

98-05-22a Colossians

This book, as all books of the Bible, is highly significant. Its significance for us, I think, will become apparent as we introduce the book tonight and study the first verse or two. My hope is that we will be able to move quickly and yet thoroughly through this short but very full letter of Paul.

Let me dive straight in and begin by giving some notes by way of introduction. It's always good to remember the context. We have said a lot in our past studies about the importance of observing the context of a verse or a statement of Scripture, whether it's a statement that Jesus makes.

Who does he make it to? What is the occasion? What are the circumstances? That aids us in rightly dividing the word of truth and not misunderstanding or misapplying teaching passages and in its worst form, yanking things out of context, is called proof texting, where you find a phrase or a statement somewhere that seems to support your view and disregarding everything else about it, you pull it out. This happens most frequently with passages that relate to giving. Bring your tithes into the storehouse and the windows of heaven will open and dump blessing on you and so forth.

It's way out of context. If people went back and understood what the tithe is, in fulfilling that little proof text command, they would run out and grab a Form 1099 and file their taxes because the tithe was a tax that supported the state and nation of Israel and the infrastructure which included the temple and so forth. But it was not a free will offering and it was a part of citizenship rather than worship.

But we want to also provide ourselves with a context for this book. It's easy to jump into a letter like James' epistle or the epistles of Peter or any one of the letters of Paul or of John and to decide that it is about salvation or that it is about evangelism or it is about ministry or it is about some particular thing. We want to be well grounded in what we know of the circumstances of the writing of these letters.

Why was it written? What was its purpose? To whom was it written? What was their circumstance? In what ways do those things compare to our own? Are there parallels? Are there similarities? In what ways do the cultural circumstances have parallels? You can look, for example, in the letter that Paul writes to Corinth where he talks about women worshiping with their head covered. If they pray with their head uncovered, it's all the same as if they should shave their head and be bald. We don't have that cultural issue today, but the principle of authority and the principle of modesty and the principle of expressing publicly your orientation to God's order is still present.

It's important for us to have a cultural understanding, a contextual understanding for these letters and not to just dive in and tell everybody to grab a bowl and wash feet or to get a veil and wear it

on their heads and so forth. We want to provide ourselves, as we begin this study of Colossians, with a little bit of background. I'm not going to belabor this.

We won't have four lessons of introduction. But I would like to take a few minutes to introduce some of the circumstances that generated this letter and the situation that it addresses. Obviously, this letter is written to a church.

If you turn to Colossians chapter 1, you will see that it is addressed from Paul the Apostle to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are in Colossae. And this first section, the greeting section, tells us who is writing, who is generating the letter, and who it is to. So there is a church in Colossae.

There is a group of saints and faithful brethren there to whom Paul is writing. But what do we know about this church and about its circumstances? First of all, this church, this community of Christians, came into existence as a result of the missionary activity of Paul. But, ironically, he had not met most of the people in this church and had never been to Colossae.

So how do you have a church spring up as a result of your missionary work, but yet you don't visit the town and you don't know the people? Well, this is what you might call, in our day, parallel situations have been called a second generation church. Someone who had heard the ministry of Paul when he was in a nearby community was converted, came to faith, realized that he had the gift of pastor and teacher, and did the work of an evangelist, went back to his own community, and in sharing the good news of Christ with his friends and his neighbors and his fellow citizens there and in the surrounding communities, several groups of believers sprung up. And they received, sort of second hand or through the ministry of this man, the teaching that Paul had brought to their region.

We have the record of this activity of Paul that generated this outreach and outgrowth in Acts 19. You might turn back there just for a moment. I won't try to cover the missionary journeys of Paul and where all of this fits in.

You're welcome to review the information you have in the teens and twenties of Acts on the ministry of Paul. But in Acts chapter 19 we find Paul, while Apollos is at Corinth, he passes through the upper regions and comes to Ephesus. And finding some disciples, he says, Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed? You may remember this episode.

They said, We have not so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit. And he said to them, Into what then were you baptized? And they said, Into John's baptism. These are some converts who came to faith in Christ through the ministry of John the Baptist.

Well, what do we know about John the Baptist's ministry? It was prospective. It looked forward to the coming of Christ. He said, There is one coming after me who is shoelatched.

I'm not worthy to unbuckle. I baptize you with water. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

Well, that was many years earlier. And evidently these men sort of forgot what John said about the Holy Spirit and fire. Remember, John was like Elijah the prophet.

Who was he sent to? Israel. His ministry was to Israel, to prepare Israel for the coming of the Messiah. Now we're up in the regions of the Roman province of Asia.

