

Colossians 1:1-2 — Introduction to Colossians

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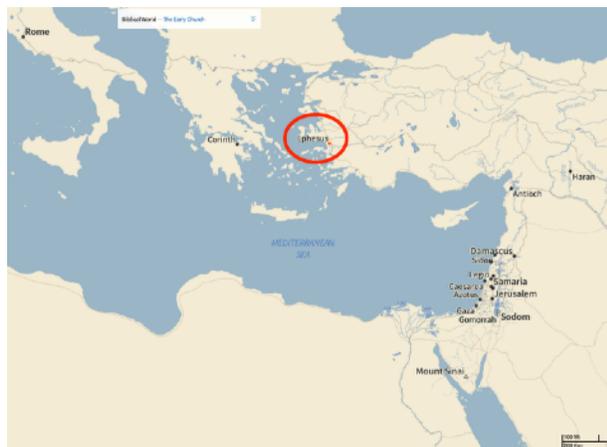
Welcome to CrossWinds. This morning we begin our study of the book of Colossians. This study will take approximately three months. I am really excited about it because there is no other book in the Bible that displays the greatness of Jesus with greater clarity than the book of Colossians. Sometimes living in the modern church, it is easy to lose sight of the greatness of what God has done for us through Jesus. Colossians is like a new pair of glasses. As we study this book, it will bring the greatness of Jesus back into focus so we see why Jesus is so important.

This morning, we are not going to get far. First, I want to give you the background to the book of Colossians. If we don't understand the context for the book, we will have a hard time understanding the book.

After the background of the book, we will look the first two verses and answer these two questions: "Why should we trust what Paul has to say about Jesus?" and "As a Christian, who am I because of Jesus?"

The background of Colossians.

When we studied the book of Ephesians — which was a letter Paul wrote to the city of Ephesus — we learned that on one of Paul's early missionary journeys, he began the church in Ephesus. He



began the church in Ephesus because Ephesus was a hub city. The city had

approximately 250,000 people and was the fourth largest city in the ancient world. All the commerce from Rome going east sailed into the port of Ephesus and then was taken by land to the interior of Asia. All the manufacturing from the Asian interior was put on ships and sailed to Rome from Ephesus. Paul's plan was to tell the story of Jesus to people in Ephesus and plant the church in Ephesus. Since people were constantly passing through Ephesus, he hoped travelers would hear about Jesus in that city then take the good news of Jesus with them to their hometowns.

On Paul's third missionary journey he returned to Ephesus and taught in the city for almost three 3 years. His primary method of teaching was in a rented public lecture hall called the hall of Tyrannus. He typically taught there over the lunch hour when people had time off. We read about this in the book of Acts.

And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. 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. Acts 19:8–10 (ESV)

As people passed through Ephesus, they heard Paul speaking about Jesus. They became Christians and went home to their cities where they told others about Jesus. Their sins were forgiven. Their lives were changed, and new churches began in a new city. This worked so well that all the people of Asia heard about Jesus.

In the book of Colossians, we will meet a man named Epaphras. He passed through Ephesus, stopped at the lecture hall of Tyrannus and heard Paul talking about Jesus. Epaphras became a Christian and returned to his city, which

was the city of Colossae. Epaphras planted the church in Colossae and pastored the church in Colossae. Epaphras wasn't alone in this work. Another wealthy businessman passed through Ephesus and heard Paul talk about Jesus. He also became a Christian. His name was Philemon. Philemon was very rich and had a huge house in the city of Colossae. In a moment, we will see the church in Colossae met in Philemon's house. When the church meets in your house, you either have a really small church or a really big house. I am going with the latter. So in the church of Colossae, Epaphras was the pastor and Philemon headed up the property team since he owned the property.

At this point, there is an interesting backstory. Philemon, the wealthy Christian businessman with the huge house, had a slave named Onesimus. Onesimus was a rebellious slave. He ran from home. In the ancient world, if a slave ran away, it was a big deal. If you were found you would be severely beaten and possibly killed. Since Onesimus was trying to hide from his master, he traveled 1,300 miles to Rome, where he planned to be lost in the sea of almost 350,000 people in the city. At this time, guess who was also in Rome? Paul was in Rome under house arrest waiting for his appeal to Caesar. We read about that in Acts 25. House arrest was the ancient equivalent of wearing an ankle collar. It meant people could visit you but you had to be supervised to go anywhere. Guess who happened to run across Paul among the 350,000 people in Rome? Onesimus, the runaway slave, ended up meeting Paul in Rome. He heard the gospel from Paul. He became a Christian and ended up helping Paul while he was under house arrest.

