

# Overview of Colossians

By Dallas Burdette

[dburdette22@charter.net](mailto:dburdette22@charter.net)

334-467-7029

**WEBSITE: [freedominchrist.net](http://freedominchrist.net)**

I hear too many voices telling me that I need something more than Jesus Christ—some exciting experience, some new doctrine, some addition to my Christian experience.... I have a feeling that we would have revival in our churches if all true believers dared to live what Colossians teaches.<sup>1</sup>

**As we approach the Book of Colossians, we are immediately mindful of its message for the Christian community today.** Christianity is attacked by atheists, the pro-abortion movement, the gay movement, Eastern religions (such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism), radical Islamism, and so on. The Holy Scriptures of Christianity are no longer regarded as the Word of God with the world at large. **We live in a culture in which many individuals advance the belief that there are no absolutes. In other words, everything is relative.** To uphold Christianity with its teachings that Jesus is the only Way of salvation is to receive many derogatory labels that are designed to discredit the followers of Jesus—arrogance, haughtiness, conceit, and pride. This anti-God philosophy demands toleration for their beliefs; yet, they refuse to exhibit toleration for those who reject their views. It is in this vein of castigation by the unbeliever that John MacArthur (b. 1939, an American pastor and author known for his internationally syndicated radio program **Grace to You**) addresses this spirit of the narrow-mindedness and fanaticism of skeptics, atheists, and non-believers:

To claim that one religion is exclusively true is regarded as the height of intolerance and bigotry. In such a religious climate, Jesus becomes merely another wise man. He is nothing more than a great moral teacher, on a par with Moses, Muhammad, Confucius, and the Buddha.<sup>2</sup>

Just a perusal of this informative Epistle of Paul to the Colossians reveals the Paul defends the preeminence of Jesus above the gods and goddesses of the citizens who lived in Colossae as well as the population throughout the Roman world. Just as the viewpoints of false

---

<sup>1</sup>Warren W. Wiersbe, "Preface" in *Colossians: How to Become the Whole Person God Intends You to Be*, Be Complete Series (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1981), 5.

<sup>2</sup>John MacArthur, *Colossians & Philemon*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute, 1992), 2.

teachers in Paul's day sought to dethrone Jesus, so, today, we see this same mind-set among many philosophers and educators and leaders in governments in our own day. The Book of Colossians is just as timely today as it was in the first century. It is not uncommon for individuals to advance the notion that Jesus was simply just a great moral teacher. This statement follows on the heels of those who deny the Deity of Jesus or that He is the Messiah promised by the prophets. It is in this humanistic frame of mind-set that Jesus is just simply a "good" man, not God, that C. S. Lewis (1898-1963, theologian and Christian apologist) issues his warning against this kind of evasion or dodge concerning His Deity:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: "I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God." That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.<sup>3</sup> (Emphasis mine)

The central theme of Colossians (written about AD 61 from Rome) appears to be the absolute supremacy of Jesus as the head of the church and creation. There are basic themes that run throughout other books. For example, the **Book of Romans** focuses on justification by faith. On the other hand, the Book of Ephesians zeroes in on the unraveling of the mystery of God, which is none other than Jesus the Messiah. Just a casual reading of **Philippians** reveals that the central theme surrounds the joy that Christ brings to the table. With just a brief overview of the Book of Colossians, we are immediately aware of Paul's efforts to seek to draw his readers upward. After he announces the Gospel message of redemption and Christ's part in Creation, he writes:

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup> Set your minds on things above [Jesus], not on earthly things [not Judaism]. <sup>3</sup> For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. (Colossians 3:1-3)<sup>4</sup>

Even though this citation is dealing with Jesus versus Judaism, yet, there is still a principle in which our way of life should reflect our new status (3:5-17). Paul wants the believers to *seek* heaven as well as to *think* heaven. Our minds are to reflect upon the "things above," not on "earthly things." Once again, he calls attention to the necessity of continuing to

---

<sup>3</sup>C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity: The Case for Christianity, Christian Behaviour, and Beyond Personality* (Westwood, New Jersey: Barbour and Company, Inc., 1943, 1945, 1952), 45.