We're up in Gentile country. There are some Jews scattered up there, as we will see. And these individuals evidently had been down in the vicinity of the Jordan when John was baptizing and preaching.

And had recognized his message as true and had come to faith in that. And were now residing up here in Ephesus. But the last they had heard was the ministry of John.

So the ministry of Jesus Christ, his death on the cross and everything else hasn't been made clear to them. So what a wonderful opportunity for Paul. So in verse 4, Paul said, John indeed baptized with the baptism of repentance saying to the people, this is the people of Israel, that they should believe on him who would come after him.

That is, on Christ Jesus. When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And the name implies more than just the syllables of his cognomen there.

This is his ministry, his work, his identity, his reputation as the Messiah, as the Savior, and so forth. And that, by the way, applies when you talk about baptism. Being baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

This is not just a magical incantation that you say when you dunk someone under the water. When someone is baptized, if you're going to do water baptism or if you're going to understand the genuine nature of baptism, it is being baptized into the name of the Father. Understanding who the Father is, what his plan is, what his purpose is, what he has accomplished, what his grace consists of.

The name of the Son, Jesus Christ. The information that Paul passes on to these early converts of John's. And the name of the Holy Spirit, what is his identity and purpose and function.

In the ancient world, when you talk about the name, this was the sum total of who you are. When you come in someone's name, you're their representative. You're acting on their behalf.

It's a lot more than just a word. It's a lot more than just what you call someone. It's your identity.

It's what is communicated about you to others. So Paul says, when they heard this, or actually Luke here says, when they heard this, they were baptized by Paul in the name of the Lord Jesus.

And when Paul had laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them and they spoke with tongues and prophesied.

Now the men were about twelve in all. And he went into the synagogue. There's a Jewish synagogue in Ephesus.

He goes there and he spoke boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading concerning the things of the kingdom of God. But when some were hardened and did not believe, but spoke evil of the way before the multitude, this is the way of Christ. Christ said, I am the way.

In other words, this is a dispute between the old Judaism and the new Christianity. Spoke evil of the way before the multitude. He, Paul, departed from them and withdrew the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus.

And there's a great lesson there in the behavior of Paul. Paul does not continue to dispute. He doesn't say, here's a case where I'm going to argue them into submission.

When it was obvious that their hearts were hardened and that they did not want to believe in Christ, they were very different from these disciples that Paul encountered, what did he do? He withdrew. He didn't keep confronting them. He didn't keep beating them over the head.

He didn't think, well, quantity, if I say it enough times, maybe it will change their minds. He withdrew so that he could teach the disciples and pass on to them the information that would enable them to grow. And this continued in verse 10 for two years.

So that all, and here's the important part here, so that all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks. By withdrawing and concentrating on teaching the people who are interested, teaching the people who are responsive, the word of God is going to spread. Paul didn't have to go beat these opponents into submission in Ephesus in order for the word of God to spread.

By withdrawing and teaching, the word of God filters out to those who are asking and seeking and knocking in the entire region. If you have maps in the back of your Bible, you might turn, find your New Testament maps, find the section that might show the journeys of Paul or that will show, you don't want your Palestine, Israel and Judah type maps or maps of Jerusalem. You want to find the ones that show the Roman Empire, show the whole Mediterranean Sea and especially that land that is north and west of Israel.

And if you find a map like that and look sort of to the northwest of the island of Cyprus and to the northeast of the island of Crete, if you look out in the Mediterranean Sea, you'll see those two islands. Cyprus is on the right and Crete is on the left. And if you imagine that they are the two corners of a triangle and go straight up about halfway between those and further north, you'll see that there is a region there called, this is the land there with a real ragged western shore, lots of

little islands scattered out there.

You'll see that this region has names like Phrygia, Lydia, Lycia. This is going to be to the west of Galatia here and this whole area here is the Roman province of Asia. And if you look carefully on the western shore, just dead even with Athens, due east of Athens, on the opposite shore there, you'll see Ephesus.

And this is where Paul is. Now depending on how small or large your map is, if you can find a map that shows that area in a little greater detail, you may find a map that will show Colossae. It's going to be straight east of Ephesus.

There's a river that travels there and passes just south of Ephesus and hits the sea there at Miletus. Well, that is the Lycus River. And the Lycus Valley is sort of an east-west valley with Ephesus at its western end, Ephesus and Miletus.

And as you travel east and just very slightly north along the Lycus River, you go back there several miles and you find a triad of cities. There are three cities back there. Laodicea is the largest at this time.

