



Colossians 1:1-2

Greetings to the Colossians

For many years I preached the gospel over radio. I shared the message of Jesus Christ in over 2,500 radio programs that were broadcast world-wide over short-wave radio station HCJB. We received letters from over 100 countries. I enjoyed reading those letters and writing a personal follow-up letter to the listeners.

Have you written a letter to a friend lately? In English we usually begin by something like, Dear Bill, or Dear Jane. Then we wait until the end of the letter to say, With regards, or Sincerely, or Love and sign our name.

The ancient letter writers did not follow that modern style. You didn't have to turn to the last page to find out who wrote the letter. This is because the letters from the first century A.D. arrived rolled up and bound with a string around it. They were written on one continuous sheet of writing material. The author of the letter put his name first and immediately following it the recipient's.

Ancient letter writing was sort of like our modern day memos and emails. It began by naming the sender, recipient and subject, whereas the letter was sender, recipient and greetings followed by a prayer for the recipient.

In the first century when the apostle Paul wrote his letters to churches and friends, he followed the customary manner of letter writing. The author stated his name first, then the name of the person to whom it was addressed, and then followed his greetings. There are tens of thousands of ancient letters in museums and libraries that follow this style. Paul was no exception. "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: Grace to you and peace from God our Father" (Colossians 1:1-2 NASB).

THE AUTHOR OF THE LETTER TO COLOSSIANS

In that opening sentence we have vital information about the author and the recipients of the letter.

The apostle Paul was the author, and he included greetings from his associate and fellow pastor Timothy. Timothy is not a co-author. It is not Paul and Timothy. Paul included the young minister out of courtesy and a way of encouraging him. Timothy is a Christian brother who is often associated with the apostle Paul in his ministry. The apostle included Timothy in his greetings in Second Corinthians, Philippians, First and Second Thessalonians, and Philemon. He mentions Timothy in Romans, First Corinthians and his letters to Timothy. Paul was a team player, and this is Paul's way of encouraging his fellow laborers in the ministry. He rejoices that Timothy is with him.

When we say our Christian brother or Bill my brother in Christ, we are indicating that he is a member of the body of Christ. He is our brother in Christ. Brother is a common term in the New Testament writings for a Christian or a believer in Christ.

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, is the sole author of the letter. It was common practice among the Hebrew people during the first century to give their children a Gentile name in addition to the Jewish name. The Gentile name closely approximated the sound of the Hebrew or Aramaic name to which it was associated. Paul, whose Jewish name was Saul, was set apart by God to be the apostle to the Gentiles. The Lord said to Ananias immediately after Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus, "Go, for he [Saul] is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel . . . (Acts 9:15; cf. 22:21; 26:17). In another letter, probably written about the same time as Colossians Paul says, "For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles — if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you" (Ephesians 3:1-2).

The apostle to the Gentiles is writing to this Gentile church in Colossae. The term apostle is a transliteration of a shortened form rather than the translation of the Greek word *apostolos* which means "sent one." Paul has been commissioned by God to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to the non-Jews. The word apostle denoted one who proclaimed the gospel, a commissioned representative of a government, and as used in the New Testament as an official representative of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul is using the term in a technical sense here. The emphasis is upon the sender rather than the one sent. The apostle had special credentials and corresponding responsibility to carry out his commission as the official representative of Christ. The closest term in our day would be ambassador. The ambassador who represents the President of the United States before the government of Ecuador has all the authority and power invested in him by the government of the United States. The apostle Paul has all the authority and responsibility to represent Christ before the Colossian Church in Asia Minor. Paul uses the term to indicate he is a commissioned ambassador for Christ.

He was under a lot of stress when he wrote to the church at Galatia. They questioned his authority so he began by saying: "Paul, an apostle (not sent from men, nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead) (Galatians 1:1). It is evident Paul is a man clothed with the authority and anointed with the power of his Master. He is a man under authority who has been sent on a mission.