<sup>4</sup> For an excellent commentary on Colossians 3:1-2, see Don K. Preston, *Minds Misplaced: Colossians 3:1-2 and Dispensationalism* (Ardmore, OK: JaDon, 2017).

walk after Him and not after the various philosophies of the world as well as Judaism.<sup>5</sup> Paul goes right to the very heart of the believers' allegiance:

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him,<sup>7</sup> rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.<sup>8</sup> See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ. (2:6-8)

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF COLOSSIANS

### Epaphras: Servant of Christ

Before we study the various philosophical concepts that Paul addresses, we need to briefly examine the historical background of this well-known book in order to really appreciate the commitment of the numerous Christians involved in the founding and strengthening of this particular body of believers. The city of Colosse was about one-hundred miles inland from the city of Ephesus. This city was located in the Lycus Valley, which today is known as the western part of Turkey. Two other churches were also located in this same vicinity—Laodicea and Hierapolis. Apparently, the church at Colosse was founded by Epaphras (ěp'â-frās) during Paul's ministry in Ephesus. Luke records this history behind these three churches: "This went on for two years [teaching in the lecture hall of Tyrannus, tī-răn'ūs], so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord" (Acts 19:10). "The word of the Lord" is equivalent to the "Gospel." Epaphras is mentioned by Paul as he closes this short Epistle:

**Epaphras**, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.<sup>13</sup> I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis [hī'ěr-ăp'ō-līs]. (Colossians 4:12-13)

In addition to Epaphras, Philemon (fī-lēmōn) also lived in Colosse and worked with other Christians in order to promote Christianity. One of the four Epistles written by Paul while in prison in Rome was sent to Philemon (written about AD 61 from Rome). In Paul's correspondence to him, he addresses him as a "fellow worker" in the kingdom:

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker,<sup>2</sup> to Apphia [ăp'fī-à] our sister, to Archippus [ăr-kīp'ūs] our fellow soldier and to **the church that meets in your home**. (Philemon 1-2)

---

<sup>5</sup>For a brief analysis of this mind-set, see Dallas Burdette, "Christ: The Fulfillment of Prophecy" in Dallas Burdette, *Ephesians: Unraveling the Mystery of God 1:1-14* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2013), 218-272, especially, read the study in this chapter dealing with Richard Dawkins, "New Atheists: Prophets of God Ignored," 224-233.

During Paul's ministry in Rome, he met and converted a runaway slave of Philemon by the name of Onesimus (Philemon 10-13). Paul sent him back to Philemon in Colosse to work for the church. Apparently Paul sent his letter to the church in Colosse and to Philemon by Tychicus. Paul sends his final greetings to this church with the following words:

**Tychicus** [tik'ĩ-kūs] will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. <sup>8</sup> I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts. <sup>9</sup> He is coming with **Onesimus** [ō-nēs'ĩ-mūs], our **faithful and dear brother**, who is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here. (Colossians 4:7-9)

### **False Teachers: Jewish Legalist and Gnostics**

Paul combats the Jews who sought to bind the rituals of the Mosaic covenant on the church as well as the various philosophical concepts of Gnostic teachings. Scholars are divided over the teachings of the teachers that were threatening the well-being of the Christian community concerning Gnosticism. Yet, the Book of Colossians itself gives us some information from which we can gather, at least to some extent or degree, the nature of the problem that sought to undermine the very foundation of Christianity. This Epistle must be interpreted in light of its historical situation. The Book of Colossians, like the First Epistle of John, plunges headlong into the false teachings of the Gnostics.

