

Exegesis of Colossians 1:24 – 2:5

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Introduction

The Epistle of Paul to the church of Colossae is a short letter, but the length is not an indication of the powerful message that was given to the first-century church and the powerful message that is equally relevant to the Christian church today. Paul initiates the letter with one of the most magnificent descriptions recorded in scripture of the Christology of Jesus and then establishes the sufficiency of Christ's work on the cross to reconcile us to God through faith in Christ alone. Paul acknowledges false teachings in the church, warns them not to be taken captive to the traditions of men, encourages them to set their minds on Christ, put on the characteristics of Christ, and live in peace and unity with your fellow man. The text does not list all the specific false teachings in the church but does provide some clues that we can draw conclusions from how Paul sets up his letter and the practical advice for living he gives to the church of Colossae. First, I will provide background information about the author and the audience to whom the letter was written, the circumstances and setting of this first-century small town church and explore Paul's stated purpose of the letter.

Authorship and to Whom was the Letter Written

The letter begins by identifying Paul and Timothy as the authors writing to Christians in the church of Colossae. Colossians 1:1, "Paul, an Apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are at Colossae." Some scholars have suggested that differences in writing style and minor inconsistencies in Christological presentation may suggest Paul was not the author. However, considering the letter introduces Paul, an Apostle, and Timothy as the author and the fact that church tradition supports Paul as the author provides strong support for Paul's authorship. Douglas Moo states that we can know Paul is the author because "there are simply too many specific personal claims

(Paul's) woven throughout the letter."¹ Paul had been charged with sedition for disturbing the Roman peace in Jerusalem and breaking religious laws. He appealed his charges to Caesar and was under house arrest in Rome awaiting his trial. The letter can be dated around 60 – 62 A.D., the time Paul was imprisoned in Rome. During this time, Christianity had emerged from a sect of Judaism to include Gentiles and was rapidly spreading across Rome. Christians were gathering in homes and early versions of churches were budding and were being challenged with competing ideas and false doctrines. Paul being pre-eminently qualified from his training as a Pharisee was appointed by God as an Apostle to spread the Gospel to the Gentiles, Kings, and the sons of Israel.² Paul spread the Gospel across the Roman world and was the authority on Christian doctrine to the church. While under house arrest, Paul had the privilege of accepting visitors where he could receive news of the churches and write letters of encouragement and instruction. Epaphras was with Paul in Rome and provided an update on the problems with the church in Colossae.³ We learn in the first chapter that Epaphras had brought the Gospel to Colossae.⁴ Epaphras, a Gentile, was identified as a faithful servant of Christ⁵ from Colossae⁶ who was likely the one who shared the Gospel with the Colossians to begin the church. It is clear from Colossians 2:1 that Paul had not personally visited the church. Colossae was not known to be a Jewish community and Paul's writing to the Colossians did not reference the Old Testament or Jewish legalism that was common to Jewish churches. Therefore, we believe the church in Colossae was predominantly Gentile. Colossae was a small and insignificant

¹ Moo, Douglas J., *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008, P 119.

² Acts 9:15 (NASB)

³ Col. 4:12-13 (NASB)

⁴ Col. 1:7 (NASB)

⁵ Col. 1:7 (NASB)

⁶ Col. 4:12 (NASB)

community in Phrygia, a Roman province of Asia (Modern day southwest Turkey). It is about 100 miles east of Ephesus and just south of Hierapolis and Laodicea. The maps below will give you a perspective of the location of Colossae relative to the Mediterranean and the major cities in Asia minor.⁷



⁷ Ashley D Farmer, "Heart Soil," 2017, <http://www.ashleydfarmer.wordpress.com/tag/colossae>.



Context for Chapter 1:24 – 2:5

We cannot begin to understand Colossians 1:24 and the following verses without beginning with the foundation on which Paul builds the entire letter. The opening salutation that is common to Paul's writings identifies himself as an Apostle of Jesus Christ, acknowledges their faith in Christ and their good works. He is building rapport and establishing his credibility before issuing warnings to come later of false teaching. Paul then writes one of the most powerful descriptions of Christology to establish the pre-eminence of Christ in verses 13 - 18.

