Colossians in the knowledge that the Gospel is the only message they need to hear and live by.

As one of the most thoroughly Christ-centred books in the Bible, Colossians finds its essential unity in the divine and exalted person of the preeminent Christ. The letter presents variations on this central theme, with Christ celebrated as the object of the believer's faith, the image of the invisible God, the creator of all dominions, the head of the church, the firstborn from the dead, the unifier and reconciler of all things, the Saviour through his sufferings on the Cross, the treasury of all wisdom and knowledge, the triumphant victor over sin and Satan, the exalted Lord of life and glory, and the true pattern for the life of Christian faith. The letter is also unified by Paul's pastoral concern to dissuade the Colossians from getting caught up in useless religious regulations and to awaken exaltation of Christ and exultation in him. Paul writes with stylistic flair and aphoristic brilliance.

### Chapter One

By beginning his letter with prayer and thanksgiving to God, Paul encourages his readers to consider more carefully why they should always be thankful as Christians. Most especially, they should be thankful because Epaphras' preaching ministry has introduced them to the truth about God's grace and the nature of the fruit that springs from it. Their response should therefore be one

of thankfulness to God for bringing them out of the realm of darkness into the Kingdom of Christ.

In poetic form, Paul celebrates and describes the supremacy of Christ, acknowledging he is the firstborn of creation, the head of the church, through whom and for whom everything was created. It is through his blood, shed on the Cross, that all can know true peace through redemption.

Paul concludes the chapter with an explanation that his personal circumstances as a prisoner are for the purpose of serving God and his church. His suffering and pain will help to deflect attention away from fledgling churches while they grow to maturity. The great mystery that God has made known through the death and resurrection of Jesus is that all the promises of God are made available to the Gentile Christians in places just like Colossæ.

## Chapter Two

Paul concludes this section on a more personal note. He not only serves the church of Christ but struggles, in cooperation with God, for the congregations at Colossæ and Laodicea. Paul's intention is exactly the same as before; that is, to clarify that the purpose of his ministry is to make known to every Gentile, including those at Colossæ, the mystery of God, namely Christ. He does elaborate on the spiritual purpose of his ministry for them, that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love; and that they may have complete understanding and know the mystery of God.

Paul's response to false teaching typically contains two parts. First, he identifies the theological errors present in a particular congregation and draws out their negative implications for faith and life. For Paul, the problem with bad ideas is that they result in distorted notions of Christ and what it means to follow him. Second, he argues against these errors in light of the foundational convictions of his Gospel ministry, usually introduced at the outset of a letter. This, then, is the fabric of Paul's letter-writing: to clarify a problem along with its spiritual and moral consequences and to articulate the proper response to it in the light of the readers' own understanding of the word of truth.

The problem Paul addresses in vv.16-23 is the legalistic submission to such regulations, such that observing them can even replace a congregation's devotion to Christ. What results is often called self-righteousness; that is, a believer's devotion is measured by how drab and dreary their Christianity is! What finally defines the borders of true Christianity is 'being in Christ', where God's grace transforms people into an alternative faith community. Any definition of Christianity that substitutes regulations of self-denial for self-transformation by the grace of God is spiritually impoverished and ultimately of no use to anyone.

## Chapter Three

Paul's second response to the teaching that threatens Colossian faith offers a description of the Christian life in four parts. After introducing the essential structure of his ethics (vv.1-4), Paul goes on to characterise what a life in

Christ is not (vv.5-11), before then describing what characterises life in Christ both within the congregation (vv.12-17), and within the home (3:18–4:1).

Paul states that the natural response to a believer's participation in Christ's triumph, indicated by the fact he now sits at the right hand of God, is to exchange secular for heavenly norms and values. This exchange of the secular life for the sacred constitutes for Paul the central moral reality of the new life; and he envisages it practically in various codes of Christian conduct that he goes on to list and develop.

God's grace enables his people to remove their old ways in order to take on Christ's ways; that is, to exchange all their vices for all his virtues. The virtues are most plainly illustrated in the guidelines for family relationships that Paul goes on to list. He addresses the relationships between wives and husbands, parents and children, and slaves and their masters; all of whom are equal in the sight of God.

Colossians 3:1–4:1, as an integral part of Paul's polemic, sets forth the moral flip side of his theological argument against the hollow and deceptive philosophy that threatens the Colossians' confidence in Christ as the only mediator between God and humanity. While the cast of this part of the letter is less polemical, Paul has shaped the timeless truths of his moral exhortation into a specific response to the Colossian crisis.

#### Chapter Four

The concluding section of each of Paul's letters contains his benediction, typically expressed as a prayer or doxology. Ancient writers usually added various greetings, specific instructions and general exhortations to their closings. Paul is no different, although he baptises these literary conventions with the distinctive phrases of his Christian ministry. Appropriately then, Paul's goodbye to the Colossian believers includes exhortations concerning their evangelistic work (vv.2-6), and internal relations (vv.7-17), before concluding with his benedictory doxology (v.18).

While this concluding passage has an eye to the situation facing his Colossian readers, it actually falls outside of the letter's main body, where Paul addresses the audience's spiritual crisis more directly and pastorally. Therefore, these verses should not be understood as part of Paul's polemic against his opponents. They rather reflect his general interest in the spiritual well-being of any church under his care, regardless of the particular problems they might be facing. His exhortations in this letter's benediction convey a universal message, equally valid for any church. Yet this passage is also interesting because it provides a window into earliest Christianity and offers an intriguing model that clarifies the dynamics of church life.