

THE EPISTLE TO THE COLOSSIANS

INTRODUCTION

A. Importance of the Epistle to the Colossians

1. This letter from Paul is a book on Christian doctrine.
 - a. It proclaims the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ, R. Hughes, *There is no book in the New Testament, including John's Gospel, which presents such a comprehensive picture of the fullness of Christ. Accordingly, there is no writing better-equipped to draw us upward than the book of Colossians.*
 - b. Doctrine gives instruction against heresy.
 - 1) A Christian needs to know what he believes so he can live out faith in truth.
 - 2) Doctrine is often downplayed as divisive and made subservient to feelings, emotions, and opinions.
2. The historical importance of doctrine.
 - a. The Council of Jerusalem affirmed the universal nature of the Gospel, for Jews and Gentiles.
 - b. The 2nd - 4th centuries focused on the Bible canon, nature of Christ and His relationship to the Godhead.
 - c. The 11th century dealt with the relationship of the Holy Spirit to the Father and the Son.
 - d. The 16th century affirmed the priority of Scripture and salvation by faith in Christ alone.

B. The writer of the epistle to the Colossians

1. The Apostle Paul was the writer of the letter to the church at Colossae.
2. External evidence
 - a. Paul was accepted as the writer by early Church Fathers, including, Polycarp (circa 110-150), Ignatius (circa 110), Irenaeus (circa 130-202), Tertullian (circa 150-220), Clement of Alexandria (circa 150-215)
 - b. Colossians was included as canonical (part of accepted books of the Bible) by Marcion's canonical list (circa 140) and the Muratorian canon (circa 170).
3. Internal evidence
 - a. Paul is identified in the letter to the Colossians in 1:1, 23 and 4:18, *I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.*
 - b. There are close links between Colossians and Philemon.
 - 1) Both include greetings from those with Paul at that time, Aristarchus, Mark, Epaphras, Luke and Demas, Colossians 4:10-14 and Philemon 1:23-24, *Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.*
 - 2) Archippus is called a *fellow soldier* in Philemon 1:2 and is directed to fulfill his ministry in Colossians 4:17.

C. Place and date of writing

1. It was probably written from Rome during Paul's first imprisonment there, as recorded in Acts 28:30, *He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him,*
 - a. This is a known imprisonment of Paul and allows for the events in Colossians and Philemon.
 - b. Paul was under house arrest in Rome which would have allowed him visitors.
 - c. Travel between Rome and the east was frequent and would have made it possible for Paul's letters to reach the churches.
2. The date of writing was 60-61 A.D.
 - a. It is possibly the first of the Prison Epistles which includes Ephesians, Philemon, and Philippians.
 - b. It was written about the same time as Ephesians and Philemon with Philippians written about one year later.

D. Historical background of Colossae

1. The city
 - a. It was located in the southwest corner of Asia Minor in the Roman province of Asia.
 - b. Hierapolis and Laodicea were a few miles away.
 - c. Ephesus, the capital of Asia, is 100 miles west.
 - d. All were in the Lycus River Valley which contained a main road from Ephesus to the east.
 - e. By Paul's day, it had lost much of its importance and was much smaller than surrounding cities.

2. The church

- a. The region was made up of Greeks, Romans, and Jews.
- b. It appears the church was primarily Gentile.
 - 1) Colossians 1:21, *And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds,*
 - 2) Colossians 3:5-7, *Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them.*
- c. Paul probably never visited Colossae.
 - 1) Colossians 1:4, *since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints,*
 - 2) Colossians 2:1, *For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face,*
- d. The church was formed due to Paul's ministry at Ephesus.
 - 1) Acts 19:9-10, *But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus. This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.*
 - 2) The Bible mentions two men from Colossae who came to faith while Paul was preaching at Ephesus.
 - a) Epaphras, Colossians 4:12, *Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God.*
 - b) Onesimus, Philemon 1:10-13, *I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel,*
 - 3) Epaphras was probably the one who evangelized Colosse and later made Paul aware of their love for the Lord.
 - a) Colossians 1:7-8, *just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.*
 - b) Colossians 4:12-13, *Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God. For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis.*