13 For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. 15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 16 For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. 17 He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. 18 He is also head of

the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything.

In these verses Paul clearly proclaims Jesus' deity, His identity in creation, His relationship to earthly kingdoms, and His identity as head of the church.

Paul then proceeds to establish the sufficiency of the cross in verses 19 – 23.

19 For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, 20 and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven. 21 And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, 22 yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach— 23 if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister.

Christ has reconciled all creation to God through the blood of His cross to present us before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach. There is absolutely nothing more that needs to be or can be accomplished to satisfy this reconciliation.

Colossians 1:24 – 2:5

Colossians 1:24 – 2:5 builds on the opening declarations of Jesus as the Christ and the work that he accomplished on the Cross.

24 Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions. 25 Of this church I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God, 26 that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints, 27 to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. 28 We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ. 29 For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me. **Chapter 2** For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf and for those who are at

Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face, 2 that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself, 3 in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. 4 I say this so that no one will delude you with persuasive argument. 5 For even though I am absent in body, nevertheless I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good discipline and the stability of your faith in Christ.

Colossians 1:24 – 29

In the original Greek verses 24 – 28 are one sentence. To achieve the full content of the message, the translation to the English language requires six verses to capture verses 24-29 so we will address each verse. Paul begins this section by further establishing his credibility and his motives in verse 24 and 25. In verse 24 Paul rejoices in his sufferings for the sake of the body of Christ. Suffering that began when Jesus suffered while on the cross. Now we, the church, are the body of Christ and continue in His suffering. Pastor Steven W. Spivey states, “If we allow the experiences of the first generation to interpret our calling and experiences, then the reality of suffering for the sake of Christ, the body and the world cannot be avoided. It is such suffering that marks the church as Christ’s church, as cruciform people being conformed to Christ’s image.”⁸ This is not to say that additional suffering is required to complete our atonement, but that God’s purpose is that the body of Christ would continue to suffer in order to identify with Christ. We share in His inheritance and His suffering. Paul expresses that he is doing his part to suffer for Christ. The end of verse 24 is one of the most controversial verses in all of Paul’s writing as some have misinterpreted the words, “in filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions” to falsely suggest we have more work to do in accomplishing our salvation. The implication is that the believer’s salvation is based upon Christ plus something else.

⁸ Steven W. Spivey, “Colossians 1:24 and the Suffering Church,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 4 (1): 43–62. <https://search-ebshost-com.libproxy.hbu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rft&AN=ATLA0001841399&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

In verse 25, Paul further qualifies his authority as a minister to this church, appointed by God, to preach to God's Word. Paul continues this thought in verses 26-27 by introducing his message. Paul proclaims that he is to preach the *mystery* of God's word His Saints. This *mystery*, hidden from generations past, is now revealed to the Gentiles, which is Christ. Paul was granted the privilege of revealing certain mysteries to the church. These mysteries are truths that were established in the Old Testament, but their full meaning was hidden until a later date. Chief among these mysteries is that God would bestow His grace to the gentiles.

Verse 28 begins, "We proclaim Him." We proclaim Christ. Here Paul probably includes Timothy, Epaphras and other fellow workers, but it is also possible that it is merely a stylistic shift as Paul continues to refer to himself alone. As Paul progresses, he puts particular emphasis on universality. The Greek work *pas* occurs four times: "admonishing *every man*," "teaching every man with all wisdom," "that we may present every man complete in Christ." Paul's repetition is emphasizing the full measure of the Gospel that Paul and his fellow workers bring to every man that they encounter.⁹ Each man is "admonished" and "taught" with to goal that every man may be presented complete in Christ. The purpose of Paul's proclamation of Christ is both to admonish or correct false teaching and to teach or instruct the truth of Christ with all wisdom. To receive the instruction, the Colossians will need great wisdom that will come from being filled with the knowledge of God's will as Paul declared earlier in verse 9.

