



**A Bigger, Better &
Fuller Life!**

Colossians

Bible Studies for Ashfield Presbyterian Church
ashfieldpresbyterian.org.au

Background:

Colossae is located on the southern bank of the river Lycus in the Roman province of Asia. It was about 160 kilometres west of Ephesus. Colossae lay on a main road east to the Euphrates that also ran through Sardis (Revelation 1v11). In Roman times it had apparently declined to a small town. However in the 5th and 4th century BC it was large and wealthy, being centre for the wool trade for the area.



Its population was made up of native Phrygians, Greek settlers as well as some Jewish immigrants. Colossae was like much of the ancient Roman world, fairly cosmopolitan with all of what that means for us today. A place of great cultural diversity that was reflected theologically in religious pluralism. People believing that serving different gods and combining them (syncretism) was the Roman way of keeping the peace.

Paul was not the church planter of the church at Colossae. The planting of the church occurred when he was ministering in the nearby cultural and religious capital of Ephesus. The Colossian Church was planted by one of Paul's many fellow-workers, Epaphras, who was himself a Colossian. Even though he had not met them, Paul, as the apostle to the Gentiles, felt a burden of responsibility for them and so he wrote the letter to this young Christian Church.

Why did Paul write the letter to the Colossians?

It is in answering this question that we come to points of discussion. We only have one side of the discussion - Paul's letter. That means we don't know anything of what was going on in Colossae except by implication.

There are two possible ideas:

1. The first, that there was a particular threat from troublemakers who were undermining these young Christians' confidence in Jesus and the gospel they had heard. It is referred to as the 'Colossians heresy'. For those who opt for this interpretation there is often an attempt to bring the different ideas that Paul warns his readers about into a consistent whole. It continues to defy classification and definition and ends up looking like one of the composite beasts of Daniel - half lion with eagle's wings with a bit of something else mixed in. The difficulty experienced in coming up with one heresy could be the pointer to what is really happening in this one sided correspondence.
2. The second and the better option is that there is no particular heresy at all. Rather Paul is warning them about generic dangers they will confront as Christians and how to handle them. It's as if Paul is saying 'from my experience these are areas you will be tempted in, it looks like this and this is how you will handle it.' Paul, like any responsible adult, warns against common dangers that must be anticipated. Once anticipated and prepared for they are largely taken care of.

Part of the purpose in looking at Paul's correspondence is to see the sorts of generic problems that can confront us and how to anticipate them, and how better understanding the fullness of what we have in Jesus Christ is our best defence.

Over the next few weeks we are going into the world of heresy, to understand its nature and causes and cures so we can be better equipped to grow followers of Jesus.

Colossians 1:1-14: Being Who You Are:

Who or what determines who you are? There are any number of forces within our lives that impact and shape us, many of which we have no control over such as our families. Then there are those we can choose that will exert a pressure for good or ill to shape us and make us. Our world has loud voices crying out for us to be self authenticating, to re-invent ourselves. But no matter how loud the cry, the claims and promises are all wearing a bit thin. Beauty is fading, success is transient, and every life shaping force doesn't, and can't, come through with the goods.

The Colossians lived in a culture like ours where extravagant claims were made by the forces and powers of beauty and prestige. But something had happened that was as radical as the little boy crying out that the Emperor had no clothes on, a man called Epaphras came to tell them about the true God.

1. **Read Colossians 1:1-14:** How does Paul identify himself to this group of people he has never previously met?
2. Given the context, what will be the significance of 'by the will of God' for Paul and the Colossians in this letter?
3. If Paul's aim had been to flatter the Colossians what would be different about v3?
4. Why would Paul want the Colossians to know he is thanking God for them?
5. Why would Paul want the Colossians to know WHAT he is thanking God for in them?

Application:

Pick a person in the church, write down their name and what you are praying for them. Make it a point of prayer this week and let them know what you're praying for them.