As we will see in a moment, the baby church in Colossae began to get off track. Epaphras, the brand new pastor, didn't know what to do. The apostle Paul didn't have Snapchat or Facebook so Pastor Epaphras set out to find Paul in Rome to get help with church problems. When Epaphras walked in the door of Paul's house, guess who he found inside? Onesimus! His buddy Philemon's runaway slave. Now Onesimus' gig is up. There was no more hiding. Paul sent him home to face the dire consequences for running away from his master.

At this point, Paul wrote the letter to the Colossians to address the church meeting in Philemon's home. He also wrote a personal letter to Philemon that was to be read in the church that met in Philemon's house. In the letter to Philemon, Paul told Philemon how to treat Onesimus, his runaway slave. So when Tychicus and Onesimus left Rome to head to Colossae, they carried two letters from Paul, not one. One is the book of Colossians in our Bible. The other is the book of Philemon.

Let me show you how Paul told Philemon to treat his runaway slave.

For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. Philemon 15–17 (ESV)

Can you imagine how this went down? I imagine Tychicus and Onesimus both showed up on Sunday morning during church. They knocked at the front door. Philemon opened it and freaked out because his runaway slave was at his front door. Onesimus said, "Before you beat me in front of the church, we have two letters from Paul. One is written to you Philemon. Let's read the letters before you give me a beating." They read the letter of Philemon and Paul

said “Don’t beat Onesimus, but treat him as a brother. Treat him like you would treat me. He is a Christian. He is more than a slave. Onesimus is your brother.” I bet you could have heard a pin drop in church that morning.

Incidentally, Paul’s words to Philemon in that personal letter on how to treat slaves, especially slaves that are now brothers or sisters in Christ, became a crucial part of dismantling the institution of slavery in England and the United States. Isn’t it fun to see how God puts things together? Nothing happens by chance. Onesimus didn’t meet Paul in Rome by chance. Paul didn’t write a letter about slavery to Philemon by chance. That letter was not preserved by chance. It was not added in our Bible by chance, because God planned to use it to not just bless the slave Onesimus but as part of the dismantling of slavery itself as part of our culture.

What was life like in Colossae?

The city of Colossae was part of a trio of cities in the Lycus valley. Hieropolis and Laodicea were its sister cities. They were only 10 miles away. At one time, Colossae was a big manufacturer and exporter of wool from sheep that grazed the fields

around the city. It was also a big exporter of dyes made from chalk found in the local hillsides. These exports helped Colossae survive. In addition, travel was big income for Colossae. It was on the trade route for caravans heading to and from Ephesus. Unfortunately, just prior to this time, the Romans changed the highway



and rerouted it through Laodicea, skipping Colossae. Colossae was fast becoming a ghost town as it was overshadowed by its prosperous sister cities, Laodicea and Hieropolis.

What went wrong in the Colossian church?

What so deeply upset Pastor Epaphras that he left town and made a 1,300 mile trip to Rome because he needed the advice and authority of the apostle Paul? We don't know exactly what was going astray in the Colossian church, but we have a good idea.

In short, the culture of Colossae was pressing into the church, and it was beginning to change what people believed about Jesus. Today, just like in their day, the culture around us exerts tremendous pressure on the church. Sometimes the church changes what the Bible says to better harmonize the Bible with what most people believe. Let me give you one example that we talked about at the men's breakfast this week. The Bible tells us the world was created in seven days. For most of Christian history, the church took the Genesis creation account at face value as seven literal days. With the advent of evolution and the need for millions of years for gradual change, many people in the church tried to harmonize science and the Bible together by saying each day in Genesis equals millions of years. "The Bible can't mean a literal seven days," they say. Some people took this even further. Since they don't believe in a literal seven days, they don't believe in a literal Adam. They also believe there was probably not a literal original sin. If you don't have a literal first Adam, you don't have a literal second Adam, called Jesus. If you don't have original sin as the problem, you

don't need Jesus as the solution. Before long, trying to harmonize the beliefs of our culture with the Bible starts to whittle away the truth of the Bible.