⁹ Moo, Douglas J., *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008, P 362.

Paul concludes his thought started in verse 24 saying that it is for this stated purpose that he labors or works in collaboration with God according to His power that works mightily or powerfully within Paul. Paul's intense effort works in synergy with God's power.

Colossians 2:1 - 5

Chapter 2:1 - 5 explains why Paul has written 1:24 – 29. “For I want you to know,” connects these two passages and points to the emphasis Paul puts on defining his effort that he has suffered on behalf of those at Laodicea and those who have not personally seen Paul. Laodicea was only 9 miles from Colossae, and they were closely related, possibly both founded by Epaphras. In Verse 2 Paul tells the purpose for his hard work for these converts. “That their hearts may be encouraged.” Paul's second purpose listed here is that they would be “knit together” in love. The picture here is the knitting, uniting, or entwining their hearts together with love as the binder. Paul uses this picture later in 3:14 instructing the Colossians, “put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.” Lastly, Paul's hope is that they will attain the wealth or riches that come from “full assurance of understanding.” “*Full assurance*” is the complete understanding that yields the result of “a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is Christ Himself.” This is the key verse in this passage stating the ultimate purpose of Paul's ministry is that they would have “a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself.” Paul completes his thought in verse 3 saying the object of knowing God's mystery is Christ, whom is all that every man needs to understand the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, establishing the Christological teaching of chapter 1. Every man who, by faith, comes to know Christ has access to all the wisdom and knowledge that exists.

In verse 4 Paul plainly transitions to his warning against false teachers. “I say this so that no one will delude you with persuasive argument.” The ESV describes this warning as false teachers that present “plausible arguments,” arguments that make sense to the common man. Whether Judaizers, Gnostic’s or other competing ideas teaching Jesus plus something more, Paul is identifying these things as a warning against false teachings and philosophies.

Paul concludes his thought in verse 5 by addressing possible criticism of the fact that he was not present in the flesh and did not know the Colossians, but he is rejoicing in their discipline and stability of the faith. Paul adds to the authority appointed to him by God as an Apostle to minister to the entire “body” of the church and especially to Gentiles given in 1:24-29 by stating, “For even though I am absent in body, nevertheless I am with you in spirit.” In the text, Paul describes “spirit” in contrast to the “body” or flesh indicating that “spirit” is referring to “withness,” as he is “with them in human spirit.” Douglas Moo cites Gordon Fee as arguing it is doubtful whether Paul ever uses the language of “spirit” without some reference to the Holy Spirit.¹⁰ Paul then is not only with them in his thoughts and prayers, but also involves a spiritual authority mediated by the Spirit of God.

Paul concludes using military metaphors to illustrate his rejoicing in their good discipline and stability of their faith in Christ. The ESV uses the words “good order” and the “firmness” of your faith in Christ. British New Testament scholar James Dunn suggests that Paul is expressing “more of what he would hope to see were it possible.”¹¹ I tend to agree with Dunn’s perspective

¹⁰ Moo, Douglas J., *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008, P 390.

¹¹ Moo, 336.

that Paul is ending this warning with a positive picture of his hope that he will someday rejoice in seeing their commitment to order and steadfastness in their faith in Christ alone.

Pastoral Reflection

More than 2,000 years ago Christian churches were just beginning to emerge. Paul, appointed by God as an Apostle, rejoiced in his suffering for the sake of the body of Christ. Paul, who was eminently qualified as a scholar of the Law was called by God to reveal the mystery hidden for ages, that God willed to make known His glory to the Gentiles. That is Christ, the hope of glory. His message is equally relevant to the Christian church today. We are Paul's co-workers called to continue his diligent work to proclaim Christ and labor to expose false teaching and teach right doctrine to present every man complete in Christ.

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