Name:

Prayer:

6. Where does faith in Christ Jesus and love for all the saints spring from? V5

Where does hope that is stored up for in heaven come from? V5

Where did the gospel come from? V6

God's profound work of faith, love and hope comes through someone telling someone else about what God has done in Jesus. Epaphras told the gospel to the Colossians and God worked in them faith, love and hope. Name and pray for someone you know who isn't a Christian, that someone

(even you) will tell them the gospel and that God will work in the them.

Name:

Paul sees the church as the arena of God's work in a fallen world and the tool of that work is the fruitful gospel. Paul has a confidence in what God is doing through the gospel and in the church for the glory of Jesus that kept him moving forward. We need to pray that we will have confidence like that.

7. How does Paul describe Epaphras, and therefore Paul's own interest in the Colossian Church? v7
8. What is the reason that Paul has not stopped praying for the Colossians?
9. What does he want God to do in them? v9f
10. Why is it important that the Colossians are filled 'with the knowledge of God's will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding'?
11. What is the next link in the maturity chain? V10 And how is it related to what has gone before?
12. What does a life worthy of the Lord look like? V10-12
13. In v13 Paul tells the Colossians why they should live a life worthy of the Lord. Why?
14. The Colossian Christians, if they are to persevere, need to understand what has happened to them in Christ. What has happened?
15. What sort of dominion were the Colossians dominated by? 'Whose kingdom are they now in?
16. How does v13-14 remind us of the old story of the Exodus?

What Paul is at great pain to demonstrate is the change that has occurred in the lives of the Colossians, and in fact in all Christians, is no small matter - we all belong to the kingdom of God's King Jesus. In the pluralistic world of first century Colossae and Sydney in the 21st century we will not avoid dangers that beset a church if we forget who we are and how we got here.

Prayer:

Colossians 1:15-23: No Better Saviour

The greatness of Jesus Christ is the measure of the Colossian's salvation - there is no better Saviour.

The world of the Colossians was polytheistic (poly - many, theo - god) and syncretistic (syn - join as in synchronised swimming). The Colossian Christians were converted out of paganism. There are huge differences and some similarities with that world and ours. List some of the similarities and differences and discuss.

Similarities

Differences.

Of course we live in a secular society where religion has little or no place within public discourse. One of the big differences in the ancient world would be the all-pervasive talk about the gods, the time spent in placating them, anticipating them, discussing their interactions and consequent ramifications for life. We don't have temples or statues to deities, we are too sophisticated for that... or are we? Think about our city skyline. Once the tallest buildings were the church spires - which buildings are the tallest now? We might not symbolise and personalise the gods in the same way they did in the ancient world, but the powers that they symbolise still attract willing worshippers.

The Colossians were brand new citizens of the kingdom of God's Son - Christ Jesus. As new citizens they were vulnerable to uncertainty and people who would undermine their new born faith. Paul writes his letter to them because he wants them to realise the futility of going back to the old pagan deities, but even more that they will see that Judaism won't offer them the protection against these hostile powers. What will? Knowing that in Jesus there is no better Saviour. In the first part of chapter 1 Paul made sure the Colossians knew who they were and how they got to be there, in this section he wants to give them the grand tour of the greatness of Jesus their Saviour.

It is important to get the big picture of who Jesus is and not get tripped up straight away on the detail that comes later.

A Hymn That Packs A Punch V15-20

It is thought that this passage is an early Christian hymn - whether this is so or not, it does display a great deal of structure.

1. **Read Colossians 1:15-23.** Work out the two major sections and circle similar words and ideas.

The two major sections, v15-17 Creation and v18-19 the new Creation have a common theme - the supremacy of Jesus in both actions of God.

2. From v15 how do we know who God is?

3. Who else was the image of God? Genesis 1-2.

What was his job? Did he succeed? Why not?

Jesus shows us not only who God truly is, but what humanity is supposed to be as well. The Bible comes down to this point, we can only know the true God truly and know what it is to be human when we know Jesus. Discuss.

It is from God's revelation in Jesus that Paul is working backwards to the beginning.

4. What does being 'first born' imply?

5. Paul wants to ensure that the Colossians understand that Jesus' control is absolute, how does he do that in the first half of v16?

