Supreme

COLOSSIANS

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The Doctrinal Basis of Strong Curriculum

A more detailed statement with references is available upon request.

- The verbal, plenary inspiration of the Scriptures
- Only one true God
- The Trinity of the Godhead
- The Holy Spirit and His ministry
- The personality of Satan
- The Genesis account of creation
- Original sin and the fall of man
- The virgin birth of Christ
- Salvation through faith in the shed blood of Christ
- The bodily resurrection and priesthood of Christ
- Grace and the new birth
- Justification by faith
- Sanctification of the believer
- The security of the believer
- The church
- The ordinances of the local church: baptism by immersion and the Lord's Supper
- Biblical separation—ecclesiastical and personal
- Obedience to civil government
- The place of Israel
- The pretribulation rapture of the church
- The premillennial return of Christ
- The millennial reign of Christ
- Eternal glory in Heaven for the righteous
- Eternal torment in Hell for the wicked

Alex Bauman, editor

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introduction

This study covers Paul's instructions to the young and threatened church of Colosse. Promoters of a Colossian heresy taught that Christ wasn't enough. They wanted to add elements of Gnosticism and Judaism to the gospel. They believed they had a secret knowledge that would help the Colossians move closer to God. Paul wrote that Christ is sufficient for salvation and the believer's spiritual growth. He emphasized Christ's supremacy. This study will challenge you to put Christ first in your life.

This course is part of the Strong Adults curriculum. Strong Curriculum builds stronger churches by teaching all Scripture to produce spiritually mature believers who measure up to the stature of Christ. The curriculum addresses 7 BuildUP aims modeled after Jesus' teaching. Each session in this course identifies one of the following aims.



BELIEVE THE GOSPEL. Jesus taught His students to trust in Him alone for salvation and to share the gospel.



UNDERSTAND BIBLICAL ETHICS. Jesus instructed His students to live according to moral values.



INTERNALIZE GODLINESS. Jesus taught His followers to have godly hearts rather than merely acting godly.



LEARN DOCTRINE. Jesus taught the truth and identified doctrine as essential for spiritual growth.



DEVELOP LIFE SKILLS. Jesus taught His followers to meet life's challenges in ways that honored and glorified God.



UPLIFT OTHERS. Jesus taught His followers to serve God by humbly and sacrificially serving others.



PREPARE TO SERVE. Jesus prepared His followers to serve in the context of local churches.

new life in Lycus Valley

Scripture Focus

Colossians 1:1–8

BuildUP Theme


BELIEVE THE GOSPEL

God gives believers the hope of the gospel which produces faith and love in believers' lives.

Memory Verses

Colossians 1:3, 4

What's left of the ghost town of Glenrio straddles the New Mexico–Texas border. The town was founded in 1903, and by the 1930s, the road through town was paved and made part of the famous Route 66. The town declined in the mid-1970s when it was bypassed by the new Interstate 40. The post office is in particularly bad shape. It has been gutted, and its roof has fallen in.

In 2006, the producers of the animated film "Cars" modeled the motel in their fictional Radiator Springs after an abandoned motel in Glenrio. The following year, Glenrio's 31-acre site was put on the National Register of Historic Places. In 2008, the Glenrio Welcome Center in New Mexico opened to draw people in to look at what used to be a bustling town

1. What long forgotten ghost towns have you visited?

2. What signs of a once bustling town did you see?

Colosse was once described as a major city in the region of Phrygia in what is now the country of Turkey. Eventually the city was abandoned as better locations for commerce and amusement opened down the road. Today the city is buried under a mound of earth. Little to no excavation has happened to uncover the ruins. Yet the city was the recipient of Colossians, one of Paul's letters. Paul wrote Colossians to defend the gospel and emphasize Christ's sufficiency. Because of Paul's letter, the Colossian believers didn't abandon the gospel even though they eventually abandoned their city.

Bible Study

Little City

Colosse is located one hundred miles west of the big city of Ephesus, in the Roman province of Asia and in the region of Phrygia. Nestled in the upper corner of the Lycus Valley about twelve miles southeast of Laodicea, Colosse straddled the Lycus River and offered a commanding view of eight-thousand-foot Mount Cadmus. The area had subterranean cavernous fires and hot springs. Flowing through the valley and into the Lycus River, Mount Cadmus's cascading streams saturated the Lycus River with calcium deposits from the soil. These deposits created beautiful limestone formations.

The land around Colosse is unusually fertile, producing rich pastures that treated large flocks of sheep to succulent grazing. But due to grander opportunities for growth and wealth in nearby Laodicea and Hierapolis, the town of Colosse, once a great city of Phrygia, began to die. Laodicea lay at a major crossroads and replaced Colosse as the region's center for commerce. Hierapolis had the region's best hot springs and baths. The town attracted people wanting a retreat. In the end, Colosse couldn't compete with its flourishing neighbors.

Colosse Residents

Colosse was home to many Jews. Some descended from the Jews whom Antiochus the Great had transplanted from Babylon into the region. Others moved to the region from Israel to pursue the opportunities in the region of Phrygia. The overall population was predominantly Gentile. And most of the Gentiles were pagan.