Paul belongs to Christ because Christ saved, appointed, and sent Him to be His representative. The character of that calling is expressed of [lit. through] Jesus Christ by the will of God. This is the authority for his writing to the Colossian Church and the reason for their heeding his exhortations in the letter. He is in this official capacity by an act of God.

Alexander Maclaren said Paul's testimony is at once an assertion of Divine authority, a declaration of independence of all human teaching or appointment, and a most lowly disclaimer of individual merit or personal power. ”

Paul wanted to be found doing the will of God. The word *will* (*thelema*) is the act of willing or desiring. He wanted to do what pleased God, not his personal desires. Often Paul says in his letters, Paul a bond-servant of Christ Jesus (Rom. 1:1; Phil. 1:1). He is in submission to the will of God.

Paul belongs to Jesus Christ. The calling and ministry is by the will of God. Sometime later he wrote to Timothy, Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, according to the promise of life in Christ Jesus ” (1 Tim. 1:1). His calling was due to the special and undeserved providence of God. God laid His hand on Paul and called and equipped him to be an apostle. He is not a self-made man; He is a God-made man. As in Philippians chapter three Paul renounced all personal worth and claimed the fullness of Christ. He is a bond slave of Christ.

It reminds us when God laid His hands on Paul on the road to Damascus. His position and role as an apostle was not sought after, was not earned or given to him by the church or a denomination. The calling and ministry came by the will of God. It was an act of God. These credentials were essential for Paul's ministry to the churches. They are also important for us today when many are teaching man-made religions instead of God's revelation to man.

Paul's credentials are important because in his letter he will expose the false teachings of those who have a low esteem for Jesus Christ. Paul is not one of the original twelve apostles, but he is on the same level with them.

In a non-technical sense, the word *apostle* reminds us of our responsibilities to be good ambassadors for Jesus Christ. We are not apostles in the technical and limited sense of the word. However, every believer in Christ is to be His representative to share with every non-believer the riches of God's grace in Jesus Christ. He has sent us out into our communities to represent Him before a watching world.

Paul is probably writing from Rome while he is prisoner there. Luke and John Mark are with him (Col. 4:10, 14). Epaphras came with news from the churches in the Lycus Valley about the time when Paul led Onesimus, a run away slave, to Christ.

This letter was sent at the same time with the letter to Philemon and the one to the Ephesians since Tychicus the bearer of the letter to Ephesus (Eph. 6:21f), and the one to Colossae (Col. 4:7f) was a companion of Onesimus (Col. 4:9) the bearer of that to Philemon (10-12). If Paul is a prisoner (Col. 4:3; Eph. 6:20; Philemon 9) in Rome, as most scholars hold, and not in Ephesus, the probable date would be A. D. 63. I believe that Paul is in prison in Rome when he sends out these letters. If so, the time would be after the arrival in Rome from Jerusalem as told in Acts 28 and before the burning of Rome by Nero in A. D. 64. If Philippians was already sent, A. D. 63 marks the last probable year for the writing of this group of letters.

Paul signed the letter with his own hand. "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my imprisonment. Grace be with you." (Col. 4:18). We do not know who his amanuensis was; it may have been Timothy. Remember in Romans 16:22 Paul let Tertius say he was the amanuensis in the letter to Romans. An amanuensis was a secretary to write down the dictation. There were a lot of young men in the life of Paul who ministered with him.

THE READERS OF PAUL'S LETTER

The apostle Paul addressed his letter to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are at Colossae . . . (v. 2). He does not directly address the church as a local body. But can you find a more descriptive picture of the body of Christ as the saints and faithful brethren in Christ which are at Colosse ?

The letter is addressed to the saints (*hagios*), literally holy ones. These are Christians or individuals who have put their faith in Jesus Christ as their savior. The church at Colossae is composed of saints. In the New Testament all believers are saints. Every person who has been born again is a saint of God in Jesus Christ. It is a common description of all church members. If you know Christ as your savior you are a saint.

The word saint means those who have been set apart to God. This is their position before God, and in practice they are faithful brethren. They are the people of God who are dedicated to Him and reserved for His purposes.