There were various views within this heretical group. One of the philosophical concepts of **Gnosticism consisted in the belief that only the spirit is good and that matter is evil.** William Barclay (1907-1978, Church of Scotland minister and Professor of Divinity and Biblical Criticism of Glasgow, Scotland) writes in his introduction to the letters of John concerning Gnosticism. The following comments, by him, expounds on this particular threat to the struggling church:

What, then, was this contemporary thought and philosophy with which the false prophets and mistaken teachers wished to align the Christian faith? Throughout the Greek world there was a tendency of thought to which the general name of Gnosticism is given. **The basic belief of all Gnostic thought was that only spirit was good and matter was essentially evil.** The Gnostic, therefore, inevitably despised the world since it was matter. **In particular he despised the body which, being matter, was necessarily evil.** Imprisoned within this body was the spirit of man. **That spirit was a seed of God, who was altogether good.** So, then, the aim of life must be to release this heavenly seed imprisoned in the evil of the body. That could be done only by a secret knowledge and elaborate ritual which only the true Gnostic could supply. **Here was a tendency of thought which was written deep into Greek thinking—and which has not even yet ceased to exist. Its basis is the conviction that all matter is evil and spirit alone is good,** and that the one real aim in life is to liberate man's spirit from the vile prison-house of the body.<sup>6</sup> (Emphasis mine—bold and underlining)

---

<sup>6</sup>William Barclay, *The Letters of John and Jude*, Daily Study Bible Series, Revised Edition (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1976), 5. One should read pages 5 through 18 for a detailed analysis of this Gnostic philosophy and its implications for the Christian's belief in the virgin birth, the preeminence of Jesus, and the Creation through Jesus who is also God.

Since the Gnostics maintained that the spirit alone is good and that matter is utterly evil, then this philosophy prevented the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus. John combated this philosophy in his Gospel. For example, he writes: “The **Word became flesh** and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14). In Paul’s first Epistle to Timothy (written from Macedonia about AD 63), he confronts those who had an inadequate concept of Jesus. We should listen and weigh carefully his words:

Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: **He appeared in a body**, was **vindicated** by the Spirit, was **seen** by angels, was **preached** among the nations, was **believed** on in the world, was **taken** up in glory. (1 Timothy 3:16)

Matthew, one of the Twelve chosen by Jesus to proclaim the Good News about Jesus and His kingdom, recorded for the benefit of the Jews the events surrounding the birth of the prophesied Coming Messiah, which coming involved His becoming flesh:

**This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about:** His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.<sup>19</sup> Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.<sup>20</sup> But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because **what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.**<sup>21</sup> **She will give birth to a son,** and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”<sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet [Isaiah 7:14]:<sup>23</sup> **“The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son,** and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, “God with us.” (Matthew 1:18-23)

The Gnostics denied the humanity of our Lord Jesus—no flesh, only a phantom. This philosophy denies the Genesis account of creation as reported by Moses. We should pay attention to the words of Moses as he reveals God’s reaction to His own creation: “God called the dry ground ‘land,’ and the gathered waters he called ‘seas.’ And **God saw that it was good**” (Genesis 1:10). Again, he pens the following words about the creation of matter: “The **land produced vegetation: plants** bearing seed according to their kinds and **trees** bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. And **God saw that it was good**” (1:12). God who created “matter” did not consider “matter” evil, but rather, GOOD.

This teaching that only spirit is good and matter evil resulted in the denial of Jesus having come in the flesh. This teaching also denied the Deity of Jesus. The Gnostics set forth the idea that Jesus was just one of the many aeons or emanations that proceeded from the original God. In other words, the Gnostics taught that God was separated from the world, which distance meant that God did not create the world since the world is “matter” and “matter” is evil. The following comments by Maxie D. Dunnam (President Emeritus of Ashbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky, where he also served as president from 1994—2004) captures, in his excellent work on Colossians, the very heart or core of the implications of threatening and ominous Gnostic philosophy on the Christian community:

This teaching [Gnostic philosophy], commonly designated by scholars as “the Colossian heresy,” has been described as “an incipient form of Gnosticism.” The name comes from the Greek *gnosis*, meaning “knowledge.” Claiming a superior and esoteric wisdom (*gnosis*), the Gnostics asserted that God was separated from the world, distantly so, and had not directly created the world. Rather, creation took place as a result of a series of emanations—each more distant from God, until those furthest from Him created the material world. This theory preserved a rationalization that matter was evil and spirit was good. Since God was spirit and therefore good, the evil material world could have no contact with him.