This is what was happening in Colossae. Colossae was a melting pot for people as they traveled to Ephesus. There were two primary cultural influences pressing on the church. The first was Greek philosophy. The second was Jewish legalism.

Greek philosophy taught that God is good but matter is evil. Followers believed the original God created another God, who created another God. That continued for thousands of rounds of gods creating lesser gods until there was a little god far enough from the real god that this lesser god could create matter, which they believed was intrinsically evil. The problem with Greek philosophy is this little god was relatively powerless, plus this god that could touch matter was evil. That is the way the Colossians thought about God. When people in the church tried to harmonize the Greek culture with the truth of Jesus, they ended up with people that believed Jesus was evil and Jesus was vastly inferior to God. This is why Paul said in the book of Colossians:

For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, Colossians 2:9 (ESV)

Paul said, "Don't change the truth about Jesus to fit culture. If you change the truth about Jesus, you no longer have the truth of Jesus."

In addition, Greek philosophy taught that only those properly educated about the secrets of God really knew God. In Greek religion there were secret societies where only certain people in-the-know knew the truth about the Greek gods. This is similar to the Masonic Lodge today, which is a secret society, with secret rituals and secret levels. The Greek pagan culture of secret societies with

secret truths was infiltrating the thinking of the church. People were now thinking Jesus was only the beginning. You needed to move beyond Jesus to get to the secret knowledge about God that only certain insiders obtained. This is why Paul wrote:

...that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and [the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments.](#) Colossians 2:2-4 (ESV)

Do you want to know God's mystery? All of God's mysteries are found in Jesus. There are no additional secrets. All of God's wisdom and knowledge are found in Jesus. Don't let anyone else fool you. Don't let anyone else tell you that you need something besides him.

In addition to the church letting Greek culture start to change what they believed about Jesus, they were also letting Jewish culture tell them they needed more than Jesus by trying to harmonize Jewish culture into the church. For example, the Jewish culture encouraged circumcision. If you really want to be a good Christian, you start with Jesus then get circumcised. Jesus was circumcised. You should be circumcised. In Colossians Paul corrected this thinking by saying:

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... Colossians 2:11 (ESV)

You don't need circumcision plus Jesus. All you need is Jesus.

They were also teaching that the really spiritual people managed their sin by learning to denying themselves of God's good pleasures. This is called asceticism. Ascetics means self-denial. They taught that learning rigorous self-

denial in even good areas of life was the key to beating sin. Paul said that is completely wrong. Denying ourselves doesn't make us beat sin. Jesus is the one who cancels the power of sin. Victory over sin doesn't come by making yourself suffer. It comes by delighting in Jesus. This is why Paul said:

...“Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!” (referring to things that all perish as they are used) — according to human precepts and teachings? 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. Colossians 2:21–23 (ESV)

So in Colossae, we have the prevailing beliefs of the world pressing into the church and people were trying to harmonize the truth of Jesus with what they originally believed rather than holding to the truth of Jesus and having to abandon their former beliefs.

In this letter, Paul was adamant. Jesus is enough. Jesus is all we need to beat sin. We don't need secret knowledge, secret passwords, or circumcision to really know God; all we need is Jesus. When you try to blend the truth of Jesus with anything, we ruin the truth of Jesus. Paul's whole point in Colossians was Jesus is more than enough for every need we have in life.

That is the background of this book. The application for us is straight forward. Today, our culture presses into the church, telling us Jesus isn't enough. We need something beside Jesus to be happy, to be saved, or to beat sin.

Let me show you an example. If you are struggling with sin, the world says you need a 12-step program then go to church for a little Jesus. Here is the problems. The 12-step program is sin management. Jesus is the only one who saves a life, breaks the power of sin and makes someone into a new person.

I am not saying there is nothing good in a 12-step program. I am just telling you the 12-step program is only sin management. Only Jesus is the sin solution in your life and mine.

To prove to you that I am telling the truth, I ask you, what did people do before the 12-step program? What is the only way a life truly changed so they went from loving sin to hating it? Jesus!