And you may have Laodicea there on your map. You probably won't have Hierapolis, which is the smaller town, and you may or may not have Colossae back there. But Colossae is very close to Laodicea.

And, in fact, it is about 15 miles. Let me find my geographical note here. Laodicea is 10 miles west of Colossae.

Hierapolis is 12 miles northwest of Colossae. So within about a 10 to 15 mile radius in this end of the Lycus Valley, you have these three towns. Now, Paul apparently stayed at the west end of the Lycus Valley in the vicinity of Ephesus.

But people who came and listened during this two-year period when he was preaching and teaching went back to their hometowns. There was commerce, there was trade and travel going on, and as they traveled up the valley, more and more people heard about Christ and more and more people heard about the teaching that Paul was giving that we find here in Acts chapter 19. One of those individuals is a man named Epaphras.

E-P-A-P-H-R-A-S. Epaphras. Apparently a man somewhat younger than Paul, who, as near as we can tell, is actually a native of Colossae.

And this message of Christ stirs his soul. He comes to faith in Christ. He's fascinated by what Paul teaches about the plan of God and the new way of thinking and the ways of pleasing God, walking before Him in love, motivated by hope, by means of faith.

And it fascinates him. And as he studies under Paul, he comes to realize that he has the gift of

himself passing this good news on to others. And he is trained by Paul in the pastoral functions as much as Paul trains Timothy and Titus and many others.

So Epaphras goes back to his own community and begins to share this news with others who have come to faith in Christ. And he perhaps evangelizes many of them. And a church springs up that meets regularly for worship and instruction and encouragement.

And it's a house church. Many of us meet for church in homes. And this is the way all of the early churches began.

There was no such thing as a church building. They didn't meet for church in synagogues. They met in people's homes.

And one of these churches meets in the home of a man named Philemon. And Epaphras is the pastor of the church that meets in Philemon's house. And you might turn quickly to the letter to Philemon, which we have recorded for us in the New Testament, been preserved for us.

Kind of hard to hit. It's right there between Titus and Hebrews, one of those one-chapter books. But you'll notice that this is a letter.

You probably have at least a general recollection of the occasion for which Paul writes Philemon. There's a slave named Onesimus who has come to Paul while he is in Rome. At the very tail end of Acts, Acts 28, we find Paul in Rome under house arrest, preaching and teaching the good news of the kingdom of God.

And Onesimus, who has stolen some things and run away from his master back in the Lycus Valley, has traveled to try to lose himself in the throngs, the big city of Rome. But while he's in Rome, he hears the teaching of Paul. And whether it was from other slaves that Paul had evangelized, that he fell in with, he eventually comes under the ministry of Paul himself and is just enraptured with the gospel.

It's what he's been looking for. He becomes a very enthusiastic believer. He spends time with Paul.

He ministers to Paul's needs. He becomes like a son to Paul during the time that they spend together in Rome. But they, together, as Paul talks with Onesimus, they talk about his previous situation when he was a slave and that he has a duty to his master Philemon back there in Colossae.

And so Paul and Onesimus discuss this and they agree that he needs to return. He needs to go back and fulfill his obligations. And you can go to the scriptures where Paul talks to slaves and he says, Be obedient.

Serve your masters as though you were serving the Lord Christ. And this is what Onesimus

needs to do. And it isn't right.

Oddly enough, you think about all of our reaction against slavery and the terrible abuses of slavery that we've seen in the last few centuries and the great hue and cry against it. And we tend to think, well, the Bible is just 100% against slavery. Here, the Apostle Paul tells Onesimus, you need to return to your bonds.

You need to return to your master. You need to serve under the circumstances that you found yourself a slave. But the wonderful thing for Onesimus is, oddly enough, by one of those weird coincidences, quote, unquote, in the plan of God, Paul knows Onesimus' master.

He's a personal friend of Paul's. And when Onesimus drifts to Rome and comes under the teaching of Paul and the ministry of Paul and comes to know Paul personally, they suddenly discover that they have an acquaintance in common. The master that Onesimus ran away from is Paul's good friend, someone that Paul probably spent a lot of time with during those two years in Ephesus.

No doubt Philemon came down and spent time with Paul because it's very obvious from this letter that they're good, close friends with whom Paul has stayed in the past, apparently. So Paul writes in this letter to Philemon, Paul, a prisoner of Christ, and Timothy, our brother, to Philemon, our beloved friend and fellow laborer, to the beloved Apphia, his wife, Archippus, our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house. Apparently Archippus, or Archippus, however you want to say that, is probably Philemon and Apphia's son, elder son, probably adult son.