6. Paul is specific about certain created 'beings' or realities, what are they v16b?

It is one thing to know their names it is another to know their nature. There are a number of things we should note especially:

- *They are created and so are not the same as 'idols' that have no reality 1 Corinthians 8v4.*
- *They are not necessarily evil but they can be evil in their influence on humans.*
- *They should somehow be seen as being represented by the 'gods' or 'lords' the Colossians worshipped before hand.*

The nature of idolatry - the 'gods' of the ancient world often epitomised certain characteristics - beauty or power or wisdom. None of these things are evil in themselves, but when they take the place of the creator they exert a powerful influence that destroys the worshipper.

7. How does our culture worship the powers?

8. What Paul is saying is not that beauty or power or wisdom are wrong, rather they have a place. According to v17 what is that place?

9. Christian belief is not life denying nor does it see matter as intrinsically evil. How does what we've looked at so far establish that?

Life as we saw in verse 15 only makes sense when you know Jesus is the one who holds creation together.

A New Creation

10. A new creation implies a problem. What is the problem? Gen 1-3, Romans 8v18f.

11. How does Jesus being the first born from among the dead deal with the problem with the old creation?

12. What does it mean that Jesus is the 'head' of the body, the church?

13. How does the reconciliation of all things in Jesus make him supreme?

14. The process of reconciliation required more than just rising from the dead - what else v20?

15. When did God's fullness dwell in Jesus?

16. How might Jesus make peace through his blood shed on the cross?

17. The process of reconciliation has included the Colossians, how? V21

What has been the effect of reconciliation?

18. Verse 23 carries with it an implicit warning. If they don't continue in the faith, what can they hope for?

What are they to keep on holding on to?

Why did Paul need to make this warning to the Colossians?

How is it relevant to Christians and churches today?

19. How can we make sure we don't move from the hope held out in the gospel?

Prayer:

Colossians 1:24-2:5: Apostle to the Gentiles

When you find yourself in a large shopping centre finding things is not always easy. To find anything you need two things - the first is a map that will give the layout of a place. The map will tell you that computers are on the fifth floor and that make-up is on the second. Very useful information but totally useless unless you have one other piece of information - the 'You are here' bit of the map. Unless you know where you are in relation to the whole map, the map is useless.

In this section Paul says some things that sound a bit wild but only because we don't have the map, and we don't know where we are on it. Paul's reason for writing to the Colossians was not only to help them to work that out, but what that meant for them now and where they should be headed. Part of being able to do that is for them to understand where Paul fitted into the scheme of things. That's what this section is about.

You are Here:

1. **Read Colossians 1:24-2:5.** In v24 Paul says something very personal in regard to the Colossians but very surprising in regards to Christ's afflictions. What is it?

What is it about what Paul says concerning 'Christ's afflictions' that sounds like heresy?

Paul is not suggesting that Christ's sacrifice for the sins of his people is somehow deficient and that he, 'the worst of sinners' (1 Timothy 1v15) is able to make up what is lacking. He must be saying something else. There are two points that will help build a map to understand where we are in Paul's thought:

- *the two ages*
- *Christ and the Church*

The Two Ages:

There were many Jews who saw that world history was divided into two main sections; the present evil age and the age to come. The movement from one age to the next was to be accompanied by suffering 'birth pains' that are connected with the coming of the Messiah (Christ).

For Paul this was essentially true but with the appearance of Jesus some adjustment was needed. The ages overlapped - the Christ had come as the representative of the people of God and had suffered and brought tokens now of the age to come - resurrection and the Holy Spirit. The new age had begun but was not complete. Now was a time of living in both ages, the time of the overlap, a time of suffering and of hope.

Christ and the Church:

In v24 the church is called Christ's body, there is a profound relationship between the church and Christ the head. Paul was well aware of this from the time of his call and conversion on the road to Damascus. Paul was on his way to take captive followers of Jesus who lived in Damascus. When the risen and glorified Lord met him he said, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" The sufferings of the church were also the sufferings of Christ.

