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COMMENTARY SERIES



# COLOSSIANS

## PAUL'S LETTER TO THE CHURCHES

*Assuring the Believer*



UNDERSTANDING GOD'S WORD  
VERSE-BY-VERSE

COLOSSIANS—ASSURING THE BELIEVER  
by Practical Christianity Foundation

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# INTRODUCTION



[Colossae](#) was an ancient city in [Asia Minor](#), located in the southwestern part of present-day Turkey, and remembered primarily for the apostle Paul's letter to the church there ([Colossians 1:2](#)). Colossae was located 100 miles (160 km) east of Ephesus in the Lycus River valley. The city flourished during the sixth century B.C. An ancient Greek historian, [Xenophon \(view image\)](#), related that [Cyrus the Great \(view image\)](#), founder of the Persian Empire, had passed Colossae with his army on his way to battle in Greece. According to [Herodotus](#), another ancient Greek historian, when the Persian king [Xerxes \(view image\)](#) came to Colossae in the fifth century b.c., it was already a city of great size.<sup>1</sup>

Colossae was situated in the region known as Phrygia and was a trading center at a crossroads on the main highway from Ephesus to the east. In Roman times relocation of the road leading north to Pergamum brought about both the growth of Laodicea, a city 10 miles (16 km) away, and Colossae's gradual decline. Nevertheless, Colossae was a significant commercial center through the third and fourth centuries as part of a prosperous triangle with two other cities of the Lycus Valley, Hierapolis and Laodicea, both of which are mentioned in the New Testament.<sup>2</sup> Colossae and Laodicea shared in the wool trade. The name Colossae was derived from a Latin name *collossinus*, meaning "purple wool."<sup>3</sup>



**Epaphras** was Paul’s coworker in Ephesus and a native of Colossae. He was responsible for the city’s evangelization, as well as that of Laodicea and Hierapolis. Through him Paul learned of the progress of the Colossian church and thus wrote his letter to the Colossians. Paul’s high regard for **Epaphras** was expressed when he spoke of him as “beloved fellow servant,” “faithful minister of Christ” (*Colossians 1:7*), and “servant of Christ” (*4:12*), a title of esteem Paul bestowed only on one other person—**Timothy** (*Philippians 1:1*).

Following his **third missionary journey**, Paul was confined to a long period of imprisonment, first in Jerusalem and eventually in Rome, A.D. 59–62. During that time, Paul wrote several letters to churches that had been established during his missionary journeys—Colossians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon. Most Bible scholars have come to the conclusion that these letters were written while Paul was in Rome about A.D. 61–62.

Philemon, Colossians, and Ephesians belong together. Paul wrote them at the same time from his prison. **Tychicus** delivered all three letters under Paul’s direction. **Philemon** lived in **Colossae** and was the leader of the Colossian church. Paul wrote to plead with Philemon to accept his runaway slave, Onesimus, as a newly redeemed brother in Christ. Paul dispatched Tychicus to accompany Onesimus on his return journey. Tychicus also carried letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians. Philippians was probably written later and **Epaphroditus**, a representative of the Philippian church, carried Paul’s letter to this small Christian community.<sup>4</sup>

**Epaphras** was in prison with Paul at the time the letter to Philemon was written (*Philemon 1:23*).<sup>5</sup> During their imprisonment, Epaphras told Paul

about his work in the Colossian church. Even though Paul never visited [Colossae](#), he felt the familiar tug of Christian kinship and penned this letter as though they were his own children in the faith.

Colossians and Ephesians share a similar message with slightly different emphases. The outlines are parallel, first explaining the theological foundations of the Christian faith and then making practical application of the theological underpinnings. In Ephesians, Christ is exalted as the head of the Church, His Body. In Colossians, Christ is the transcendent sustainer of His creation. The language of Colossians, like Ephesians, is generally an expression of worship in the opening the sections. As readers follow Paul's thinking through these letters, spirits are lifted and hearts sing with praise. Then, walking with the exalted Christ, readers are urged to let the expression of praise be seen in their daily activities.

In the confused and shifting sands of the theologies of today's church, Paul's letter to the church at [Colossae](#) sounds a clarion call to make Jesus Christ the center of Christian worship. This short letter is a challenge to today's believers to again lift up Christ, exalt His Name, and live with thanksgiving as an expression of their worship.

**XENOPHON** — (born *c.* b.c. 430, Attica, Greece-died shortly before 350, Attica), Greek historian and philosopher whose numerous surviving works are valuable for their depiction of late Classical Greece. His *Anabasis* (“Upcountry March”) in particular was highly regarded in antiquity and had a strong influence on Latin literature.

**CYRUS THE GREAT** — Third king of Anshan, Cyrus (the Great) assumed the throne about 559 B.C. According to the best histories, Cyrus was reared by a shepherd after his grandfather, Astyages, king of Media, ordered that he be killed. Apparently, Astyages had dreamed that Cyrus would one day succeed him as king before the reigning monarch's death. The officer charged with the execution instead carried the boy into the hills to the shepherds.

As an adult, Cyrus organized the Persians into an army and revolted against his grandfather and father (Cambyses I). He defeated them and claimed their throne.

One of his first acts as king of Medio-Persia was to launch an attack against Lydia, capital of Sardis and storehouse for the riches of its king, Croesus. Turning eastward, Cyrus continued his campaign until he had carved out a vast empire, stretching from the Aegean Sea to India.

The Babylonian Empire next stood in his path, an obstacle that appeared to be insurmountable. Engaging the Babylonian army at Opis, Cyrus' troops routed them and moved on Babylon. The people in the capital welcomed Cyrus with open arms, seeing him as a liberator rather than a conqueror. All that remained was Egypt, which he left for his son, Cambyses II. Cyrus truly was the ruler of the world.