The main idea in this word *hagios* is not excellence of character, but separation to God. They are reserved for His use and their lives should reflect that in every area. Things, places, seasons, people are described in the Bible as holy meaning they are set apart for God's purposes and service. We are a consecrated people. This should lead to practical holiness.

Let me illustrate. Let's say my wife and I go to a fine restaurant after church today. I call ahead and make reservations in the name of Wil and Ann Pounds. The head waiter places a beautiful engraved card on that table. No one else can use that table for dinner today. It has been reserved and set aside for the use of one couple. When we arrive for dinner, the hostess asks, "Do you have reservations?" My response will be, "Yes, in the name of Wil Pounds." She will check her list of reservations and say, "Come with me, please." She will take us to a special table with that engraved card. "Reserved for Wil and Ann Pounds."

God has reserved you if you are a believer for His own personal and unique possession and service. No one else had better ask or demand you if you are in Christ Jesus. You are set apart, consecrated, dedicated, and separated to God.

How interesting it is that this word is also used in the personal name of the Holy Spirit. He is the Holy One, and Christian saints are set apart to a holy God by God. Our spiritual position is that of one who has been set apart to God through the work of the Holy Spirit. Christ is our sanctification, righteousness and redemption and therefore the One in whom we become holy to God the Father. The apostle Paul states it so clearly when he wrote, ". . . you were washed, . . . you were sanctified, . . . you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:11).

Just as we are in Christ we also have an intimate association with the Holy Spirit. Paul is not referring to a special class of Christians who have achieved a certain level of holiness. Believers are saints not because of their conduct but because of their relationship to Christ.

These saints are also called faithful brethren in Christ Jesus (*pistis adelphois*). This is a favorite expression of the apostle Paul in his writings. The Jews referred to fellow Jews as brothers, but they would never refer to a non-Jew in this manner.

Brethren affectionately describes the intimacy and love within the body of believers. Every where I travel in different countries of the world, I experience a bond of love in a spiritual body. I have stood at the end of a service on many occasions and greeted visitors from many countries and different parts of the world and

service on many occasions and greeted visitors from many countries and different parts of the world and heard them express the bond of love they experience and often when they cannot even speak the local language. There is a kindred spirit that comes only in Christ. We have common parentage; it is God the Father. We have common brotherhood; it is Jesus Christ.

If you have never been born spiritually, you are not a member of this family of God. The apostle John wrote: "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12-13). You can become a member of the most wonderful family in all the universes right now this very moment. Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will become an adopted member of that family. You are born spiritually into it. It does not come by a physical birth, but by regeneration. It is an act of God in His grace through the Holy Spirit based on the atoning sacrifice and merits of Jesus Christ.

These faithful brethren lived in the city of Colosse, located beside the Lycus River in the Lycus Valley in the geographical district of Phrygia in the Roman province of Western Asia Minor. This is the area of modern day Turkey. The city of Colosse was about 100 miles from the city of Ephesus and ten miles east of Laodicea, and about 10 miles southeast of Hierapolis.

This tri-city area on the Lycus River was a busy metropolis with commercial activity in the heart of Asia Minor. The rich fertile river valley along the Lycus and Meander rivers and the busy trade routes provided wealth to the region.

Colossae was the first of the three cities to achieve greatness, however by Paul's day it had declined and the other two cities had much more vigorous economies and larger populations. Though Colossae was still an important commercial center the city continued to decline until the eighth century A.D. and was abandoned. It is now barren and deserted.

Epaphras was the missionary evangelist who started the work in the Lycus valley as the gospel reached out from Ephesus to neighboring communities (Col. 1:7-8; 4:12-13; Acts 19:1-20:1). The majority of the church may have been composed of Gentile believers.