And they're probably a couple getting on in years. Onesimus is a slave, or was a slave, in their household. So Paul writes this letter, and if you read through Philemon, you come to discover that Paul is introducing, or reintroducing, Onesimus back to Philemon and saying, Philemon, look, isn't this a great thing? This slave that ran away from you found me, found Christ, and is now returning to you, and my request of you is to treat him as a son rather than a slave and take him back.

It's a beautiful expression of what's in Paul's heart and the wonderful things that can happen in the plan of God through Christ. And it's a great, great story. But the neat thing is that there were actually three letters that were all in the same pouch that made the trip back through the Lycus Valley, back across the sea from Rome to Asia, and probably into Ephesus or Miletus and up the river and all the way back to where Philemon lives in Colossae.

There are three letters in the pouch. One of them is this letter to Philemon because Onesimus and another individual, Tychicus, Tychicus and Onesimus are going to bring these letters back to the end of the valley there, back to Colossae and Laodicea and Hierapolis. So they bring this letter to Philemon personally.

They bring our letter, Colossians, to the church that meets here in Philemon's home. And there's

another letter in the pouch. It's a letter that Paul wrote to the Laodicean church, the church at Laodicea, just 11 miles away from Colossae.

We're anticipating a little bit, but turn to the end of Colossians. Turn to Colossians chapter 4, verse 16. Actually, you can start in verse 15.

Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea, their neighboring towns, and Memphis and the church that is in his house. The Laodicean church meets in the house of Memphis. Look at verse 16.

Now when this epistle, this letter, is read among you, Colossians, see that it is read also in the church of the Laodiceans and that you likewise read the epistle from Laodicea. He says, I'm sending each of you a letter, and when you finish reading your own letter, then trade. You Laodiceans read the Colossian letter, and you Colossians read the Laodicean letter.

Well, wouldn't it be fascinating to know what was in that Laodicean letter? As I think about my books of the New Testament, I've got Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians. I've got some letters to Timothy and Titus and Philemon. I don't have first and second Laodiceans or anything, do I? Well, actually, yes, we do.

This letter we do have, and this letter is in the New Testament. It is what we call the book of Ephesians. But without going into great detail, when you get to Ephesians 1.1, when it says, Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God to the saints who are in Ephesus, the earliest and best manuscripts don't have in Epheso.

That is a later edition. Now, you remember where Ephesus is, right? Ephesus is the big important town on the seacoast where Paul spent two years. But this letter is not to that church.

This letter called Ephesians is the one that Paul wrote to Laodicea. And we'll see when we get to the conclusion of Colossians. And if you have spent any time at all in Ephesians, as we go through Colossians, you will see the very close parallel.

They're similar in thought. They're similar in outline. They're similar in vocabulary.

And they are carried by the same individuals at the same time. And it's very clear that this letter was intended to be sort of a general letter that could be read in many churches. And there was no church designation at the beginning of Ephesians.

It was Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, to the saints and faithful in Christ Jesus. And he meant this for all the Christians in the Lycus Valley from one end to the other. So, yes, the Christians in Ephesus could read it.

The ones in Laodicea could read it. The ones in Colossi could read it. The ones in Hierapolis could read it.

But it was originally in the pouch with Colossians and Philemon. And I'll leave it to your own investigations. If you want to look at the ends of each of these letters and see who carried them and what is said, we'll cover that in more detail when we finish Colossians.

But this is the situation as Paul writes to the church in Colossi. He's writing a couple of letters. He's writing one to Laodicea, one to Colossi.

He's got a personal letter in there to Philemon to reintroduce Onesimus. It's a momentous occasion when these letters are written. The church to whom he writes in Colossi, as I said, came into existence during the time that Paul was ministering down there in Ephesus at the other end of the valley for those two years.

He apparently never made it all the way out there to where these cities are. Or if he did, there's no record of it in Acts. He may well have visited.

You have to wonder, why does he tell Philemon, prepare a lodging for me? I'm hoping to come visit you. If your prayers are answered, I will be delivered to you, he says at the end of Philemon's letter. And so he says, prepare a lodging for me.

You get the idea that maybe he has lodged with Philemon before. And there may be some sort of an unrecorded visit. But we'll see during the course of Paul's comments to the Colossians that he indicates that he has not seen their faces.

So apparently the constituents or the congregation of the church, the vast majority of them, had never met Paul. But this church came into existence. This would have been somewhere in the vicinity of A.D. 52 to 55.

