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Colossians

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Colossians

A. Summary and Overview.

1. The epistle of Paul to the church in Colosse is one of Paul's prison letters written from Rome along with Philippians, Ephesians, and Philemon. This would put the date of its writing about 60 to 62 AD. Colosse was a city in Phrygia, in the Roman province of Asia, which is now modern Turkey. It was located about 100 miles east of Ephesus in the region of the seven churches of Revelation chapters two and three. At one time, the city had been located on an important trade route, but by Paul's time, the main route had been relocated to nearby Laodicea which led to its decline. The population was mainly Gentile, but had a large Jewish population and both groups were represented in the church at Colosse. This mixture contributed to heretical doctrines which was the primary reason Paul wrote this epistle.
2. The church in Colossae was established by Epaphras (1:7), who, by tradition, was converted in Ephesus and planted the church upon returning to his hometown. The church faced several doctrinal challenges, including Jewish legalism, the issue of circumcision, and a blend of Jewish and Gentile pagan mysticism. Additionally, the church struggled with an emerging heresy that would later be recognized as Gnosticism. The term Gnosticism comes from the Greek word "gnosis," meaning "knowledge", and it emphasized mystical knowledge as the path to enlightenment and salvation. According to this heresy, while God was seen as good, they believed that material matter was inherently evil. Gnosticism claimed that this secret knowledge, which they held to be superior to Scripture, was necessary for salvation. It also denied the full divinity of Jesus Christ, asserting that He was a lesser being than God and, in doing so, rejected His true identity as both fully God and fully man. Concerned about this dangerous teaching, Epaphras made the long journey to Rome (4:12-13) to seek counsel from Paul. In response, Paul sent this epistle back to Colossae through Tychicus, who also accompanied the runaway slave Onesimus on his return to his master, Philemon, who was a member of the church (4:7-9).
3. The epistle presents doctrinal truths including the deity of Christ, reconciliation, redemption, election, forgiveness, and the nature of the church as well as addressing Gnosticism. These will be discussed in the chapters that follow. Modern cults that deny the deity of Christ, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and

Mormonism, often point to verse 1:15 where Paul says that Jesus is the “first-born over all creation”. We will deal with this in the narrative of the first chapter below.

B. Chapter One.

1. Paul opens his epistle with a greeting from him and Timothy. He begins with thanks to God for their faith in Christ and their love for all saints and the hope that is reserved in heaven for them (1:3-5). He then gently introduces the proper knowledge of God to offset the false knowledge of Gnosticism: “For this reason also, since the day we heard this, we haven’t stopped praying for you. We are asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding, so that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him, bearing fruit in every good work and growing in the knowledge of God” (1:9-10). He also addresses redemption and the forgiveness of sins: “He has rescued us from the domain of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of the Son He loves. We have redemption, the forgiveness of sins, in Him” (1:13-4).
2. He then presents a picture of the glory of Christ: “who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him were all things created, in the heavens and upon the earth, things visible and things invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers; all things have been created through him, and unto him; and he is before all things, and in him all things consist. And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence. For it was the good pleasure of the Father that in him should all the fulness dwell; and through him to reconcile all things unto himself, having made peace through the blood of his cross” (1:15-20a). As was mentioned in the introduction, the phrase “firstborn of all creation” is used by the cults to attempt to deny Christ’s deity. The fact Christ is the creator (John 1:10) means He cannot be both the creator and the created. In Biblical times, “firstborn” referred to the heir who had priority over all things. This is Christ’s position before the Father.
3. Paul expresses his thoughts that God’s desire “to present you holy, faultless, and blameless before Him— if indeed you remain grounded and steadfast in the faith and are not shifted away from the hope of the gospel that you heard. This gospel has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and I, Paul, have become a servant of it” 1:22b-23). That Paul gives the “if indeed” here is a statement of his concern regarding the heresies that are impacting the church.