The apostle Paul stresses the spiritual position of all believers when he says we are *in* Christ. Spiritually these believers are *in* Christ Jesus. Physically they live in the city of Colosse. Every believer is spiritually in Christ, but you also live in a local community. How tragic when individuals try to separate the two. Some live as if the only thing that counts is the physical, and they completely leave out the spiritual. They want only a humanistic secular life without God. Others want to live in a monastery or an isolated life from the physical world. We live in a physical location in this world, but we are also in Christ. Wherever you are on this planet, if you are a Christian, you are in Christ. Therefore, you can live above the changes, changes, and circumstances in this life. You have Christ. Every Christian is in Christ.

We as believers in Christ Jesus live in a mystical fellowship with Him. We have been incorporated in Christ, united with Him as closely as the limbs of our body are united with our physical body. Our being *in* Christ is our vital union with our Savior. What a privilege and honor to be in vital union and communion with Christ. That is the only way we can possibly live the Christian life. This relationship is so important to the apostle Paul that he uses the expressions *in* Christ or *in* Him or *in* the Lord to describe our vital union with Christ over 160 times in his letters.

PAUL'S GREETINGS TO THE CHURCH

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In his greetings the apostle Paul directs his reader's attention immediately to the work of God in the sinner's life. He prays for grace and peace for his readers.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father (v. 2b).

Grace (*charis*) is the free, divine, unmerited, undeserved and unearned favor of God toward depraved sinful man. His grace not only saves us, but touches every area of our Christian life. This greeting stresses the favor of God and the spiritual blessings that comes with it. We rejoice when we realize what God has done on our behalf. *Charis* always has that sense of divine favor in action. It is His spontaneous, unmerited, undeserved sovereign grace freely bestowed on sinful radically depraved sinners.

Grace always emphasizes something that we cannot achieve on our own. It is His gift. God freely gave His own perfect and righteous Son to die for our sins so He could give the free gift of eternal life.

The companion word in Paul's greetings is peace. Peace (*eirene*) is the inner working result of the grace of God in the believer's life. Inner peace is the result of God's grace. It is kin to the Hebrew word *Shalom*. It is spiritual prosperity, true spiritual wholeness and soundness. It is the assurance that the sinner is in a right relationship with a righteous God based upon the atoning blood of Jesus. Only Jesus Christ can give this peace that passes all understanding. You, oh Lord will keep him in perfect peace or peace whose mind is stayed upon You. He gives peace and songs in the night.

"There is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

Divine peace always comes as the product or result of appropriating the grace of God in Jesus Christ. If we ignore grace, we forfeit peace with God. Peace is the product of grace. The more we appropriate and experience the grace of God the more we experience His wonderful peace. This is part of growing in His grace and knowledge.

THE THEME OF THE LETTER TO THE COLOSSIANS

There was an incipient Gnosticism beginning to take hold in the philosophical soil in the first century. When it began to attract gullible and easy to fleece young Christians, the apostle Paul attacked it like any other wolf in sheep clothing.

The letter was written upon the arrival of Epaphras in Rome from Colossae with news of the state of the church there (1:7-9; 4:12f). One very disturbing feature of the new teaching was a subjective response on the part of the unsuspecting Christians to accept a teaching which was calculated to sabotage the pure gospel which they had believed and bring them into spiritual bondage. Does that sound familiar? Ask any God called, doctrinally sound pastor in our generation. The Gnostics degraded Jesus Christ, and Paul's solution was to exalt Christ. Paul describes a Christ-centered universe with Jesus Christ the sovereign. The universe was created by and is sustained by Christ. The only proper response to Him is to bow down and humbly worship Him.

"Grievous wolves" had descended upon the churches in the Lycus Valley (Colossae, Hierapolis, Laodicea) and were leading many of the believers astray. These false teachers and deceivers were later called Gnostics. The culture of Paul's day was full of the teachings of the mystery cults which professed new thought with a world view that attempted to explain everything on the assumption that matter was essentially evil and that a holy God could only touch evil matter by means of a series of aeons or emanations that were so far removed from him as to prevent contamination by God and yet with enough power to create evil matter. These

from him as to prevent contamination by God and yet with enough power to create evil matter. These Gnostics (*hoi gnostikoi*, the knowing ones) with their philosophic speculations applied their theory of the universe to the Person of Christ. Many today are content to deny sin, disease, death and evil in spite of the evidence to the contrary. The issue was so grave that Epaphras journeyed all the way to Rome to seek Paul's wisdom and help.