So what is Paul saying? The church lives in a time of suffering. Paul is a servant of the church and a follower of Jesus. As such it is appropriate that he should suffer for the Colossian church not for

their sin, which he can't do and has already been done but by being a bigger target and drawing the enemy's fire away from his beloved Colossians.

2. What stops us from thinking like this today?
3. In v23 Paul described himself as a servant of the gospel, here he describes himself as a servant of the church. How does he discharge the commission God has given him?

Often we can be so focused on just the proclamation or just the people, what does Paul demonstrate here?

Mystery

The problem with using this English word 'mystery' is that it can wrongly slant our reading of v26 in two unhelpful ways. Firstly, in English a mystery is something that no one knows and has to be natted out like a 'murder mystery' - you don't find out who did it until the last page. Mystery for Paul is something that is now revealed. It's almost as if God has put the last page in the middle of the book, we know how it's going to end - in Christ. Secondly, when the word mystery is used in association with religion it means something like inside knowledge only for the initiated. Nothing could be further from the truth, in v23 Paul says that the gospel is proclaimed to every creature.

4. Who understands the mystery?
5. What, or better, who is the mystery v27?
6. Who has God included in this 'making known'?

What were the Colossians?
7. What does 'Christ in you' mean and how does it relate to 'the hope of glory'?
8. What Christians are included in Paul's ministry?
9. What is Paul's aim in proclaiming Christ?
10. How does he develop people to maturity?
11. What ideas does the word *admonish* conjure up and how is that related to good ministry?

What will that take from him? Is he alone?

12. If this is what Paul's ministry is about how closely does this ministry letter conform to Paul's ideal?

13. Why does Paul want the Colossians to know his struggle for them even though he hasn't met them personally v4?

14. Verse 2 -3 of Chapter 2 defines maturity Paul aspires for through his teaching. What is maturity?

Does this idea of maturity challenge other notions of maturity you might have?

What will being mature mean v4?

15. What do you think the fine sounding arguments will try to do?

Prayer:

Colossians 2:6-23: Freedom from...

Maturity can be described as being able to change and sometimes not changing! Maybe maturity is all about knowing when to change and when not to. For Paul the Colossians already had the best - Christ, anything else was a backward step. The Christian life is not a matter of going from one new idea to another and even less of moving through different stages of mysterious knowledge, it's all about knowing Jesus and remaining loyal to him.

Read Colossians 2:6-23

1. How did the Colossians receive Christ Jesus and what did that mean?
2. Does Paul think there was anything deficient in the message that was preached to them by Epaphras?

How do we know?

3. How will faithfulness to the Lord shape the church v7?
4. How does our life relate to our confession?
5. Why should we overflow with thankfulness?
6. Over against the positive advice of v6-7 Paul gives negative advice in v8. What are the characteristics of the 'philosophy'?

What is its shortcoming?

What was the philosophy?

Certainly Judaism styled itself as a 'philosophy' to a Gentile audience and was big on the traditions of men but within all of this there is also an overt critique of paganism - the 'basic principle' of this world (the powers that were deified). The Colossians and we ourselves are confronted with the choice of Christ as Lord of all or of nothing!

7. Looking at verse 9, why would the Colossians be mad to have an alternative to Christ?
8. What does to be 'in Christ' mean? V9
9. Why is Christ the head over every power and authority?

10. If a Judaizer said to a Colossian Christian that Judaism was the full story of Christianity and that the Christian needed to be circumcised what could the Christian say? VI 1

How is it better?

11. What connection is there between circumcision and baptism?

12. What does baptism symbolise?

13. When did God act on our behalf? VI 3

What did he do?

Read John 19v16-22

The notice Pilate prepared was not unusual, it was the crime for which the crucifixion was the punishment.

14. What is the written code of and how could it be against Gentiles v14?

15. If the powers and authorities are pagan deities the Colossians once served, what has God done to them in the cross of Christ?