This would be maybe 20 years or so after the resurrection and ascension of Christ, after Paul's apostolic ministry is well underway. All of the residents of Asia have heard, as a result of his ministry centered in Ephesus, the gospel according to Acts 19.10. And evidently Epaphras was one of those who heard and went and evangelized his community and continued as a pastor and teacher there. And he apparently was sort of a circuit riding preacher.

Apparently he also ministered in Laodicea from time to time and in Hierapolis. We'll find out more about those towns and their unique qualities a little bit later. Apparently Epaphras, who is the pastor there in Colossae, the church that meets in Philemon's house, apparently a problem developed.

Not necessarily with the congregation. It's not like there was a big problem with the individuals in the church. But there is something on the outside.

There is a false teaching that has sprung up. And there are people who are pushing this and presenting it and saying, this is what's necessary to complete your faith. Without this you're sitting

soaking and souring.

Without this you don't have all the fullness that God wants for you. You don't have it all yet. Here's the missing pieces that Paul didn't tell you about.

Here are the missing pieces that are going to complete your life and make you truly productive and fruitful and so forth. You need this information. This isn't a part of what Paul had taught.

It isn't a part of what Epaphras had learned in his study of the scriptures and his study under Paul. And yet it's catching on. It's really popular and a lot of people are starting to flock to this new teaching that wants to add on and put some additional things into the gospel that they had heard at first.

Epaphras apparently doesn't quite know how to cope with this. He isn't nearly as long in the tooth in spiritual things as Paul is. And so he decides that it's time for a visit.

He's going to go back to his mentor, go back to his own pastor, his apostle, Paul, who he knows is under house arrest in Rome. And so Epaphras travels to Rome to meet with Paul to convey greetings and the status of the church and the way things are going in Asia in general, to bring him the news, to give him encouragement as he's in prison awaiting his trial before Caesar, and also to unburden his heart on this situation that has cropped up in the region there, this modification of the gospel, this different form of Christianity, these added things and different things. Epaphras wants to run this by Paul and find out what is your advice in dealing with this.

And so Epaphras comes and visits Paul in Rome. However, apparently, Epaphras is detained and is not allowed to return because Asia is a Roman province, for some of the same reasons that Paul himself is in prison for teaching this Christianity, and there's some talk about whether or not it's subversive, and Asia is a province that's at some distance from Rome, and here's one of the possible quote-unquote agitators. It appears that Epaphras is likewise detained and he's not allowed to return.

He comes to Paul to encourage him and visit, get some answers and go back, but he's not allowed to leave immediately. He's sort of imprisoned with Paul. And we know this from Philemon, where Paul says that Epaphras is his fellow prisoner.

Remember these two letters come at the same time, on the same occasion. They travel in the same pouch. And if you look at Philemon, verse 23, in the farewell section of this little short personal letter, Paul says, Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you.

And so Epaphras, who has come, you find out at the beginning of Colossians that Epaphras brought Paul news of their faith and love and the status of the church and the growth of the gospel in Asia and so forth. So Epaphras came to Paul, but now Paul, in writing back, says, Epaphras is my fellow prisoner. So he's been detained, apparently, by the Roman authorities.

We don't know for how long. We don't know necessarily what the results of this are. But we do know also that during his absence, Epaphras made provision for somebody to oversee the church.

And apparently this is Philemon's son, Archippus. This reminds me, I saw a quick, they had a 50-year review of the history of CBS. I guess they're celebrating their 50th anniversary.

And they were reviewing very quickly some of the great, what they consider to be great shows that they've had on their network. And they had people, little clips and snippets and so forth. And of course they always use any occasion, like a parade or something, to trot out their current sitcom stars and get their faces in front of you for a few moments.

And so they had someone, I don't remember who it was, come out and talk about one of the great shows that was on CBS. I'm using their vocabulary here, great shows. They said, well, Dallas was one of the great shows that was on this network.

And so they had a lady come out and explain what Dallas was about. And in one big long sentence, she talked about all of the ins and outs of who married whom and who got out of sorts with whom and who finally shot J.R. and all of this. These big involved plots of soap operas where Bobby was there and then he was gone and then he was back and then he was dead and then he was alive again.

And all of these plot twists and you wonder, my goodness, how can you keep track of all of these twists unless you just watch the thing religiously? Well, I feel like we're sort of getting in that situation here with Colossians. I'm giving you a lot of information and background. But it's amazing the information we have about the setting of Colossians because we know about the church.

We know whose house it meets in. We know a little bit about the family. We know something about the pastor and his situation.