Paul wrote to counter the Gnostic attack on the Person of Christ. The Docetic (*dokeo*, to seem) held that Jesus did not have a real human body, but only a phantom body. He was an *aeon* and had no real humanity. The Cerinthian Gnostics (followers of Cerinthus) "admitted the humanity of the man Jesus, but claimed that the Christ was an *aeon* that came on Jesus at his baptism in the form of a dove and left him on the Cross so that only the man Jesus died."

Paul confronted both false teachings with his accurate presentation of Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the Son of Man (both deity and humanity) in opposition to both types of Gnostics. This is beautifully painted for us in Philippians 2:5-11.

Colossians is just as relevant today when men try to rob Jesus Christ of his death as when Paul wrote it. It speaks to the New Age Movements, mystery religious cults, the legalists, as well as the "licentious element that let down all the bars for the flesh while the spirit communed with God."

The movement was filled with theosophical speculations. The heretical teachers added to Christian belief a strong influence of Jewish ideas and rituals that had been mixed with pagan mystery religions. The religious cocktail of superstitions, magical secret religious cults, witchcraft, astrology, etc. caused the people to search for spiritual reality apart from the one true living God who revealed Himself in Jesus Christ.

The heretical Gnostic teachings depreciated the Lord Jesus Christ. We do not have to interpret Christ; all we have to do is proclaim Him because in Him "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3).

The apostle proves the supremacy of Christ over all the religious philosophies and fads of the New Age Movements and world religions. He writes with passion as he strikes out at this new heresy.

The solution to the heresy of Gnosticism is "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27).

In Colossians Paul paints a full-length portrait of the full deity of Jesus Christ. Here we see the *pleroma* of the Godhead in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. God with us is the portrait. "For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form" (Col. 2:9).

ABIDING PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

1. When we are servant leaders, we encourage our co-laborers in the ministry.

The apostle gave us an example in the way he included Timothy in his greetings to the church at Colossae. He showed appreciation for Epaphras in his letter along with Tychicus "our beloved brother and faithful servant and fellow-bondslave in the Lord" (Col. 4:7). He goes on to mention Onesimus "our faithful and beloved brother, and Aristarchus my fellow prisoner, and John Mark and Luke, etc. Let's encourage our brethren with words of kindness and appreciation.

2. When we are commissioned by the Master, we will give Him all the glory.

We serve Christ because we know it is by the grace of God that we are saved and called to the ministry. We do not deserve the opportunity. It is all of grace, and not of man. Every servant of God is Christ-made, not man-made. There are too many self-made preachers and church leaders out for their own power and glory. We need God called men and women who have been set apart by the Holy Spirit for His glory.

3. When God saved you by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, you became a saint.

Saints are not a select few in the church, or in church history. They are not little metal engravings molded to put on your dashboard. Saints are people whom God has set aside for His glory by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you are a saint. If you have been born again, you are a saint. If you are trusting in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ alone to save you, you are a saint of God.

4. When you belong to Jesus Christ, you will make yourself available to Him at all personal costs.

True saints are always available to the Lord God for His own personal use. Every saint has been commissioned by the Master to take His good news to the ends of the earth. Every believer is in Christ. It is from that vital union with Him that we serve Him.

If you need help in becoming a Christian here is [A Free Gift for You](#).

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Series: Letter to Colossians

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Wil is a graduate of William Carey University, B. A.; New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, Th. M.; and Azusa Pacific University, M. A. He has pastored in Panama, Ecuador and the U. S., and served for over 20 years as missionary in Ecuador and Honduras. He had a daily expository Bible teaching ministry head in over 100 countries for ten years. He continues to seek opportunities to be personally involved in world missions. Wil and his wife Ann have three grown daughters. He currently serves as a Baptist pastor and teaches seminary extension courses in Honduras.

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