Session 1: JUNE 2

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The Life and Death of Colossae

olossae (koh-LAHS-sih) was at one time an important city in the Roman province of Asia. This territory covered the western area of a large peninsula now known as Turkey. The capital of this territory was Ephesus, situated near the western coast of the peninsula. Some 120 miles inland were the three cities of Laodicea (lay-ahd-ih-SEE-uh), Hierapolis (high-uhr-AHP-oh-liss), and Colossae, nestled in the valley of the Lycus (LIK-uhs) River. Laodicea and Hierapolis stood on opposite sides of the valley, some 6 miles apart. Colossae was about 12 miles farther east, on the banks of the river itself.

Early History of Colossae

Of the three cities, Colossae was the earliest to achieve city status. Greek historian Herodotus (hih-RAHD-uh-tuhs; ca. 484-425 BC) referred to it as the large city of Phrygia (FRIJ-ih-uh). At that time, the people must have been primarily Phrygians (FRIJ-ih-uhns), speaking their native language and worshiping their great goddess and associate deities. Colossae is mentioned as a large and prosperous city by another Greek historian, Xenophon (ZEEN-uh-fahn), in his account of the march of Cyrus the Younger (401 BC). All of this clearly indicates that Colossae must have been a prominent city in the Lycus Valley.

The ground in this region was fertile, and the neighboring uplands afforded excellent pasture for large flocks of sheep. The area was perhaps the greatest center of the woolen industry in the world. The chalky waters of the Lycus River were particularly favorable to the manufacture of dyes, especially crimson (then called purple). In fact, Colossae was so famous for this trade that a purple dye drawn from the cyclamen flower was named Colossinus.

Originally, the three cities had been of equal importance, but this changed as the years passed. Laodicea became the political center of the district and the financial head-quarters of the whole area—a city of splendid prosperity. Hierapolis became a great trade center and a notable health resort due to the medicinal qualities of its waters.

Colossae, however, declined in importance during Rome's imperial days. This is because a

trade route that had formerly passed through the city was moved to Laodicea. By the time Paul's epistle to the Colossians was written, Colossae seems to have been a small, unimportant town.

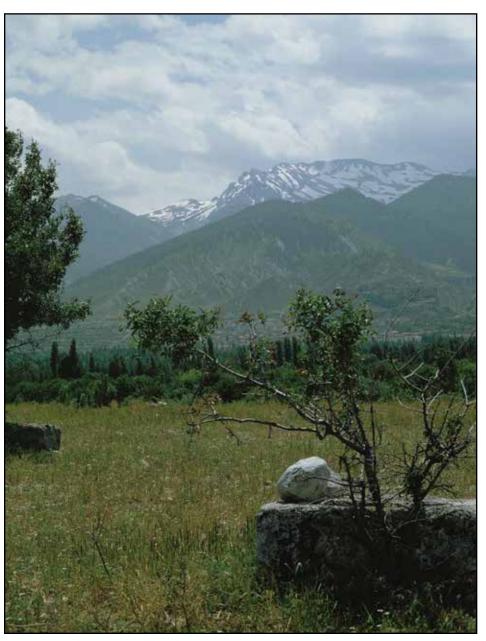
These three cities were home to many Jews. The Seleucid ruler Antiochus III (ca. 241—187 BC) transported 2,000 Jewish families from Babylon and Mesopotamia into the region of Lydia and Phrygia. These Jews had prospered and, as usually happens in such a case, more Jews moved into the area to better their own circumstances. This Jewish environment later contributed to some of the heresies the church at Colossae had to confront.

The Phrygians themselves were a religious

people. There seems to have been a marked tendency to emotional forms of expression and even to orgies in which exciting music and frenzied dancing played a part. Prominent Phrygian deities were Cybele (SIB-uhlee), the Anatolian mother goddess, and Sabazios (suh-BAHZ-ee-ohs), who was connected with the renewing powers of nature.

Christianity in Colossae

The Christianization of Colossae probably took place during Paul's three-year stay at Ephesus on his third missionary journey (see Acts 19). It seems Paul never visited Colossae himself; he notes that the Colossians and the Laodiceans had never seen his face (see Col. 2:1). Yet, no doubt the founding of the church



Colossae was at one time an important city in the Roman province of Asia. Today, there is little evidence that the city ever existed as the ancient city of Colossae has remained unexcavated. Yet explorations of the site indicate that much is waiting to be revealed!

sprang from his direction. During Paul's years in Ephesus, the whole province of Asia was evangelized, so that all its inhabitants, both Jews and Greeks, heard the gospel. Colossae was probably founded at that time.