And we know that Epaphras, in addition to being a faithful teacher and someone who was very concerned about his congregation and who prayed for them constantly, we also know that when he knew he was going to be gone for a while, he made provision for them. And he had identified within his congregation someone who also apparently was developing their pastoring and teaching skills. And this is Philemon's son, Archippus.

Archippus is there. And so when Epaphras is going to be gone for a couple of months, making this long journey to Rome to visit with Paul, he sort of hands over the reins to the apprentice pastor here, Archippus. And we know this from the statement that Paul makes again in Philemon.

He mentions in verse 2 that Archippus is a fellow soldier. And this is Paul's language for someone who's engaged in the ministry in some significant way more than just what the average person

would be. A fellow soldier of Jesus Christ, he uses that language of Timothy and so forth.

So we know that this is someone who's engaged a little more than the usual. We also know in Colossians chapter 4 and verse 17 that Archippus had a very specific ministry entrusted to his care. Look at Colossians chapter 4 and verse 17.

Paul says, well, I'm not going to find it in Thessalonians. I'm using a new Bible and the pages are much thinner than my old one. I have a little more trouble navigating here.

Paul says in the close of Colossians, again, when this epistle is read, make sure that it's read in Laodicea and that theirs is read in your church. And, in verse 17, say to Archippus, take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord that you may fulfill it. So it's pretty clear the implication here is that Archippus is sort of standing in for Epaphras.

And he now has the weight of responsibility. Epaphras, Archippus thought, well, you know, this is going to be an eight-week... I can teach a special for eight weeks and hang in there until Epaphras gets back. He's going to make a quick trip to encourage Paul and get some answers to his questions.

And he'll be right back. So I'll just stand in for a short time. Well, now Epaphras has been detained.

And he's under arrest in Rome along with Paul. He's a fellow prisoner. So, Paul, at the close of the letter that he writes back, says, Archippus, boy, you've got the ball.

Take heed to the ministry that's been entrusted to your care. It's a ministry. You've got the whole thing.

You're the pastor. You've got the responsibility in Hierapolis and Laodicea and all the things that Epaphras had undertaken and that he's unable to fulfill because he's a prisoner. Jump on in there.

This is your trial by fire, Archippus. So it's really fascinating, at least to me, to see all of the circumstances into which these letters come. The things that Paul is thinking about, the things that the people are thinking about.

We have a lot of information about their circumstances. And we're going to see as we go through Colossians that we know a lot about this false teaching that had sprung up that was so hard to refute and hard to combat and hard to identify and show people where the error in it was that Epaphras, this very good and well-qualified pastor, really needed to go consult with Paul the Apostle. He said, Paul, I've learned a lot.

I understand a lot. I've been able to teach and pass on a lot. But this new strange teaching that's cropped up, this perversion and distortion of Christianity, I don't know how to cope with it.

I can't seem to make clear in the minds of people what the distinction is, why this isn't a part of the Gospel that we have of Christ. And I need your help in identifying and in coping with this in a way that reflects God's glory, in a way that communicates the truth. I don't want to go out and make a mistake and try to refute and argue and confound.

You see, Paul knows this. Paul knows how to withdraw. We saw him do that in Ephesus.

Under certain kinds of opposition, he withdrew and just taught separately. So Epaphras is wondering, well, do I go out there and enter into debates? Do I publicly debate this and try to put it down publicly? Do I withdraw and teach privately? How do I cope? So that's the occasion for the writing of this very interesting letter that we are embarking on tonight. We know that the composition of this church is largely Gentile.

Most of these people are Greeks or Phrygians. This is in the region of Phrygia, ancient Phrygia, that's been there for hundreds of years. The city of Colossae itself has been around for more than 500 years in this spot.

And so the people in the region there, in this eastern end of the valley, are largely Greek and Phrygian. We also know, however, that there are a lot of Jews in the region as well. But one of the reasons we know that Paul considers the church to be largely Gentile is that in the language of the epistle, which we will see in detail, especially here in chapter 1, he uses language of outsiders being brought in.

When Paul is talking about the Jews, you can see this in Romans chapter 9 and so forth, he says, to the Jews belong the oracles of God and they have the promises and the law and so forth. And he talks to them as insiders who need to understand the forward progress of God's plan. When Paul talks to Gentiles, he says, you were aliens, enemies, and you've been reconciled.

You've been brought from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light and that sort of thing. And that's the language of Colossians. You don't have the inclusive language that Paul uses when he's talking to Jews.

