

Through the Bible Book by Book

New Testament

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COLOSSIANS

Theme: The occasion for the writing of the Epistle to the Colossians was the introduction of erroneous teaching in the church.

It seems that there had appeared in their midst a teacher who was propagating a doctrinal system that was a mixture of Jewish legalism and pagan philosophy. It was the pagan element in the system - after Paul's time known as *Gnosticism* - that constituted the greatest danger to the faith of the church.

The Gnostics prided themselves on their possession of a wisdom far deeper than that revealed in the sacred Scriptures, a wisdom which was the property of a favored few. ("*Gnostic*" comes from a Greek word meaning "*knowledge*"). They believed that matter was inherently evil, therefore a holy God could not have created it. Angels, claimed they, were the creators of matter. A pure God did not have direct communication with sinful man, but communicated with him through a chain of intermediary angels who formed, as it were, a ladder from earth to heaven.

Dr. Jowett thus describes one form of their belief:

"Flesh is essentially evil, God is essentially holy; between the essentially evil and the essentially holy there can be no communion. It is impossible, says the heresy, for the essentially holy to touch the essentially evil. There is an infinite gulf between the two and the one cannot touch and be intimate with the other. The heresy then had to devise some means whereby this gulf could be crossed, and by which the essentially holy God could come into communion with the essentially evil state in which mankind was dwelling. What could it do? It said that out of the essentially holy God there emanated a being slightly less holy, and then out of the second holy one there emanated a third one less holy still and out of the third, a fourth, and so on, with increasing dilution of holiness, with divinity more and more impoverished, until one appeared (Jesus), who was so emptied of divinity, holiness, so nearly like man, that he could touch man."

It will be clearly seen that this heresy dealt a blow at the sovereignty, deity and mediatorship of Jesus, and placed Him in the same class as mediating angels.

Paul meets this error by showing that Jesus, instead of being a mere intermediary angel, is the Creator of the universe, the Creator of the angels themselves.

He exalts the Lord Jesus to His God-appointed place as Head of the universe, and the one mediator reconciling the entire creation to God.

We shall sum up the theme as follows: The pre-eminence of Christ: He is first in nature, first in the church, first in resurrection, ascension and glorification; He is the only mediator, Saviour and source of life.

Occasion for Writing: The Colossians, having heard of Paul's imprisonment, sent Epaphras, their minister, to inform the apostle concerning their state. (1:7, 8). From Epaphras Paul learned that false teachers were trying to supplement the Christian faith by a doctrine which was a mixture of Judaism and heathen philosophy. To combat this error he wrote the Epistle.

When Written: Colossians, being sent by the same messenger who bore Ephesians and Philemon – Tychicus - was probably written about the same time.

Note - Colossians was a city of Phrygia, a province of Asia Minor.

Contents:

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I. Introduction: Greetings. 1:1-12.

1. Paul's greeting. 1:1, 2.
2. His thanksgiving (1:3-8).

He thanks God for the love and fruitfulness of the Colossian church, which was made known to him by Epaphras, the minister, and the probable founder of the church.

3. His prayer. 1:9-12.

II. Explanation: True Doctrine Declared. 1:13 to 2:3.

1. The person and position of Christ. 1:14-19.

- (a) He is our Redeemer because of His atoning blood. vv. 13, 14.
- (b) He is the head of the natural creation - the universe - for He is its Creator. vv. 15-17.
- (c) He is the head of the spiritual creation - the Church - because as the resurrected One He brought it into being. v. 18.
- (d) He is the pre-eminent One, for in Him dwells the fulness of the divine powers and attributes. v. 19.

2. The work of Christ - a work of reconciliation. 1:20 to 2:3.

- (a) *The full extent of the reconciliation* - the entire universe, material as well as spiritual. v. 20.
- (b) *The subjects of the reconciliation* - those who were once enemies of God. v. 21.
- (c) *The purpose of the reconciliation* - that men may be presented holy, flawless and irreproachable in the sight of God. v. 22.
- (d) *The condition for the full consummation of the reconciliation* - a continuance in the faith. v. 23.
- (e) *The minister of the message of reconciliation* - Paul (1:24 to 2:3).

By his sufferings he is filling up the measure of Christ's sufferings. (In a sense, Christ still suffers through the persecuted members of His church. See Acts 9:4.) His ministry is to reveal the great mystery of the ages; namely, that Christ is in them, the hope of glory. This explains his interest for the Colossians though he has never seen them (2:1-3).

III. Refutation: False Doctrine Exposed. 2:4-23.

Paul warns the Colossians not to be led astray by the false reasonings of philosophers (2:4-7), for in Christ they have the fullness of divine revelation (2:3).

He warns against the following errors:

1. Gnosticism (vv. 8-10). The believers are to beware of being entrapped by the arguments of human philosophy, which is simply the "A-B-C" (**rudiments**) of worldly knowledge (v. 8). They have no need of further perfection of the so-called higher knowledge of the Gnostics, for as Christians they are filled with the fullness of Him in whom dwells all the fullness of the Godhead in bodily form, and who is the head of all angelic powers.

2. Legalism (vv. 11-17). In these verses Paul shows:

(a) *The believer's relation to the rite of circumcision* (vv. 11, 12). They have undergone a spiritual circumcision, which represents a death to the sins of the body, which death is outwardly expressed by the Christian ordinance of baptism.

(b) *Their relation to the moral law* (vv. 13-15). Dead in trespasses and sins, they were condemned by the Law, but Christ, by His death, paid the penalty of the Law and cancelled the debt against them. (Compare Galatians 3:13, 14).

(c) *Their relation to the ceremonial law* (vv. 15, 16). The feasts, holy days and other Jewish ceremonial observances were but types and shadows pointing forward to Christ. Now since Christ has come and fulfilled the types, the latter are unnecessary. Therefore the Christian is not bound to observe any Jewish holy days or feasts.

3. A false mysticism (vv. 18, 19). Mysticism is the teaching that, by direct communion with God, a deeper knowledge of divine truths may be acquired, than that afforded by the Scriptures.

The Colossians are not to be deceived by those who teach that angels are to be worshiped, and who base their doctrine upon fancied revelations from the other world.

4. Asceticism (vv. 20-23). By asceticism we mean that doctrine which teaches that mortification of body and the renunciation of physical comforts are necessary to holiness. Those prohibitions against tasting certain foods and enjoying physical comforts are simply man-made rules for the attainment of holiness (vv. 21, 22). These restrictions though lending a show of humility and piety to those practicing them, cannot in themselves mortify the deeds of the flesh (v. 23). The Christian does not need these prohibitions, for he has died to sin and is living a new life with Christ (v. 20).

IV. Exhortation: Holy Conduct Required. 3:1 to 4:6.

1. The believer's union with Christ, and his conduct in view of this fact. 3:1-4.
2. Death to the "**old man**" - the putting off of lusts of the lower nature. vv. 5-9.
3. The putting on of the "**new man**" - the cultivating of the graces and virtues of the new life in Christ. vv. 10-17.
4. Admonitions to the family. 3:18 to 4:1.
5. Concluding exhortations. 4:2-6.

V. Conclusion: Salutations. Ch. 4:7-18.

1. The mission of Tychicus and Onesimus. vv. 7-9.
2. Salutations from different individuals. vv. 10-14.
3. Salutations from Paul. vv. 15-17.
4. Benediction. v. 18.

~ end of Colossians ~

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