Any time we try to blend Jesus with something else, we make him out to be less than he actually is and we direct people away from the only thing that can change their life — Jesus!

Let's jump into the first two paragraphs where Paul told us who he was and who we are.

Why should we trust what the apostle Paul says about Jesus?

[Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother... Colossians 1:1 \(ESV\)](#)

Jesus is the most important person of history. We divide history by his birth. Easter and Christmas are all about Jesus. Billions of people worship Jesus. When it comes to teaching us about Jesus, Paul was probably one of the most important people in the history of the world. Paul wrote 13 books in the New Testament. Every single one of Paul's letters is about the importance of Jesus and how he transforms life.

Surprisingly, many young people are rejecting Paul. Jesus is in style but Paul is out of style. Paul is considered a sexist, bigot, and homophobe. Today it is trendy to follow Jesus but reject Paul. Personally, I didn't know this was an

option, but the cover article of Christianity Today in 2010 was Jesus vs. Paul.

Who will win? It described this growing trend among young people to reject Paul.

Rejecting Paul is not something new. It is something they did in the early church too. Paul was always a controversial figure.

As Paul wrote to the Christians in Colossae, that he had never met, he began by telling them the kind of authority he had when he talked to them about Jesus. This way they knew they could trust what he had to say about Jesus. He isn't just another opinion. What he said about Jesus is the honest-to-God truth.

Paul said he was an apostle of Jesus. Paul was speaking about the office of the apostle. The apostles were 12 men chosen by Jesus to teach the truth about Jesus. Jesus chose the apostles. Jesus trained his apostles for three years, then Jesus sent his apostles into the world to tell the truth of what he had done.

Paul was not one of these original apostles, yet he described himself as an apostle, an apostle that was abnormally born.¹

When we read the book of Acts, we find Paul began life as a highly educated religious zealot. He hated Christians. He hated Jesus. He thought Jesus was a shame. Paul was part of a group of thugs that went from town to town to find Christians, beat them up and take them to prison. When they could, they acted like terrorists and were behind public mob executions designed to strike terror into the heart of a city. That was Paul. He was at the killing of the first Christian martyr, a man named Stephen. The Bible describes it this way.

¹ 1 Corinthians 15:8

But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. Acts 8:3 (ESV)

Ravaging literally means *to lay waste*. It means to completely destroy something. When Paul and his posse came to town, they completely destroyed a church. You were either going to die, be beaten or thrown in prison.

In Acts 9, we see the resurrected Jesus in heaven set up a little appointment with Paul on the road to Damascus. The risen Jesus appeared to Paul, blinded Paul, then knocked him on his backside and said, “Why are you persecuting me?” Saul had the sudden terrifying realization he was playing for the wrong team. Paul became a Christian. This is like Osama Bin Laden becoming a pastor. Paul went from jihad to Jesus. Paul was the least likely Christian on the planet. The only reason he was a Christian was because he was supernaturally chosen by God. The Bible also tells us he was also trained by God in the truth about Jesus.² Then God sent him to teach the good news of Jesus, just like he did the other apostles.³ By the time we get to Acts 13 to 28, the spread of the gospel message and the growth of the church throughout the world was spearheaded by the apostle Paul. Paul was one of the great authorities on Jesus because he was supernaturally converted by Jesus, trained by Jesus and sent out by Jesus, just like the other apostles. Paul walked an average of 20 miles a day for the rest of his life as he tried to tell more and more people about Jesus. There were no benefits. When he came to a town, he was often met by an

² Galatians 1:17

³ Acts 13:2-3

angry mob that wanted to kill him. He got no money out of the deal. He was shipwrecked, whipped, stoned and left for dead.

When it comes to the truth about Jesus, you can trust Paul because of the his conversion by Jesus, his training in Arabia by Jesus and because he was sent to be an apostle by Jesus; plus, the testimony of his life clearly tells us he was not in it for the money.

That is why Paul said he was an apostle of Jesus Christ in this opening line. He established his authority to the Colossian church so they knew they could trust he would tell them the truth about Jesus. I love how he said something similar when he spoke to the Corinthians.

If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord. If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized. 1 Corinthians 14:37–38 (ESV)

He said, “When I am telling you something about Jesus, it is not up for debate. I know what I am talking about because Jesus told me, and Jesus called me. If someone thinks they are spiritual, they just need to acknowledge I am telling the truth.”