4. He closes the chapter with: Now I rejoice in my sufferings for you, and I am completing in my flesh what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for His body, that is, the church. I have become its servant, according to God's administration that was given to me for you, to make God's message fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to His saints" (1:24-26) The phrase "completing what is lacking in Christ's affliction" is puzzling. How could Christ's suffering on the Cross be lacking? Many Bible teachers believe Paul was talking about his own sufferings, which had not yet conformed to those of Christ. Other translations make this clearer: "I am glad when I suffer for you in my body, for I am participating in the sufferings of Christ that continue for his body, the church" (NLT).

C. Chapter Two.

1. Paul gets to the heart of the heresy facing the Colossians in this chapter. He begins with his desire that those who have not seen him face to face "may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery—Christ. All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Him" (2:2-3). He presents God's mystery to offset the mystical teachings they face and affirms that wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Christ.
2. He continues with "Be careful that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit based on human tradition, based on the elemental forces of the world, and not based on Christ. For the entire fullness of God's nature dwells bodily in Christ, and you have been filled by Him, who is the head over every ruler and authority. You were also circumcised in Him with a circumcision not done with hands, by putting off the body of flesh, in the circumcision of the Messiah (2:8-11).
3. He addresses the practice of the Judaizers and worship of angels. "Therefore, don't let anyone judge you in regard to food and drink or in the matter of a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of what was to come; the substance is the Messiah. Let no one disqualify you, insisting on ascetic practices and the worship of angels, claiming access to a visionary realm and inflated without cause by his unspiritual mind (2:16-18).

D. Chapter Three.

1. Paul admonishes them to set their minds on the things above and not upon the earth (3:2). He then exhorts them to purity and calls them to unity: "Therefore,

put to death what belongs to your worldly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desire, and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, God's wrath comes on the disobedient, and you once walked in these things when you were living in them. But now you must also put away all the following: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and filthy language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self. You are being renewed in knowledge according to the image of your Creator. In Christ there is not Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all (3:5-11).

2. He gives words about the Christian life: "put on heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, accepting one another and forgiving one another if anyone has a complaint against another. Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive. Above all, put on love—the perfect bond of unity. And let the peace of the Messiah, to which you were also called in one body, control your hearts. Be thankful. Let the message about the Messiah dwell richly among you, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, and singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, with gratitude in your hearts to God" (3:12-16).
3. He closes with practical instruction and a warning: "Wives, be in subjection to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and be not bitter against them. Children, obey your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing in the Lord. Fathers, provoke not your children, that they not be discouraged. Servants, obey in all things them that are your masters according to the flesh; not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but in singleness of heart, fearing the Lord: whatsoever you do, work heartily, as unto the Lord, and not unto men; knowing that from the Lord you shall receive the recompense of the inheritance: you serve the Lord Christ. For he that does wrong shall receive again for the wrong that he has done: and there is no respect of persons (3:18-25).

E. Chapter Four.

1. Paul continues with a word to masters but then gives a request for prayer for himself and his companions: "Masters, render unto your servants that which is just and equal; knowing that you also have a thanksgiving; praying for us also, that God may open unto us a door for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in bonds; that I may make it manifest, as I ought to speak. Walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming (making most of) the

time. Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer each one" (4:1-6).

2. He closes the epistle with a word about Tychicus and Onesimus who will carry the epistle back to Colosse. Then he sends greetings from a number of people with him in Rome, and then gives salutations as well. He requests that this epistle be read among the church of the Laodiceans and that the epistle to them be read at Colosse as well (4:16). The epistle to the Laodiceans has not yet been found.

F. Discussion Questions, Application and Passing it On.

1. Gnosticism, although originating in the 1st century, has evolved into a comprehensive challenge to the church, particularly within the New Age movement. It has infiltrated mainstream denominations and drawn many away from the solid truths in the Bible. How would you address anything that you may see in your local church from what you have learned from Colossians?
2. How would you speak to someone who uses Colossians 1:15 in an attempt to deny the deity of Christ?
3. Do you redeem the time (4:5)? The context would indicate using the time you are in communication with unbelievers. However, there are several ways this verse could be interpreted. How would you redeem or make the most of your time?

This New Testament survey was provided by Joshua Nations (JoshuaNations.org)