Secondly, that's the first clue. The second clue is, there's a real scarcity of Old Testament allusions or quotations. Paul doesn't hark back, he doesn't say, like he does in Romans chapter 4, remember Abraham and Sarah, remember the son of the bond woman and the son of the free woman, like he does in various places.

There's very little reference to the Old Testament because if these are Greeks and Phrygians, they're not going to know the Old Testament. It's not going to be something meaningful or part of their frame of reference. Thirdly, when Paul talks about vices and things that could draw them away from Christ, he doesn't talk about the things that typically trip up the Jews.

What is it that trips up the Jews and those under Jewish influence? You find those in Galatians, falling back into the law, falling again under circumcision or under the Sabbath days and observing feast days and so forth. There's a little of that in Colossians, but not much. There's a list of vices in Colossians 3, verses 5 through 7. These are Gentile problems.

These are falling into idol worship, worship of angels and weird observances that were a part of the pagan cults in the Roman Empire. Finally, there's also very little in this letter about the idea of reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles. A lot of times when there's a mixture of Jews and Gentiles in a church, Paul will address their relationship, that they are all one in Christ, that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free and so forth.

That is also absent, which tends to make us think that this is sort of a homogenous group, largely Greek and Phrygian individuals. However, we know that there is a Jewish presence in this region. Back under the reign of Antiochus III, this is like the 2nd century BC, Antiochus grabbed up 2,000 Jewish families that were living in Babylon.

Remember after the Babylonian captivity and you had a movement back under Ezra and Nehemiah, back to the land and so forth? Well, a lot of the Jews remained in the area of Babylon. Well, when Antiochus took over, he said, I want to get these Jews out of here and resettle them somewhere else. So he got 2,000 Jewish families and moved them out of Babylon up to the Lycus Valley and settled them in Phrygia.

And this was, I said 5th century BC, I should say the 2nd century BC. The town of Colossae was present and thriving and was a large metropolis in the 5th century BC. But this is in the 2nd century BC, early in the 2nd century, probably 200 years before Christ, Antiochus III resettles these Jews who were still living in the region of Babylon up there into Phrygia.

Now in 62 BC, we know that these Jews intermarried and had families and prospered and grew numerically in the region. Because in 62 BC, the Roman governor Flaxus was up there and he found out that the Jews were trying to send their temple tax down to Jerusalem. He said, wait a minute.

If you're going to pay any taxes, you pay them to Rome. You're living in a Roman province. We're providing the government.

We're providing the protection. We're providing the security. Everything that you get, you get from the government of Rome.

So when he found out that the Jewish community had gotten together to send their temple tax down, he seized it. And this is in the historic records that we still have from the ancient guys like Herodotus and Strabo and some of these historians of Rome. And they record this.

Flaxus seized this and they recorded the amount that he seized. It was 20 pounds of gold. 20

pounds of gold was what the community here was sending down to Jerusalem.

Well, we can work an equation to figure out how many Jews were in the land because we know that the temple tax is a half shekel tax. That's what got Israel in so much trouble when David numbered the people. Remember when he numbered the people and the half shekel tax was not collected and that's when the angel of death came in and all the great monstrous things were happening and he stops over the mountain where eventually the temple will be built, over the threshing floor there.

So we know that it's a half shekel tax. Well, if you take 20 pounds of gold and figure out how many half shekels are in that, it tells us that there were approximately 11,000 Jewish males in the community. So in 62 B.C., which is roughly 120, well, maybe 110 years before the time of the writing of this epistle, we've gone from these 2,000 families that were transported in 200 B.C. or so, 150 years later you've got 11,000 Jewish males.

So however many households that would work out to, you think of fathers and eldest sons and so forth. These were the men of military age. And we also know from archaeology who have gone to Hierapolis, for example, and dug up the cemeteries and have found inscriptions and so forth, headstones and grave markers and whatnot, that many of these Jews completely absorbed themselves into the Asian culture.

It was encouraged, you can tell by what Flaxus did, that he didn't want them acting like Jews and doing their religious observances. He wanted them to be Asians, to be Romans, and many of them did. And when you read these inscriptions, you discover that even though someone has a Jewish name, their prayers and the indications of what they did and how they lived and so forth indicate that they were thoroughly immersed in the culture of their region and they had very much lost their Jewishness.

The way we have a lot of Jewish people today who are thoroughly American, who very few, relatively speaking, follow the Orthodox path, certainly, and they may observe Hanukkah and so forth, but pretty much culturally absorbed. And that was the situation here in the Lycus Valley. As I said, the city of Colossae had been around for many centuries.

