



Community Group Discussion Guide

A Letter to the Colossians

August 13, 2023 | Colossians 1:1-2

MOTIVATE

Starter Question:

- ⇒ *If you were to send an encouraging letter to someone today, who would it be and what would you write?*
- ⇒ *Why are Paul's letters to the churches and to individuals still important to us today?*
- ⇒ *What do you know about Paul's letter to the Colossians?*

Optional Activity: Lead your group to search in their Bibles or on their electronic devices for information about Paul's letter to the Colossians. Use this as an opportunity to help your group not only gain context for Colossians but to also encourage them to use resources available to them. Record their findings on the whiteboard in your room or on a poster board and refer to their answers as you introduce Colossians.

DISCUSS

Paul's letter (or epistle) to the church at Colossae was possibly the first of his letters from prison. Paul did not establish the church and may have never visited. The church was probably founded by Epaphras, who was a native of Colossae. Epaphras is only mentioned in the letters to the Colossians and to Philemon. He was a companion of Paul's while the apostle was in prison. It was from Epaphras that Paul likely learned of a troubling situation in the Colossian church.

- ⇒ *Why would Paul be interested in the Colossian church if he had never met the believers there?*

Paul wrote to warn Colossian believers about the seductive and dangerous presence of doctrinal heresy. Biblical scholars don't agree on the precise nature of the false teaching. In Paul's rebuttal to the heresy, he provided enough information for us to deduce the basic themes. At its core, the heresy undermined the supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus Christ. Heretics told believers they needed something more than their relationship with Jesus to bring them to genuine spiritual experience. These false teachers wanted to impose strict rules about eating and drinking and the observance of religious festivals, Sabbaths, and New Moons (Colossians 2:16-23).

- ⇒ *Why would new believers in Colossae be particularly vulnerable to false teaching?*
- ⇒ *Is this the case for all new believers? What about mature believers?*
- ⇒ *How can our Community Group guard against false teaching?*

Paul also wrote the Colossians letter:

- To encourage a group of new believers to be fully assured that their salvation and forgiveness were secure and complete in Christ.
- To show the superiority of Christ and the gospel over all human philosophies and traditions.
- To challenge believers to look to Christ as the head of the church and to focus on heavenly things rather than earthly things.
- To disciple believers in the way of godly living in this world.

- ⇒ *Why is it important to keep this context in mind as we study Colossians?*

Colossians 1:1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother

Estimated to have been written in 61-62AD, Paul began the letter with his customary salutation: author, audience, and greeting. It is believed Paul was the primary writer, but Timothy was included because of his share in the ministry. We have no record of Timothy's direct connection to the Colossians. Timothy was also part of Paul's letters to the Philippian church and to Philemon.

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, was a Jew and a Roman citizen, born in Tarsus (modern Turkey). He was a prominent Jewish leader and a highly educated Pharisee. He persecuted Christians in the early church before his own dramatic conversion in 35AD (Acts 8:1-3; 9:1-22). After his conversion, Paul became the leading missionary to the Gentiles.

⇒ *Why is Paul's ministry to the Gentiles of such significance?*

Paul identified his authority as an apostle of God. The word apostle means "one who is sent" and was assigned to those who were called and commissioned by the risen Christ. The word carries the idea of one sent forth with a message and with the authority of the sender.

⇒ *How does the concept of "one who is sent" relate to Henderson Hills' emphasis on living sent?*

While Paul never claimed to be included among the original twelve, he, the other apostles, and early believers recognized that Jesus appointed him as a special apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 26:16–18; 1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:8; Galatians 1:1). Paul was not an apostle because of personal ambition, his title came to him by the will of God.

Paul was imprisoned by Nero in 67AD in Rome, where some scholars suggest he was executed the next year (2 Timothy 4).

⇒ *Why is it important to understand more about Paul when studying one of his letters?*

Timothy, our brother, was the son of a Greek father and Jewish mother (2 Timothy 1:5). A native of Lystra, Timothy may have been converted on Paul's first missionary journey, which included the cities of Lystra and Derbe (Acts 14). Timothy was enlisted by Paul to travel with him on his second missionary journey (Acts 16:1). Paul sent Timothy specifically to Philippi to help the church (Acts 19:22; Philippians 2:19–24). Timothy became a major player on Paul's missionary team (2 Corinthians 1:1; Philippians 1:1; Colossians 1:1; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:1; Philemon 1). Although Timothy was not an apostle, Paul affirmed him as one who carried on the same work and the same preaching task (1 Corinthians 16:10; 2 Corinthians 1:19). Timothy eventually became the leader of the church at Ephesus. Paul wrote 1 and 2 Timothy to him.

