

Chapter Summary: Colossians

"Why do you keep on following the rules of the world, such as 'Don't handle! Don't taste! Don't touch!?' Such rules are mere human teachings about things that deteriorate as we use them."

Like the believers in Galatia, those in the city of Colosse were being pressured to keep certain parts of the Jewish law – such as circumcision, Sabbath observance, and various festivals – and to adhere to instructions based on certain visionary experiences. These things require "strong devotion, pious self-denial, and severe bodily discipline" but don't help believers actually conquer evil desires.

Paul heard this news about the church from his co-worker Epaphras, who had just come from Colosse. Paul was in prison, but even from afar he continued to teach and guide the young churches around the Roman Empire. Paul wrote a letter to the Colossians and asked his friends Tychicus and Onesimus to deliver it, along with the letters we know as Philemon and Ephesians.

Colosse was located in the Roman province of Asia (modern-day Turkey). It was a place where people tended to mix practices and beliefs from various religious traditions and where new spiritual practices were constantly developing, like worshipping angels. Paul warns the believers not to let these empty philosophies capture their thinking. Instead, they are to continue in the truth of the Good News they heard in the beginning.

The result is a letter giving us one of the strongest statements about the person and work of Jesus the Messiah in the New Testament. Paul combats the alternative philosophies in Colosse by emphasizing the grandeur of Jesus. He writes that following rules and seeking mystical experiences won't strengthen a person's faith in Jesus or bring about spiritual transformation. Rather, Paul insists that the Colossians are made complete only through their union with Christ.

After his opening thanksgiving and prayer for the Colossian believers, Paul presents a striking poem showing how Jesus is supreme in all things. The fullness of God the Father dwells in the Son, who is the maker of all things and holds the creation together. Because of the Son's blood shed on the cross, everything in heaven and on earth is reconciled to God. The supremacy of Christ is the great theme of Paul's letter. Christ is sufficient for everything the Colossians need, and no other power or ruler can ever be His equal.

Paul then explains that this great victory by God's Son has implications for how the Colossians should live. All the rules and laws they've been told to obey were only shadows; the reality has arrived in Jesus. Since they have been raised with Christ, the believers are now to live freely in His Kingdom of light. As they do so, their relationships must be marked by a commitment to love each other. A new life of humility and forgiveness, rooted in the Messiah, will anchor their community.

Paul also gives the Colossians practical instructions for household life, showing how followers of Christ should have an attitude of love and service in their everyday relationships. This includes how they relate to others within the human institutions in which they live. While these institutions won't always change overnight, God's people can move them closer to the ultimate goals of Christ's Kingdom.

At the end of the letter, we find specific instructions for the Colossians to share this letter with the nearby church in Laodicea and to read their letter in turn. This shows how the books in our New Testament, first written for particular local churches, were shared and eventually gathered into a single collection for all God's people.