Herodotus describes it in the 5th century B.C. as a great city of Phrygia. It was renowned in the region. Xenophon, my piano teacher, when I was taking piano lessons, I was 11 or 12 years old, and she was a really wonderful lady.

And in addition to teaching piano, she was trying to help me develop my mind, and she said, you ought to read this book. And she gave me a book which is actually written by Xenophon. Xenophon was a Greek warrior in the 4th century B.C. and engaged in campaigns, and he kept sort of a diary of his expedition, his exploits, and the things that went on.

It's really fascinating. It's like finding the diary of a Civil War soldier or something. Xenophon was

up there.

He was an officer. Anyway, he describes in his writings Colossae. He saw it in the 4th century B.C. and he said it's a populous city, wealthy and large.

It was quite a striking town at the time. The reason Colossae had come to such prominence is that all around it, in the slopes of the mountains that surrounded it in the Lycus Valley, people raised sheep and grazed sheep and raised them for their wool. And the wool from Colossae was famous throughout the land.

They would shear the sheep and get this wool and cart it, of course, and make yarn and stuff out of it. And a lot of times they would dye it a deep red. And this deep red was sort of like Lydian purple and that sort of thing.

It was noted in the region. And a lot of times they would call this Colossian wool. And if somebody said, well, he was wearing a robe of Colossian wool, you knew that it was dyed deep red.

So the problem is that this end of the Lycus Valley was very prone to earthquakes. It lies on a fault. And from time to time they would have these horrendous earthquakes.

And apparently sometime subsequent to when Xenophon was there, they had an earthquake and it really caused the city to decline. They didn't recover well. It was an old city.

There were younger cities springing up around it with different kinds of industries and commerce. With the coming of the Roman Empire, things changed. The Romans put their district headquarters at the capital of the district of Asia was at Laodicea, which was kind of an upstart town.

Antiochus II founded that city and named it after his wife. Her name was Laodicea. And so he founded this town in about 250 B.C. and named it after his wife.

And so Laodicea that was 11 miles away, it became the big thriving young upstart town. And it was the Roman district capital. And so everything centered on Laodicea.

Colossi just kind of dried up on the vine out there. And it was the old tired town whose day was past and whose buildings were crumbling and whose cisterns didn't hold water well anymore and was ravaged through the centuries by earthquake and each time didn't quite recover to the extent that it had before. And so just a generation or two before Paul, the historian Strabo described Colossi.

And he said it's a small town. It's just a small town. You get the idea that it reminds me of the neighborhood down here where the Dallas Seminary is.

It used to be down here on Swiss Avenue and these big two-story mansions and wide avenues

and big lawns and so forth. That used to be a really ritzy part of Dallas. And back in 1924 when they put the seminary out there, this was really kind of a ritzy part of Dallas.

But over the years, those houses have just stood there and stood there and stood there. Now these houses are all 70, 80, 90, 100 years old and they're sagging and falling. And it's kind of a run-down area of Dallas now.

And they've tried to refurbish it and so forth. But it's not the part of town, it's not one of the parts of Dallas you want to be in at night. Swiss Avenue is sort of a faded glory section.

And that's sort of the story of Colossi. Colossi was a faded glory. It has been town by the time of Paul.

It's just a small town. And it's interesting that right at the same time that Paul is writing this letter to the Colossians, we don't know if it was just the same year or within a year or two before or after, there was a huge earthquake in this end of the Lycus Valley. And it absolutely wiped out Colossi.

It did a great amount of damage in Laodicea and in Hierapolis. But they were younger towns, they were thriving, there were rich people there. Laodicea rebuilt itself after this earthquake of 60 or 61 A.D. without any outside help.

Rome didn't have to send any disaster relief. Caesar didn't declare it a disaster area and send in a bunch of government money. Laodicea was so prosperous, they got their own private money and rebuilt their town from scratch.

And were doing fine. Colossi didn't have those rich people anymore. And people couldn't see the point.

And Colossi pretty much disappears off the map. There are a few scattered references to it in the Christian era. But today it is just a mound that covers ruins.

So far it has not been excavated. It's never been the subject of an extensive archaeological dig. There's a town three to five miles away that's inhabited.

A little small village type of thing. But Colossi itself, after the earthquake of 60 or 61, which is when they date the letter to the Colossians from Paul right in that same time frame. So it's very interesting that this town is fading fast when Paul writes.

And everything is happening elsewhere. That's a little bit of the context and the situation in which this letter was written. We'll pause here and take our break.

And when we come back, we'll actually get into the letter itself and begin to see why Paul writes it and what it's about. Let's pause here and take a break.