E. The heresy at Colossae

1. It is likely that Epaphras brought a report to Paul of the heresy at Colossae.
2. Nature of the heresy
 - a) Judaism
 - 1) There are references to circumcision.
 - a) Colossians 2:11, *In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ,*
 - b) Colossians 3:11, *Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.*
 - 2) There are discussions of dietary regulations and Jewish holidays, Colossians 2:16, *Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.*
 - 3) The mention of angel worship had become an issue in Judaism, Colossians 2:18, *Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind,*

- b) Gnosticism
 - 1) The basic premise of this heresy is that matter is evil and the good may only be found in the spirit world.
 - 2) There was an emphasis on knowledge and salvation became a matter of knowledge and not faith.
 - 3) Conclusions derived from Gnosticism.
 - a) God could not have created matter if it is evil but only sent out emanations (physical thoughts) which eventually created matter unlike what God had originally intended.
 - b) Jesus did not have a physical body if matter is evil. Therefore, Jesus could not save mankind because He did not become flesh and blood.
 - c) Concerning morality and ethics
 - 1] One side became ascetics since our bodies are matter and therefore are evil, Colossians 2:23, *These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.*
 - 2] The other side said that since our bodies are evil no matter what we do, it does not matter how much we sin.
- c) Threads of heresy in Colossians
 - 1) Spiritual fullness
 - a) The false teachers declared they had something that had not been experienced before.
 - b) R. Lucas, *The false teachers came in with the claim that they would complete and perfect the simple and elementary faith to which the Colossians had been introduced by Paul and his friends.*
 - 2) Special freedom
 - a) Colossians could experience this freedom if they followed the new teachers.
 - b) Paul reminds them in this epistle of the deliverance that is already theirs in Christ, Colossians 1:13, *He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son,*
 - 3) Super protection
 - a) Insight into the powers of evil was available.
 - b) Paul taught of protection from evil instead of familiarity of evil, Colossians 2:15, *He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.*
 - 4) Strict behavior
 - a) An ascetic lifestyle was stressed by the false teachers.
 - b) Note Paul's rejection of such teaching, Colossians 2:23, *These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.*
 - 5) Super knowledge
 - a) The false teachers offered Initiation into deep spiritual truths of God.
 - b) Paul emphasized the sufficiency of Christ, Colossians 2:8-10, *See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.*
 - 6) Superior attitude
 - a) There was an elitist, critical attitude toward *ordinary* believers.
 - b) Paul encouraged the Colossians to realize that Christ is our only hope, Colossians 2:16-17, *Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.*

- F. Outline of the Epistle to the Colossians
 - 1. Introduction (1:1-14)
 - a. Greeting (1-2)
 - b. Thanksgiving for their faith (3-8)
 - c. A prayer of petition for them (9-14)
 - 2. Doctrinal Instruction (1:15-29)
 - a. The supreme person of Christ (15-20)
 - b. The supreme work of Christ (21-29)
 - 1) Instruction on reconciliation (21-23)
 - 2) Paul's ministry of reconciliation (24-29)
 - 3. Warnings against false teaching (2:1-23)
 - a. Encouragement to persevere in the faith (1-7)
 - b. True doctrine is found in Christ (8-15)
 - c. False doctrines of men (16-23)
 - 4. Instructions on living the Christian life (3:1-4:6)
 - a. Live what you believe (3:1-17)
 - b. Concerning relationships (3:18-4:1)
 - c. Concluding instructions (4:2-6)
 - 5. Final greetings (4:7-18)
 - a. An introduction of the bearers of Paul's letter to the Colossians (7-9)
 - b. Greetings from Paul's fellow workers (10-14)
 - c. Greetings from Paul to the church at Laodicea (15)
 - d. Instructions from Paul (16-17)
 - e. Benediction (18)