16. The implication of the argument is clear. If Christ's death has made then acceptable to God and brought forgiveness, what don't they need to be judged by?

17. Why are the commandments inappropriate for Christians to be judged by? VI 7

Paul's ministry was dogged by 'Judaizers'; Judaizers were a group within Judaism that held that for Gentiles non-Jews to become a part of God's people - be saved, they had to become Jews, be circumcised and live under the law. The Law and angels were connected in some way, Hebrews 2v1-3. Paul is warning the new church at Colossae not to be sucked in by a 'super spirituality', a spirituality that looks good and is impressive but can't come up with what Christ has done!

18. What is Paul warning the Colossians to avoid?

19. Paul is saying in v20 and following, that in Christ the Colossians have grown up past the ABC's of spirituality. Does that appear to be the case?

20. What is it that we find attractive in super spiritualities?

21. Do super spiritualities work?

Prayer:

Colossians 3:1-17: Freedom for...

Life for us can be confusing at the best of times. Most of us have many different spheres of life. There's the place we work, the people we socialise with, the people we live with and then there is our families. What's more, these spheres keep changing as we move, as we grow older, as we change jobs, and they will probably keep changing until the day we die. Each sphere puts its own expectations upon us - we have to act in a certain way when we are at work, wear certain clothes, and speak a certain way. Life is bit like this for Christians, except we only have two spheres, we live in this world, but belong to the world to come. In this part of Colossians Paul calls the Colossians to be living and acting in one consistent way, even though they belong to two worlds.

Living In Two Worlds

Read Colossians 3:1-17

1. From what we have learnt so far in Colossians, what does Paul mean when he says that they have been raised with Christ (3.1)?

2. Which world does Paul tell us we are to be living for?

What effect will this have on the way that we live?

3. Paul talks about us dying and that our lives have been "now hidden with Christ in God". What does Paul mean? (Look back at the idea of mystery)

4. Paul talks about a time when our lives will no longer be hidden, but will appear. When will this be?

What encouragement does this give us for the future?

5. Why is it that our inheritance is guaranteed? (Look back at chapter 1)

As Christians look to a future when they will appear in glory with Christ, Paul tells us that this future life is to be lived out now while we wait. Even though we still live in this world, we are to be living with values that are out of this world. Becoming a follower of Jesus, will mean death and life - that is putting to death your old ways and bringing to life a new way as we wait to be raised with Christ in glory.

6. Summarise below the actions of death and those of life that Paul gives us in 1-17.

Put to death....

Bring to Life....

After you have summarised the points, think and pray about how you, and our church, are going in throwing out the old and putting on the new.

7. In verse 6, why is God's wrath coming?
8. What is it that has saved us and the Colossians from God's wrath? (Look back at chapter 1)

Peaceful Living

9. Jesus' death on the cross has brought peace between mankind and God, and Paul now calls Christians to peace as they live as Christ as their king. What will a life ruled by the peace of Christ look like?
10. What is to be the place of the word of Christ in the Christian's life?
11. This is not an individual endeavour, but one for the whole church. What part do we play?
12. What will it mean for us to teach and admonish one another at church?

Church is important time of meeting together because this is when we can do these things. When we come to church with an 'individualistic' mindset we are losing the richness of what church is all about, we are losing the support and encouragement of other Christians. What we need are people committed to getting to know each other better so that we can stand as 'one body' that depends upon God.

13. What attitude does Paul call the Colossians (and us) to have? v17

When is it hard to have this attitude?

When is it easy?

As Christians living in this world we belong to another world which has starkly different values to this world. Paul tells us that even though we are living in this world, we ought to be living not the earthly way, but the way of Christ, where we will one day appear with him in glory.

Prayer:

Colossians 3v18 - 4v1: Freedom to Serve

In Colossians we have seen how God has rescued us and that we look forward to a new life when Christ comes again in glory. This future life has implications on all our relationships now. In Chapter 3 of Colossians we have been exploring what it means to be in relationship with Christ, and how that works itself out in our relationships with each other at church. In this section Paul gets down to the nitty gritty of life and looks at 3 important relationships that we have.