*The Cyrus Cylinder, inscribed with the famous Edict of Cyrus the Great in 538 B.C. (2 Chron. 36:23; Ezra 1:2-3).*

Cyrus' military exploits have become legendary. However, he is best remembered for his policies of peace. His famous decree in 539 B.C. (2 Chron. 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-4) set free the captives Babylon had taken during its harsh rule. Among these prisoners were the Jews taken from Jerusalem in 586 B.C. They were allowed to return to rebuild the temple and city. Along with this freedom Cyrus restored the valuable treasures of the temple taken during the exile. Since the Jews had done well in Babylon financially, many of them did not want to return to the wastes of Judah. From these people Cyrus exacted a tax to help pay for the trip for those who did wish to rebuild Jerusalem.

An astute politician, Cyrus made it a practice publicly to worship the gods of each kingdom he conquered. In so doing he won the hearts of his



subjects and kept down revolt. He is referred to as Yahweh's shepherd and anointed (Isa. 44:28-45:6) because of his kindness to the Jews and worship of Yahweh.

His last years are obscure. Cyrus was killed while fighting a frontier war with the nomadic Massagetae people. His tomb is in Pasargadae (modern Murghab).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Mike Mitchell, "Cyrus", *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, ed. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, Archie England, Steve Bond, E. Ray Clendenen and Trent C. Butler (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003). 377-78.

**HERODOTUS** — A fifth-century B.C. Greek historian (*ca.* 484-*ca.* 424), whose nine-part History earned him the appellation “father of history” (Cicero *De leg.* i.1). Based on eyewitness accounts, oral and written traditions, and archaeological observations accumulated during his own travels, this work records the relationships between Greece and ancient Near Eastern peoples from the rise of Croesus as king of Lydia (B.C.560) through the end of the Persian War (B.C.478).<sup>1</sup>

*ca.circa*

*ca.circa*

*De leg.De legibus*

<sup>1</sup>Allen C. Myers, *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987). 483.

**XERXES** — Persian king who reigned 486-464 B.C., known in the book of Esther as Ahasuerus. He was the son of Darius the Great and grandson of Cyrus the Great. He campaigned militarily against the Greeks, avenging the loss at Marathon in 490. However, his armada suffered a crippling defeat in the Bay of Salamis in 480, and he soon lost interest in attempting to defeat the Greeks.

Xerxes tomb in modern day Iran

<sup>1</sup> “Xerxes”, *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, ed. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, Archie England, Steve Bond, E. Ray Clendenen and Trent C. Butler (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003). 1694.

**EPAPHRAS** — Co-worker with the apostle Paul. Epaphras, a native of Colossae, was responsible for the city's evangelization, as well as that of Laodicea and Hierapolis. Through him Paul learned of the progress of the Colossian church and thus wrote his letter to the Colossians. Paul's high regard for Epaphras was evidenced by his use of such terms as "beloved fellow servant," "faithful minister of Christ" (Colossians 1:7), and "servant of Christ" (4:12), a title of esteem Paul bestowed only on one other person (Timothy in Phil 1:1). Epaphras was in prison with Paul at the time the letter to Philemon was written (Philemon 23).

<sup>1</sup> Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988). 703.

**TIMOTHY** — One of Paul’s most significant traveling companions and coworkers. Timothy was already a Christian (probably converted during the apostle’s first missionary journey) when Paul and Silas passed through Lystra, Timothy’s home, during the second missionary journey (Acts 16:1; cf. 14:6–8, 21). Timothy’s mother was Jewish but “a believer,” and his father, probably deceased, a Gentile. Timothy had not been circumcised, but had received some training in the Jewish scriptures (2 Tim. 3:15). Wanting Timothy to join him and Silas, Paul circumcised the young disciple so that traveling with the son of a marriage regarded as illegal according to Jewish law would not be such an immediate hindrance to work among Jews (Acts 16:2–3).

Forced to leave Macedonia for Athens, Paul left Timothy and Silas behind in Macedonia (17:1–15). When Timothy joined Paul at Athens, the apostle sent him back northward to Thessalonica (1 Thess. 3:1–2). When they were rejoined at Corinth, Timothy again worked alongside Paul (Acts 18:5; 2 Cor. 1:19). His name occurs with Paul’s in the letters to Thessalonica written from Corinth (1 Thess. 1:1; 3:6; 2 Thess. 1:1). Again on his third missionary journey, Paul sometimes had Timothy with him as an assistant and sometimes sent him to some location where help was needed but where the apostle could not himself be present (Acts 19:22; 1 Cor. 4:17; 16:10; 2 Cor. 1:1). When Paul was in Corinth on the eve of his journey to Jerusalem, and at least during part of that journey, Timothy was with Paul (Acts 20:4; Rom. 16:21). Later Timothy worked at Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3), perhaps going there while Paul went on to Jerusalem. If Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon were written from Rome, then Timothy was there with Paul at least for a short time (Phil. 1:1; 2:19; Col. 1:1; Phlm. 1).

Toward the end of Paul’s life, Timothy proved to be an especially significant helper whose faithful service was remembered by the apostle, as 2 Timothy bears witness (cf. 1 Cor. 4:17; Phil. 2:22). Paul indeed wanted Timothy to be with him (2 Tim. 4:9, 21). It appears that alongside his faithfulness was a timidity on Timothy’s part, which Paul considered a difficulty, and problems with physical health as well (1 Tim. 4:12; 2 Tim. 1:7; 4:1–5). At some time during his career as a Christian worker Timothy was imprisoned (Heb. 13:23).<sup>1</sup>

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