One can immediately see what a challenge this was to basic Christian understanding of Christ as the incarnation of God. The Christian teaching that God came in the flesh of Jesus Christ, loved, forgave and reconciled the world could not be, argued the Gnostics. If Jesus was the Son of God, He could not dwell in the flesh because all matter is evil. So Jesus must have been an “emanation” from God; at most, one of a gradation of angels. Following that line of reasoning, they contended that Jesus did not really live as a man; His suffering on the Cross was not real; there was no point of a Resurrection because He had never really lived as a material being in evil flesh.<sup>7</sup> (Emphasis mine—bold and underlining)

In addition to the denial of Jesus’ preeminence, we are confronted with another aspect of Gnosticism that sought to undermine Christianity—asceticism, self-denial) and libertinism (license to sin). Concerning asceticism, William Barclay calls attention to this aspect of their philosophical thinking. He explains:

It might take the form of asceticism, with fasting and celibacy and rigid control, even deliberate ill-treatment, of the body. The view that celibacy is better than marriage and that sex is sin go back to Gnostic influence and belief—and this is a view which still lingers on in certain quarters. There is no trace of that view in this letter [1 John].<sup>8</sup> (Emphasis mine)

Since the body is evil, then one should free himself or herself from the influences of “matter.” On the other hand, we discover another insidious, sinister, treacherous, crafty, and deceptive trait that worked havoc within the Christian community—license to sin, which is the opposite of asceticism. Since the soul (spirit) is the only thing that matters, one may do what he or she pleases with his or her body. This belief about “matter” led some to justify immoral, depraved, wicked, and corrupt behavior. The tendency of **antinomianism** (without law) was at work within some members of the church at Colosse—at least they were exposed to this philosophy. The desires of the flesh could be gratified without a tinge or touch of conscious—everything goes. Since the body is evil, the appetites or cravings of the flesh could be indulged in without fear. Paul dealt with this mind-set when he penned the following instructions about right-thinking versus ill-thinking:

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup> Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. <sup>3</sup> For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. <sup>4</sup> When Christ, who is your life, appears, then

---

<sup>7</sup>Maxie D. Dunnam, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, The Communicator’s Commentary, General Editor, Lloyd J. Ogilvie, vol. 8 (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1982), 327.

<sup>8</sup>William Barclay, *The Letters of John and Jude*, 9.

you also will appear with him in glory. <sup>5</sup> **Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature**: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. <sup>6</sup> Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. (Colossians 3:1-6)

## CONCLUSION

This overview to the Book of Colossians is designed to give one a brief background of how some **false teachers had infiltrated the church of the Resurrected One**. As one proceeds through the four chapters of Colossians, one should seek to unravel the message of Paul to a fledgling church in its battle against those who opposed Christ (Judaism) and Jesus teaching concerning ethical behavior for His people. Hopefully, the ones reading this brief overview of Colossians will examine Paul's teachings about where he puts Jesus and godly living. For Paul, Jesus is not just a philosophy life; He is God Incarnate; He is the Creator of the Universe (1:15-20). In this short Epistle, Paul illustrates that the Gospel of God is not about circumcision, mandatory holidays, or a code of ceremonial activities (3:1-2). The various course of actions on the part of the Gnostics and of the Jewish legalists put a damper on the true doctrine of God and the teaching concerning Jesus' finished work on Calvary and His Deity.