The prime evangelist to Colossae seems to have been a certain Epaphras (EP-uh-frass; see Col. 1:7), who was himself a Colossian. Presumably, he had been converted while visiting Ephesus. Thereafter, he carried on under Paul's guidance and proved faithful in his message and ministry.

The new church at Colossae probably first met in the house of Philemon, for it was to Colossae that Paul returned Philemon's runaway slave, Onesimus, and also because Paul's epistle to Philemon speaks of "the church that meets in your home" (Philem. 1:2).

The church seems to have been composed largely of Gentiles; the phrase, "Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds" (Col. 1:21), was one that Paul regularly used to describe those who had been non-Jews. In addition, Paul speaks of making known the mystery of Christ among the Gentiles (v. 27); the reference is clearly to the Colossians themselves.

Heresies

About six years after the formation of the church, Epaphras visited Paul in his imprisonment. Although he brought Paul a good report in general, he confessed that certain

heretical teachers had appeared among the Colossian believers, propagating false doctrines that were gravely endangering the fellowship. Paul immediately responded by writing the Epistle to the Colossians.

The main motivation behind the Colossian heresy seems to have been to show Jesus as an inadequate Savior. Jesus, according to these false teachers, was a created being, one of many mediators between God and humanity. Thus, Jesus was stripped of his deity and robbed of his atoning work at Calvary.

This heresy emphasized externals in religion—works of righteousness, ritualism, abuse of the flesh, worship of angels. These were touted as marks of the Christian way. To Paul, such a view was unthinkable: "For in Christ," Paul wrote, "all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (Col. 2:9).

The Last Days of Colossae

The mention of both Asia and Galatia in 1 Peter 1:1, written to churches in a time of hardship and persecution, implies that in the latter part of the first century, the churches of Phrygia had to withstand active opposition.

The second century shows Christianity strong in Phrygia, but marked by dissension. Great leaders, such as bishops Papias and Apollinaris of Hierapolis, arose in this region. Martyrs proved the courage and dedication of the Church. But the native Phrygian bent for highly emotional religious life was revived when the Montanist movement, with its ap-

peal to visions and the new era of the Spirit, became prominent in Phrygia.

The third century saw the churches of the region numerically dominant. Church historian Eusebius reported that the entire population of one city became Christian during this time. In the fourth century, however, under the reign of Diocletian (284—305), this city was completely destroyed and persecution of all Christians was strong in the region.

Little more is known about the city of Colossae. During the seventh and eighth centuries, it was overrun by the Saracens, whose main objective was to spread the Muslim faith. The Saracens soon occupied Syria, Israel, Persia, Egypt, Cyprus, Crete, and Armenia. By the end of the 12th century, the church at Colossae was destroyed by the Turks, and the city disappeared.

In 1835, William J. Hamilton identified the ruins of the city on the left bank of the river, where he saw many architectural fragments in marble and the cave of the theater with several of the stone seats preserved. On the north bank lies the cemetery, with rock-cut and partly-built graves. However, to date, the ancient city of Colossae has remained unexcavated.

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COMMENTARY Colossians 1:1-14

olossae (koh-LAHS-sih) was located in the Lycus (LIK-uhs) River valley, in Phrygia (FRIJ-ih-uh), a district of Asia Minor, about 100 miles east of Ephesus. Two other cities formed a triad with Colossae: Hierapolis (high-uhr-AHP-oh-liss) and Laodicea (lay-ahd-ih-SEE-uh). They stood six miles apart on either side of the valley separated by the river. Colossae straddled the river 12 miles upstream.

Colossae was once a city of importance, on the trade route between Ephesus and the Euphrates. However, when Paul wrote, around AD 62, it was a small town. One Bible commentator remarked that Colossae was the most unimportant town to which Paul ever wrote a letter!

Tradition says four of Paul's epistles—Colossians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon—were written while Paul was a prisoner in Rome. All the letters affirm that Paul was indeed in prison (Col. 1:24; Eph. 3:1; Phil. 1:12-13; Philem. 1:1). If written from Rome, it would have been shortly before Paul's death, around 59-62, though some believe Colossians was written from an earlier imprisonment at Ephesus, in 54-56.

Among the epistles of Paul, only Colossians and Romans were written to churches Paul had not founded (cf. Rom. 1:10-13; Col. 2:1). Perhaps the Colossian church, which met in Philemon's home, was a result of Paul's Ephesian stay (Acts 19:10). Epaphras (EP-uh-frass) seems to have started the work (Col. 1:7-8; 4:12-13). He visited Paul in prison to report the heresy that threatened the church in Colossae. He also brought greetings from those whom the apostle knew.

