

COLOSSIANS

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Profile:

Sent from: Paul, probably at Rome, joined by Timothy.
Sent to: Members at Colossae, in west central Asia Minor.
Date: About A.D. 61.
Purpose: To strengthen the branch on the return of Onesimus and to correct the false doctrine of "worshipping of angels."
Main themes: The Godhead; errors about Christ, days, and diet; developing celestial qualities.

Background:

The City

Colossae lays in a high valley with mountain scenery resembling the arid west of the United States. A hundred miles east of Ephesus, it was mentioned on Xenophon's famous march from the coast and up the Meander River to the tributary basin of the Lycus River. Colossae was "prosperous and large," partly because it was on the east-west trade route. Christianity later marched the hundred miles from the coast to Colossae, for Paul was at Ephesus and reached "all Asia" with the gospel message (Acts 19:26). The regional economy depended not only on trade but also on grazing lands that supported the wool industry in Colossae and in nearby Laodicea. The geographer Strabo reported of Paul's time, "The country around Laodicea produces sheep that are excellent, not only for the softness of their wool...but also for its raven-black color, so that the Laodiceans derive splendid revenue from it, as do the neighboring Colossians from the color [of wool] which bears the same name."

Hierapolis and these two cities formed a triangle with sides about ten miles long. In writing to Colossae, Paul also named "them that are in Laodicea, and them in Hierapolis" (Col. 4:13). Substantial ruins of the latter city are spread out around its well preserved stone theater. It was built adjacent to massive hot springs that attracted religious and recreational pilgrims. But Laodicea was the major city of the area in Paul's day. Just before Paul, Strabo wrote that Laodicea "grew large in our time and in that of our fathers." That geographer paid tribute to its "fertile territory" and the private wealth of some of its citizens. Its ruins, including its theater, are badly deteriorated, but Laodicea's stonestrewn area is massive. Although Hierapolis is merely mentioned in Paul's Colossian letter, Laodicea is prominent, probably reflecting the size of the Church in that large city. Laodicea was possibly the regional center of Church administration. Three decades later John sent his letter to Laodicea as the most important branch of the Church in that area.

Colossae was an ancient city located in southwestern Phrygia in the Roman Province of Asia. It was situated on the southern bank of the Lycus River, about one hundred miles as the crow flies east of Ephesus and on the great highway of trade linking the East and the West of the ancient world. It was not far from the towns of Laodicea and Hierapolis. Long before Paul's day, Colossae had been a town of considerable importance, but with the founding and growth of Laodicea, about ten miles west, it had steadily declined from about the middle of the third century B.C. Earthquakes had contributed to the decline of Colossae, not to mention the fame and attractiveness of Hierapolis, which was located about thirteen miles to the northwest. According to the geographer Strabo (died A.D. 24; cf. XII, 8) Colossae was but "a small town," and it was of little commercial importance.

As far as we know, Paul had never visited Colossae, and it is probable that the branch of the Church there had been established by Epaphras, a possible convert of the Apostle's while in Ephesus. (Col. 1:6-8;

³ Adapted from Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Understanding Paul*, pp.244-247, and Sidney B. Sperry, *Paul's Life and Letters*, pp.vii to 303.

4:13) Epaphras was a native of Colossae (4:12) and had doubtless been much aided in his labors by Philemon, also a native of the town and a good friend of Paul's. (Philem. 2-3) Epaphras seems to have been a very active man in carrying the Gospel to his whole district, for the Apostle speaks of him in these words:

"For I bear him record, that he hath a great zeal for you, and them that are in Laodicea, and them in Hierapolis." (Col. 4:13)

Most of the Church members were probably converts from paganism (Col. 1:13, 21; 2:13; 3:6-7), but there may have been a few Jewish members there, too, for it is a known fact (Josephus, Antiq., XII, 3, 4) that Jewish people had been settled in Phrygia and Lydia by Antiochus the Great (223-187 B.C.).

Reason for Writing

That Paul wrote the Epistle to the Colossians before the one to the Ephesians may be deduced from a comparison of certain statements made in each. In Ephesians we read, "But that ye also [p.234] may know my affairs, and how I do, Tychicus, a beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord, shall make known to you all things" (6:21); whereas in Colossians we read this: "All my state shall Tychicus declare unto you." (4:7) The phrase "ye also" in Ephesians would seem to presuppose the previous letter to the Colossians.

The occasion and purpose of Paul's Epistle to the Colossians is this: during the years of the Apostle's absence from Asia, it appears that certain false teachers had made a distinct impression upon many of the members of the branch in Colossae. We don't know just who these teachers were, nor do we know the details of their doctrines, but it seems possible to gather the main outlines of their errors from the Epistle. (Col. 2:8-23) The heretical teachings are thought by some scholars to be mainly Jewish in origin; others believe that pagan mystery-cults had a part in them, and still others hold that Greek philosophy played a role. At any rate, we may note at least three distinct elements of interest: (1) The Jewish element, in which Paul makes reference to circumcision, meats and drinks, feast days, new moons, and sabbaths (Col. 2:11-16); (2) the ascetic element, as revealed in his reference to ordinances, "touch not; taste not; handle not" (Col. 2:20-23); and (3) the speculative element, as seen in his warning against "philosophy and vain deceit" (Col. 2:8). This latter may have reference to errors of a semignostic type which tended to detract from the dignity of Christ (Col. 2:9; cf. 1:19), and which held that the angels were superior to or at least equal to Him, and that they may act as intermediaries through whom we may have access to God (Col. 2:18-19). These false teachings were given a Christian coloring and foisted upon the saints.

It is probable that Epaphras was alarmed at the situation, and he hastened to Rome to give Paul a full report of what was taking place. Nor was his report completely one of alarm and apprehension. The charity and faith of the Colossian saints were such to win Paul's express commendation. (Col. 1:8; 2:5) The report of Epaphras determined the Apostle to write a letter to the Colossians, not only to encourage them, but also to check the spread of false doctrine among them. The letter he sends by Tychicus and Onesimus (Col. 4:7-9), inasmuch as Epaphras, for some reason which we do not know, could not return at once. (Col. 4:12; Philem. 23)

A letter to Colossae was certainly part of sending Onesimus back there, but another problem was serious enough to demand a separate letter of correction. How did Paul learn of this situation? Philemon's letter closes with a greeting from "Epaphras, my fellowprisoner in Christ Jesus" (Philem. 1:23). This is probably a way of honoring this man who was well known at Colossae; he was assisting Paul in prison, just as the returning Onesimus had done. Colossians also names Epaphras, "who is one of you, a servant of Christ" (Col. 4:12). The Colossians had "learned" the gospel from "Epaphras our dear fellowservant, who is for you a faithful minister of Christ" (Col. 1:7). Since he had "declared unto us your love in the Spirit" (Col. 1:8), Paul's knowledge of the current problems of that area came through this missionary with their interest at heart. And Paul apparently wanted them to know that negative information was relayed for their benefit, since Epaphras has a "great zeal for you, and them that are in Laodicea, and them in Hierapolis" (Col. 4:13). Only the letter to Colossians survives, but the lost Laodicean letter must have also included correction. That nearby branch probably had as many members as that at Colossae and was likely affected by the same false teaching.