⇒ *What does it teach us that the apostle Paul had coworkers in his ministry?*

⇒ *How can our Community Group be coworkers in this ministry?*

Colossians 1:2 To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

As Christ's apostle, Paul was not tied to any one congregation but felt compelled to provide leadership to all the churches, particularly those with Gentile believers (Romans 11:13; Galatians 2:7; Ephesians 3:1–2). Paul's calling to preach the gospel and to build up the body of Christ by helping believers with their struggles led him to intervene in the Colossian controversy. Paul was thankful for believers in this church and he was concerned about their spiritual health.

- ⇒ *Why does the discipleship process often require some type of intervention?*
- ⇒ *How can our Community Group show concern for new believers?*

Not much is known about the agricultural town of Colossae. The population was a mixture of Greeks, Romans, and transplanted Jews. Colossae was part of a tri-city area in the Lycus valley in what is now south-central Turkey. Colossae once was an important city, but by the time of Paul it had become a small market town. The city was situated in a region prone to earthquakes. Some scholars speculate that Colossae was possibly destroyed by an earthquake and may not have been rebuilt. Consequently, Paul must have written this letter before an earthquake destroyed the city.

Paul's letter served as a substitute for his personal presence (Colossians 2:5). The recipients did not need Paul to explain to them the things going on in their church that prompted his letter, but we might wish he had provided more information for clearer understanding. It is interesting to note that in the Colossians' letter, Paul doesn't quote or allude to the Old Testament nor does he refer to Jesus as the Messiah of Israel. This has led some scholars to believe the church at Colossae was comprised mainly of Gentiles.

- ⇒ *How would a letter to Jewish believers differ from one written to Gentile believers?*

Paul gave the Colossians a threefold identification:

1. Saints: Means "to be set apart," "holy ones," or "sanctified." The word was applied to Israel in the Old Testament, and Paul intentionally included Gentile Christians in this category. All true believers in Jesus are saints. A saint is separated, consecrated, and devoted to God's service by the Spirit. As instruments of God, we are "holy ones" called to serve His purposes in contrast to our dark culture.

- ⇒ *Do you struggle with the identification of "saint?" Explain your answer.*

2. Faithful: Paul commends the Colossians for their steadfast commitment to the gospel even under pressure.

3. Brothers in Christ: Jews addressed fellow Jews as brothers, but for a devout Jew to call Gentiles brothers, many of whom he had never met, reveals the radical consequences of a gospel that overcomes racial prejudices. Paul saw the Colossians as a loving, supportive, spiritual community despite differences in background, race, or social status. To be "in Christ" means the Colossian believers were inseparably joined to Him in such a way that He encompassed their entire lives and determined their beliefs and behaviors.

- ⇒ *How does a person come to be "in Christ?"*
- ⇒ *What does it mean to you to be "in Christ" on a daily basis?*

Paul's greeting of grace and peace was the standard way of saying "hello" to other believers in the first century. Paul's desire was for the Colossians to gratefully accept these two blessings from "God our Father." For Christians, God is our Father because He is the Father of Jesus Christ, to whom we belong and through whom we can know Him.

⇒ *What is the significance of Paul writing “our” Father to a Gentile congregation?*

1. Grace: Grace is God’s unmerited favor and the source of salvation (Ephesians 2:8-9).

- Grace is the basis of new life in Christ.
- Grace not only saves us from the penalty of sin; it also delivers us from the power of sin.
- Grace leads to peace.

⇒ *Besides peace, what else does grace from God lead to?*

2. Peace: “Peace” was the traditional greeting in Hebrew (*shalom*).

- Peace is a consequence of grace received. When a person believes in Jesus Christ, he or she receives salvation and peace with God, others, and self.
- Peace represents life in its wholeness—a life filled with a sense of satisfaction and serenity only God can give.

⇒ *Why should peace from God be obvious in the life of Christian communities?*

⇒ *Why can only God give true peace?*

TRANSFORM

1. Make personal application:

- ⇒ *How did today’s discussion prepare you to study Colossians? Is there something you intend to research further about Paul’s letter to the Colossians? What resources will you use?*
- ⇒ *What difference has God’s grace made in your life?*
- ⇒ *Is there an area of your life in which you need to seek the peace only God can provide?*

2. Pray: Thank God that He led you to a group in which you can find a supportive spiritual community. Praise Him for His grace and peace. Use a portion of your prayer time to pray for some of Henderson Hills’ missionaries, remembering that even though you may not know them, you can be an encouragement to them through prayer. Visit <https://www.hhbc.com/missions> for information about some specific missionaries.

STUDY: Resources used, compiled from, and quoted:

- *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, pages 317-320.
- *Holman Illustrated Bible Handbook*, page 405-408.
- *Holman New Testament Commentary, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians*, pages 274-277, 288-291.
- *The NIV Application Commentary, Colossians and Philemon*, pages 17-33, 39-63.
- *Shepherd’s Notes, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, pages 36-40.