When Paul learned of the problems in the Colossian church, he wrote immediately to check the spread of false teaching among the Christians. He dealt with the error by declaring Christ's supremacy and the completeness of the body of believers in Christ.

The central theme of Colossians is Jesus Christ. The germ of Paul's thought about Christ in Colossians exists in 1 Corinthians 8:6. There, he writes of "one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live." Two other major threads run through the letter. They are: 1) freedom and joy in Christ and, 2) the marks of true and false leaders.

Our Scripture passage for this first study sets the tone for Paul's Christ-centered gospel.

1. Salutation (1:1-2)

1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

2 To God's holy people in Colossae, the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ: Grace and peace to you from God our Father.

1. Paul uses the title, an apostle of Christ Jesus, seven times in his 13 letters in the New Testament. In Romans and Titus, he calls himself "servant" and "apostle." In Philippians, he refers to himself as "servant," and in Philemon, as "prisoner." He uses no title in the two Thessalonian letters. Apostle literally means "one who is sent on a mission for another." Paul says he was sent out by the will of God. From the outset, the letter reinforces the doctrine of divine grace. Paul implied there

was no such thing as a self-made person, let alone a self-appointed apostle. However, as God's chosen ambassador, he had authority to speak divine truth. Paul had been personally commissioned by the risen Lord when Christ appeared to him on the Damascus road (Acts 9:1-9).

Paul regarded Timothy as having special kinship, calling him *our brother*. The same title is given to Quartus (Rom. 16:23), Sosthenes (1 Cor. 1:1), and Apollos (1 Cor. 16:12). Deep relationships are essential for corporate Christian service.

2. To God's holy people... faithful brothers and sisters in Christ. Holy means to be set apart for the service of God. Redeemed to the service of God through Jesus Christ, believers have a special relationship to one another as well.

Paul links *God's holy people* in Christ to a geographic location: *in Colossae*. This highlights the dual citizenship of Christians. We are put into the world to do God's will. In Christ, we are all citizens of God's kingdom as well as our earthly homes.

The apostle concludes his greeting using an ancient custom in letter writing, by adding a salutation: *grace and peace*. This phrase, however, is characteristic of Paul, and expands upon the typical greeting in ancient letters. *Grace* means God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. *Peace* goes hand in hand with grace—to receive God's grace is to know God's peace.

2. Thanksgiving (1:3-8)

- **3** We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you,
- 4 because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people—
- 5 the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel
- 6 that has come to you. In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit
- and growing throughout the whole world—just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God's grace.
- 7 You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf,
- **8** and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.
- 3-4. Paul thanked God that the Colossians displayed the two vital sides of Christian life: faith in Christ Jesus and . . . the love you have for all God's people. True Christians are loyal to Christ and love their Christian brothers and sisters. Christians must know in whom they believe, and that belief must be turned into love for others. Christians have thus a double commitment—they are committed to Jesus Christ and to their fellow human beings. Christian faith is a conviction that functions in love. Faith in Christ Jesus and love for God's people are evidenced by holy living.
- 5. The hope stored up for you in heaven. Christian faith and love depend on such hope. The city of Colossae had a great past but a bleak future. Not so the Colossian Christians! The emphasis on hope here reminds us that our salvation has a future aspect. The

Colossians had eternity with Christ to look forward to.

As Paul does in many of his writings, he uses the triad of faith, hope, and love here. In this case, these three are meant to affirm the Colossian church. These are the true marks of a Christian community.

6-8. Verses 6-8 summarize what the gospel is and does. It has been bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world. The gospel is not a static thing, but good abounds in the lives that are changed. Paul notes that the gospel has been growing and bearing fruit in Colossae as well: just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God's grace.

It was through *Epaphras* that the Colossians learned of the gospel. It is also through Epaphras that Paul learned of the believers' problems. Here, Paul dwells on the positive news that Epaphras bore about these believers

Love in the Spirit. Paul says that the love evident in the Colossian church was a gift of the Spirit. When he listed the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22, he began with love. This divine element promotes growth and fruit-bearing.