Paul likely never visited Colosse, though he ministered in Ephesus for a two-year period. Probably some believers had carried the gospel from Ephesus to Colosse and introduced the Colossians to Christ (Acts 19:10).

The "streams of living water" that had reached Colosse were more beautiful and productive than the tainted streams from Mount Cadmus. Also, the Lord's Colossian "sheep" enjoyed "pastures" far greener than those in the verdant Lycus Valley. Paul wrote to point out the gospel's greatness. As you will learn later in this study, a serious heresy threatened to pollute the streams of living water and to poison the green pastures.

Authoritative Writer

The apostle Paul wrote the book of Colossians around AD 60 while he was under house arrest in Rome. Paul wrote to encourage the church to worship and serve Christ. He wanted the believers to understand that they were complete in Christ (2:10). As this study will reveal, Paul made the believer's completeness in Christ crystal clear.

Paul wrote that he was an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God (Col. 1:1). This statement carried a lot of weight and established Paul's credibility as he dealt with the false teachers in Colosse. The statement also pointed to Christ as the source of Paul's writing. Paul wasn't writing his own thoughts and musings. The Colossians needed to view his words as coming directly from Christ.

3. Read 1 Corinthians 14:37. What did Paul call his writings?

4. Read 1 Thessalonians 2:13. How did the Thessalonians accept Paul's writings?

5. What could the Colossians assume about any teachings that went against Paul's teachings?

Timothy, Paul's son in the faith (1 Tim. 1:2), stayed with Paul during Paul's imprisonment. He was a true friend. The Colossians

knew Timothy was fully confident that God had called Paul to be an apostle.

Church in Christ

The word "saints" (Col. 1:2) identified the Colossian believers as those who had been set apart unto God as His holy ones. At one time they had been far from God, Who saw them as lost in sin. When the Colossians trusted in Christ, the Holy Spirit placed them into Christ, where they received the righteousness of God (Rom. 6:1–4; 2 Cor. 5:21). From the time of that supernatural transaction, God viewed the Colossian Christians as wholly His people and His holy people. God views believers today in the same way: we are "saints."

As saints, we show forth the praises of God by living with faith and love (1 Pet. 2:9). Faith and love are evidence of the power of God in our lives. Others will praise God when they see His power in our lives (Matt. 5:16).

Paul also addressed the Colossians as faithful brothers in Christ (Col. 1:2). The Colossians were faithful to their calling to proclaim the praises of God through their lives. They had become brothers in Christ by believing in Christ.

6. Why did the Colossians, who were facing uncertainties concerning their doctrine and practice, need to hear they had been faithful?

Although Paul had never visited the Colossian church, he had a warm place in his heart for the believers there. Paul extended warm greetings to the Colossian believers, wishing them "grace"—God's favor—and "peace"—a sense of well-being that accompanies a close relationship with God (Col. 1:2).

Threatening Heresy

A mixture of Greek philosophy and Jewish legalism threatened the church in Colosse. That threat, which remained unidentified, prompted Paul's letter. We call the threat the Colossian heresy. From Paul's writing we can identify four distinct characteristics of the heresy threatening to derail the Colossian church. This study will address each of these distinctions more thoroughly as they come up in Colos-

sians. The following is a summary of each point.

First, the heresy was driven by a philosophy that denied the teaching that Christ is sufficient (Col. 2:8). Heretics taught that their visions and some recently discovered secrets led them to believe something needed to be added to Christ to achieve salvation.

Second, the heresy emphasized the need to participate in Judaistic ceremonialism (2:11, 16, 17; 3:11). The heretics pointed to circumcision, food laws, and the observance of special days from the Old Testament law as integral to their faith.

Third, the heresy introduced angel worship (1:16; 2:15, 18). The false belief in Christ's insufficiency is at the root of such a practice.

Fourth, the Colossian heresy promoted asceticism, meaning the rigorous abstention from self-indulgence and severe treatment of the body (2:20–23). This aspect went beyond the Old Testament law, adding suffering as a means of gaining favor with God.

7. What would you say is the root problem with the Colossians heresy? What drove the heretics to invent and follow their teachings?

Given the tenets of the Colossian heresy, it is no wonder Paul emphasized Christ's sufficiency so clearly in his epistle. And even though you aren't threatened by the Colossian heresy, you can benefit from Paul's clear teaching in that you can gain a better understanding of Christ's sufficiency for your salvation and sanctification.

Confirmation: The Gospel Is God's Work

Epaphras gave Paul a report of how the work in Colosse was progressing. Included in that report must have been the heresy threatening the church. Paul constructed his opening greeting and address with the heresy in mind. In doing so, he confirmed the gospel message as still relevant and powerful.

Paul opened his address to the church by focusing on God. He gave thanks to God for the Colossians (1:3). His point is that all that had happened to bring the Colossians to understanding salvation and putting their faith in Christ was God's work. Paul's mention of the Lord Jesus Christ points to the means of the Colossians' salvation. Christ did all the work on the cross.