Here is our application. Every one of us needs to decide who we will listen to when it comes to learning the truth about Jesus. The people of Colossae had to choose who they would trust. Would they trust what their friends and neighbors said about Jesus when they claimed he wasn't enough for their lives or would they trust the apostle Paul who told them Jesus is more than enough for every problem we face?

This morning, I ask you, who are you going to listen to when it comes to Jesus? The world says Jesus is just another religious teacher. The culture says

Jesus may help your life but you need something else to fix your life because Jesus isn't enough. Who are you going to trust to tell you the truth about Jesus? Paul or your friends and neighbors?

Who am I because of Jesus?

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

Paul said the Christians in Colossae were saints because they were in Christ. When Paul said we are "in Christ," that is a very special term. Paul used this term in many of his letters. We read it so fast we miss the significance of these words. "In Christ" means our identity is not found in ourselves. Our identity is found "in Christ." Today, most of us find our identity in relation to other people. If someone is the smart person, that makes you the dumb person. If someone is the beautiful person, that makes you the ugly person. When we compare ourselves to others, it leads to either pride because we look down on others or despair because we can't measure up to others.

Paul said that Christians are different. Our identity is not found in ourselves or in comparing ourselves to others because our identity is now "in Christ." Paul described the good news of what it means to be in Christ in the first chapter of Ephesians. Let me just show you one verse from that chapter.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places... Ephesians 1:3 (ESV)

Christ is the most blessed and exalted being in the universe, because we are "in Christ," that means we are the most blessed and exalted beings in the universe, not because of who we are but because of who Christ is, and our identity is found in him.

In the Roman catacombs, many of the unnamed tombs of dead Christians simply have this phrase etched across the front of the grave, “in Christ.” The Christians that buried their deceased brothers and sisters realized that what really mattered was not their names, not their births, not their deaths and not what they did with their lives. The only thing that matter about their lives was that they were “in Christ.” Anything they did with their lives, no matter how great it was, is nothing compared to what it means to be “in Christ” since our whole identity in life and eternity is found in him. Since we are in Christ, our sin is paid for. Since we are in Christ, we are a completely new creation. Since we are in Christ, sin no longer has control of our hearts. Since we are in Christ, we will reign for all eternity with Jesus. Is there anything more important in this world than having your life in Christ?

Our identity “in Christ” changes the way we need to see ourselves in the mirror. The Bible says we are all sinners by nature, but because we are “in Christ,” sinner is no longer our identity. Our identity is we are saints, not sinners. Saints are holy people set apart by God to live holy lives. Will we still sin? Of course! Sin now describes our occasional activity but saint is our persistent identity. Sin explains what we do, but saint explains who we are because our identity is “in Jesus.” Struggling with sin may define our current struggle, but it doesn’t describe our eternal struggle. Once we have given our sin to Christ, our sin is forgiven and we are in the process of becoming more and more like Christ every day. When we die, we will be with Jesus and our struggle with sin will be over.

It is very important to understand that as Christians, our new identity in Christ is a saint, not a sinner. We struggle with sin, but sinner is not who we are, it is what we occasionally do. Since we are “in Christ,” we don’t need to give in to sin anymore.

We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin.... So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Romans 6:6-7, 11 (ESV)

When you struggle with sin, don’t let yourself get tricked into thinking you must give in to the power of sin because sinner is your nature. That is who you were. As a Christian, saint is who we are because we are “in Christ,” so we now have the desire and ability to live a holy life.

This morning, we need to know the truth of who Jesus is, so we understand who we are, so we stop living like what we were. That is the honest-to-god truth.

Conclusion

This morning, we were introduced to the problem in the church of Colossae. They were letting the culture reshape the truth about Jesus to make him far less than he actually is. They were letting the culture tell them Jesus isn’t enough to bring you to God and handle the problems in your life.

The problem is when they thought Jesus wasn’t enough, they didn’t understand their new identity in Christ, and as a result they lived in sin like who they were, not who they are.

The same is true for us today. Most of us have a small picture of Jesus or a distorted picture of Jesus. As a result, we don’t understand who we are in

Jesus and that we are no longer sinners but saints that display God's power and glory by living changed and holy lives in this world.



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