Read Colossians 3.18-4.1

Much paper and ink has been devoted to these verses, trying to work out what they mean, particularly if you are married. These words of Paul have caused many an argument and disagreement. The world hasn't like them because they seem to denigrate women.

Husbands and Wives

1. How does Paul direct wives to act within a marriage?
2. What does Paul mean when he says "as is fitting in the Lord" (v18)?
3. There has been a lot of debate over the meaning of *submit*. Why does our world have trouble with this?
4. What is the husband directed to do?

These aren't the only verses in the bible given over to issues of men and women and marriage. Look up Ephesians 5v22-33 and Galatians 3v26-29.

5. What does the Galatians passage tell us about the place of men and women before God?
6. Ephesians 5v22-33 develops further how a husband is to act. How is a husband to love his wife?
7. Within a marriage relationship, how will Paul's directives work themselves out? (If you are married think of your own relationship, if you're single, ask some people who are married)

It is interesting that when you talk to a married couple about this, they can usually only remember a few times when the wife has had to submit to the will of her husband in a major decision that they have had to make. So are we missing something?

8. So how might submission operate in day to day life?
9. What will it mean as a couple relate to each other, not forgetting the husband's love of his wife?

Children and Fathers

On the issue of families the Bible says very little directly to this relationship. We have general directions about loving one another and encouraging one another, but there is little specifically about children and their parents.

10. How might a father embitter their children?

What effect does this have on them?

Slaves and Masters

11. In what way, and when, is a slave to obey their master?

12. Who does Paul say the slave is doing the work for?

How do you think this affected the attitude of a slave?

13. What is to be the slave's reward?

What have they done to earn this?

14. How is a master to treat a slave?

These days we do not see too many slaves and masters about, but commonly these Bible commands are applied to the employee/employer relationship. The slave is in a relationship which they had no choice about, being bought and sold by their master. If we are employees, we have made the choice to be in that relationship, how much more then should we follow Paul's principles.

15. What then is important about the work that we do?

16. Since we are raised with Christ, how is this to affect the way that we work?

Earlier in Colossians Paul went to great lengths to tell us how it is that we have been rescued and set free. It is in this freedom that we can serve each other.

17. How will this service arising out of freedom be different from service which is required for freedom?

Prayer:

Colossians 4:2-18: Prayer and the Gospel

Prayer is one of those things that is so simple to do, it requires nothing other than us and God. Yet why is it that we all struggle with it so much? And when we do eventually pray, what should we pray for? Paul finishes his letter off on a personal note. He offers encouragement to his readers and fills them in on a number of different people. Here we get an insight into what is important in Paul's life.

Priorities in Prayer

Read Colossians 4:2-18.

1. What do you think Paul wants the people to be watchful of, considering what he has written in the letter?

What have they to be thankful for?

2. Paul asks them to pray for him too. What does he ask for?

Remember that Paul is in prison when he writes this letter, but his release from prison doesn't figure in his prayer requests. Paul truly understands what it means to be living for the world to come.

3. How does Paul make the most of the situation that he is in?
4. Why is it important to be wise in the way that we act?

How will this help to make the most of every opportunity?

5. Paul singles out conversation, why do you think he does this?

What will it mean for conversation to be full of grace and seasoned with salt?

What is the reason for this distinctive conversation?

Partners in the Gospel

Paul obviously mixed with a large group of people. By no means was he a one man show, he had many other workers with him, who were as dedicated and single-minded as he was.

6. For the following partners in the Gospel, how does Paul describe them?

Tychicus

Onesimus

Epaphras

7. List the other people that Paul mentions.

8. What is Paul's general feeling towards these fellow workers of the gospel?

9. What is the priority of Paul in his prayers and his life?

Following Paul's Example – Pray!

Look back to study One, and the person who you have been praying for to become a Christian. Keep praying for them!!

Discuss with each other different opportunities you have for sharing the gospel.

Pray and encourage each other as partners in the Gospel, just like Paul did.