8. What did Paul communicate to the Colossians by adding that he and Timothy pray "always" for them?

Notice that Paul intentionally didn't give any credit to the heretics for the Colossians' salvation or spirituality. If the heretics' message was indeed correct, Paul would have commended them for their teachings. Paul wanted the Colossians to grasp that the gospel is a work of God.

Confirmation: The Gospel Changes People

The Colossians' faith in God and love for others were evidence that God was answering Paul's prayer for the Colossians (1:4). The gospel was transforming the Colossians' lives, giving them God's love for each other in their hearts. God's love had motivated them to reach out to each other and care for each other in ways that became abundantly obvious to the world. What was happening in the Colossians' congregation wasn't normal.

9. How is God's love in our hearts different from the love the world knows?

10. Read John 13:34, 35 and 1 John 2:9–11. What is the connection between faith in Jesus Christ and love for fellow believers?

According to the report given to Paul, no one felt unloved in the Colossian church. The believers in the church had refused to put restrictions on their love for one another.

11. Do you see mutual love between believers in our church? How so?

Confirmation: The Gospel Gives Hope

The Colossian believers all had the same hope of final deliverance from sin and eternity in God's presence (Col. 1:5). This common hope drew them together in love (cf. 3:14). Likewise, such hope ought to draw you and other believers together in love for one another. Believers are all recipients of God's love now and will someday spend eternity together with perfect love for each other.

Don't miss the fact that the believer's hope is "laid up . . . in heaven" (1:5; cf. Matt. 6:19–21). This phrase points to the rewards Christ will give to believers at the Judgment Seat of Christ in Heaven (2 Cor. 5:10). Those rewards are in the form of crowns believers will use to glorify God.

12. Read 2 Corinthians 5:10, 14, 15. What connection did Paul make between love and the hope of rewards?

So far, Paul had given the Colossians no reason to believe that Christ and the gospel are in any way deficient. Thanks to God and His gospel, the Colossians had faith, love, and hope.

Confirmation: The Gospel Spreads

The growth of the church at Colosse provided further evidence of the sufficiency of Christ's provision for salvation. If the doctrine the heretics taught was so vital to true salvation and spirituality, then how could they explain all the "fruit" in Colosse?

"Don't chop down the fruit tree," Paul essentially wrote (Col. 1:6). "The gospel is working. It changes lives and gives hope. Don't abandon it for an unproven, unauthoritative heresy."

The Colossian believers owed both the fruit of their salvation and the spiritual fruit in their lives to divine grace. They knew "the grace of God in truth." By grace, God saves those who believe the truth (Eph. 2:8, 9). Furthermore, by grace, God uses the Word to conform believers into the image of Christ. A sinner cannot save him- or herself; neither can a believer develop Christlike character by relying upon his or her own determination, strength, or ingenuity.

The gospel bore fruit not only at Colosse but also in all the world beyond the Lycus Valley. Some have estimated that at the time of

Paul's writing there were 500,000 believers scattered throughout the inhabited world. That's quite an early testimony to the power of the gospel. To add something to it or to suggest Christ lacked sufficiency was absurd.

13. Why do you think Paul wrote a letter to address the Colossian heresy despite the absurdity of adding to the gospel and diminishing Christ?

Paul worked tirelessly to define the gospel and defend it against distortion and intrusion. He understood the importance of its purity. Christ did too, of course. For Paul essentially wrote the words of Christ as he penned his epistle.

Confirmation: The Gospel Is Precise

Epaphras was instrumental in carrying the transforming gospel of grace to the Colossians (Col. 1:7). Paul considered him a dear fellow servant and a faithful minister of Christ. Epaphras must have felt the threat of being undermined by the heretics in Colosse. So Paul intentionally put his stamp of approval on Epaphras. If the Colossian believers adopted the heretics' mangled gospel, they would do so without approval from Epaphras, Paul, and Christ.

14. Read 2 Timothy 4:2, 7, 8. What was Paul's personal testimony concerning his defense of the faith (doctrine)?

Paul mentioned again that Epaphras had told him about the Colossians' love (Col. 1:8). Paul might have sensed the church might consider Epaphras to be a bit of a tattletale for going all the way to Rome to tell them about the heresy brewing in their church. That wasn't the case at all. Epaphras went to Paul because he loved the Colossians and was concerned about their future spiritual growth. Upon Epaphras's return and the reading of the epistle, the Colossians needed to embrace him with the Holy Spirit directed love they had already shown toward each other.

15. Read Galatians 5:22–26. What is the connection between the Holy Spirit and a believer's love for fellow believers?

Paul's opening to his epistle is masterful. He focused on the greatness and personal nature of God's transforming gospel. And he reminded the Colossians of the wonderful life they enjoyed in Christ. The Colossian heresy would destroy their unity and sap their power if they didn't put an end to it. The next section of Paul's letter, the topic for session two, will begin to make that clear.

Application

16. How is the gospel's power evident in your life? Does your love reflect God's love?

17. Would the people in your life say you are a person of faith? Why or why not?

18. How would you describe the hope that is laid up for you in heaven (Col. 1:5)?

19. How will you let the hope of Heaven affect your life in the coming week?

20. What threats to the gospel might your church be facing?