

## Colossians Lesson 1

# Jesus Is Lord of All

Colossians is a small book written to a small church in a town of diminishing importance. But the truths found in this book are huge. The apostle Paul wrote this letter to a group of Christians who were probably only a few years old in their faith. His purpose was to encourage them to hold firmly to the word of God's truth that had come to them. He wanted to inspire them to live in a way that was consistent with the truth they believed.

### The History

During Paul's third missionary journey, he spent two years in the city of Ephesus. This city was located in present-day Turkey. It was probably there that a man named Epaphras heard Paul's teaching about Jesus and believed. Epaphras traveled to the city of Colossae, about 200 kilometers away. He told the people there what he had heard. The believers in the city started a church. They soon became well known for the Christ-like love they demonstrated.

The city of Colossae had once been an important part of the trade route between Persia and the Mediterranean coast. It was also a major producer of wool and dyed cloth. But a new road from Persia had bypassed the city, causing business and travel to decline. For Colossae's citizens, the future must have seemed extremely uncertain. They faced economic disaster, high unemployment, and the burden of heavy taxation. In this time of fear and cynicism, Paul's letter offered hope through Jesus.

The native people of Colossae were Phrygians. Many Greeks had moved to the area when the region was part of the Greek Empire. And at the time of Paul's letter, the city had been part of the Roman Empire for about 200 years. A large population of Jews had moved there to escape the wars in Israel. They soon adopted many of the customs of the Gentiles among whom they lived.



**Think about** who influences whom. As followers of Christ, God calls us to bring His light to our communities. Over time, entire communities can be transformed because of the influence of a few faithful believers who reflect Jesus in their everyday lives. But it is sadly possible that instead of positively influencing our communities for Christ, some of us will let our communities influence us instead. If we are not careful, we can, like the Jews in Colossae, easily pick up mind-sets and habits that keep us from moving forward with God. How does your community influence your walk with God? Does it discourage you in any way from living out your faith? Are you influencing the people around you for Him?

It seems Epaphras had told Paul about false teaching that was threatening the Colossians' faith in Jesus. We don't know exactly what this false teaching included. Paul did not directly address the teaching when he wrote his letter. He chose instead to fight the errors by emphasizing the central truths of Christianity. In response to Epaphras's report, Paul wrote the book of Colossians to correct the errors and keep the believers focused.

### The Problem

The false teachers who were confusing the Colossians weren't all teaching the same thing. Some believed that salvation came through special knowledge acquired by magic. They falsely taught that only a few "knowing ones" could find the truth. They also taught that all matter was evil. This led some of them to become ascetics who avoided all enjoyment. They punished themselves for what they thought to be unholy physical desires. Others went the opposite direction and did anything they wanted because they believed that none of it mattered. Their beliefs led them to the conclusion that God did not create the world and had little interest in it.

Despite the different ways they applied their beliefs, these false teachers shared one major view in common: spirit was good and matter was evil. This belief led them to a serious misunderstanding of Jesus. They thought a pure and holy God would never choose to enter the imperfection and weakness of a human body. If their view were true, flesh and spirit could not have been combined in Jesus, the unique God-man. They claimed it was impossible for such a man to be the Savior, because his humanity would make him sinful. So they argued that Jesus could never have been both Son of Man and Son of God. And they concluded that Jesus was not really God.

There were also Jewish teachers, called Essenes, in Colossae. The Essenes strictly followed some aspects of Old Testament law. But they had added extreme interpretations of their own alongside God’s commands. They even prohibited drinking water on the Sabbath. Meanwhile, they had strayed into idolatrous beliefs. They worshiped the sun and angels. And they refused to believe in the resurrection of the body.

All of these confusing beliefs were causing the Colossians to wander from the truth. Epaphras told Paul about the unsettling situation in the church.

### **Paul’s Response**

Paul was concerned when he heard what was happening in Colossae. But he could not visit the Christians in Colossae because he was a prisoner. He would mention this imprisonment in the letter he wrote to them (see Colossians 4:3, 10, 18).

Paul had probably never met the Colossians. But he cared about them deeply as fellow believers in Christ. He could also relate to their diverse cultural backgrounds. He was Jewish and had been trained by a respected rabbi. He was a Roman citizen by birth. And he had grown up in Tarsus, a center of Greek culture.

### **The Letter’s Theme**

To counter the false teaching, Paul introduced Jesus as the exact image of God. Through Jesus, all things were created. Jesus has “all the fullness of God” (1:19). Paul explained that Christ is over everything and holds everything together. And he also made it clear that Christ is fully human with “his body of flesh” (1:22).



**Think about** how Paul combatted error. He chose not to directly debate the false teaching. He did not tear it apart point by point in an effort to convince his readers of its errors. Rather, Paul’s approach was to build up the believers by affirming what they were doing right, praying for them, and then giving sound teaching about Jesus’s deity and preeminence. Might we be more effective in our efforts to “contend for the faith” (Jude 3) if we found ways to affirm, pray for, and build up other believers as we teach truth? Watch how Paul did this with the Colossians. Ask God to give you wisdom like Paul’s to stand up for truth in a gracious way.

Paul assured the Colossians that God’s truth is not a secret revealed to only a few. He reminded them that it is Christ alone who is the Head, the reality, the truth. When we know Christ, we have access to “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”

After teaching the truth about Christ, Paul explained how that truth should affect Christians’ daily lives. Once they realize who Christ is, and who they are in Christ, their behavior should reflect their beliefs.



### **Personalize the TRUTH!**

Paul used truth to counter the false doctrine spreading through the Colossian church. He wanted the Colossians to know Christ well enough to escape the delusion and captivity of false teachings. How can Paul’s approach serve as a model for us today? How can you stay anchored in truth when you become confused about the world’s ideas and whether they fit with God’s plan? Think about some of the truths that keep you “rooted and built up in [Christ]” (Colossians 2:7). Ask the Lord to keep you grounded in these truths whenever you are faced with false teaching.