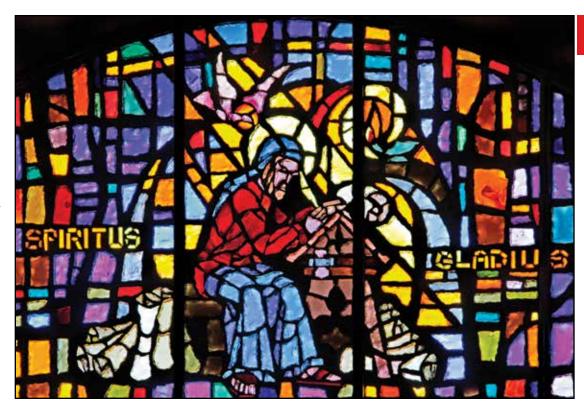
3. Prayer of Intercession (1:9-14)

- **9** For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives,
- 10 so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God,
- 11 being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience,
- 12 and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light.
- 13 For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves,
 - **14** in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.



Colossae lay nestled in the valley of the Lycus River. The chalky waters of the river were particularly favorable to the manufacture of dyes, especially crimson (then called purple). In fact, Colossae was so famous for this trade that a purple dye drawn from the cyclamen flower (pictured) was named Colossinus.

9. This section flows out of verses 6-8, where Paul refers to the Colossians' response to the preaching of Epaphras. The prayer turns here from thanksgiving, the earlier theme, to intercession for the readers. Paul prayed that God would fill the Colossians with the knowledge of his will. "Fullness" and "knowledge" were important concepts in the misguided understanding of Paul's readers. Greek philosophy had interpreted these words in ways that changed the Colossians understanding of the gospel. So, the apostle took their favorite words and interpreted them properly in relationship to Christ. Knowledge is not secret and speculative as it was in Greek thought, but practical and revealed in terms of God's will. Spiritual wisdom and understanding would enable the Colossians to apply the will of God revealed in the Old Testament and in Christ to the circumstances of their own lives.



It seems Paul never visited Colossae himself; in his letter to the Colossians, he notes that the Colossians and the Laodiceans had never seen his face (see Col. 2:1). Yet, no doubt the founding of the church sprang from his direction. During Paul's years in Ephesus, the whole province of Asia was evangelized, so that all its inhabitants, both Jews and Greeks, heard the gospel. Colossae was probably founded at that time.

10. The goal of this prayer was for the Colossians to *live a life worthy* of the Lord. People of the ancient world were usually very concerned about their social status and the honor or shame that came to them from their position in life. To be associated with Christ required the Colossians to live up to the honor that came to them from such an association. Living the wrong way would bring shame to Christ rather than honor.

Paul further prays that they might *please* Christ *in every way*. If Christ were pleased with their lives, his honor would be shared with them. If they displeased Christ, their behavior would bring shame on Christ and themselves. The way they would be able to please Christ was to bear *fruit in every good work*. *Bearing fruit* may refer to lives producing the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) or to growth in the congregation through evangelism. Paul desired both and both please Christ. In addition to *bearing fruit*, the Colossians were to grow in the knowledge of God. This phrase can also refer to increase in spiritual insight or in the number of people who know God.

11-12. Only as the Colossians were strengthened with all power would they discover Paul's prayer being answered in their lives. The apostle often used synonyms of the word power to emphasize God's available power. Here, according to his glorious might sharpens the focus on God's power. The purpose of God's power is to produce great endurance and patience. The Greek word translated endurance suggests the ability to remain in a difficult circumstance. The word translated patience speaks of the ability to experience a great deal of suffering or pain. Joy and thanksgiving are also part of Paul's prayer for the Colossians.

The final portion of verse 12 describes God the Father. He has qualified the readers to share in the inheritance of his holy people. Qualified translates a Greek word meaning "to be sufficient, adequate, competent." In their own strength and virtue, believers do not qualify to

be part of the community of faith (holy people). Qualifying to belong to the Church is the gift of God. The phrase, share in the inheritance, draws on Old Testament imagery of the promise of the land now used as a symbol of relationship with Christ.

13-14. Paul saw human existence as taking place in one of two rival kingdoms. Since God has rescued us from the kingdom (dominion) of darkness, the contrast would be the kingdom of light. It is, but the apostle calls it the kingdom of the Son. The language of kingdoms, rescue, and transfer (brought) echoes terms used in the ancient world when people were captured and resettled hundreds of miles away to destroy their allegiance to their previous king. The Assyrian resettlement of the Northern Kingdom is an Old Testament example. Paul's point is that God intends to terminate believers' attachment to sin and darkness.

The attractiveness of the kingdom of the Son is redemption, the forgiveness of sins. The word redemption spoke of buying freedom for slaves. Paul used the term as a figure of speech for salvation—God set us free from slavery to sin. Here, redemption is defined in terms of forgiveness of sins. The Greek word for forgiveness implies "letting go of." In Christ, we are free to let go of past sins, for in him, we have been redeemed.

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