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## **Saint Paul's Epistle to the Colossians Introduction and Overview**

### ***Colosse and Its Church***

Colosse was a small town in the Lycus Valley in the district of Phrygia of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). Phrygia is mentioned in the Book of Acts. On the Day of Pentecost, among the Jews in Jerusalem were those from Phrygia. We may suppose that those from Phrygia who heard Saint Peter's sermon on the Feast of Pentecost would have gone back to their homes preaching Christ.

The city of Colosse was later destroyed by a powerful earthquake and only its ruins are preserved today near a small, new Turkish city.

Colosse used to be a mighty and influential city, along with its neighboring cities: Laodicea and Hierapolis. Laodicea was a place of political importance in the area, and Hierapolis was a great trade center with a popular spa.

Although located near Ephesus, where Saint Paul spent two years, the church in Colosse was not founded by nor visited by Saint Paul. Rather, it was founded and evangelized by Epaphras, Saint Paul's convert and first bishop of Colosse.

### ***The Occasion of this Epistle***

Saint Paul wrote his epistle to the Colossians while imprisoned in Rome, probably around 61 A.D. His other prison epistles composed around 61 – 63 A.D. were addressed to the Philippian, the Ephesians, and to Philemon. The epistle to the Colossians was probably delivered at the same time as Ephesians and Philemon, whose home became a church in Colosse, and who was perhaps a presbyter-bishop there, one of the local Colossian clergy.

Even though Saint Paul was imprisoned in Rome, he was still allowed to receive visitors, who brought him news of his churches throughout the Roman world. He heard from Epaphras, founder of the church of Colosse, of the Colossian situation: both of their love and faith, and also their problems. The letters were delivered through Tychicus, Saint Paul's friend and contact in Rome. Tychicus delivered all the letters intended for that area including the letter to the Ephesians and the letter to Philemon. These two letters are both brief, and are outwardly and seemingly insignificant. In truth, they are a lasting tribute to Saint Paul's care for everyone. Colosse appeared to be a small town, and Onesimus, the subject of the Epistle to Philemon, was just one slave among many thousands in the Roman Empire. Nevertheless, even in the midst of his imprisonment, Saint Paul takes great care in dealing with these issues.

Saint Paul addresses some important issues in this epistle which are still relevant to some of the heresies we find today (particularly among the beliefs of the Jehovah's Witnesses). Saint Paul leaves for us a great treasure of Christological teaching in this brief epistle.

### ***Themes of the Epistle***

Gnosticism was a movement which emphasized secret and saving “knowledge” among its believers. It combined Christianity with many other religions and influences. In the region of Phrygia around Colosse, it seemed to have a strong Jewish element. This form of Gnosticism stressed the importance of obedience to the Law as an essential element in salvation, including food laws and holy-day regulations, as well as the insistence on circumcision.

The Gnostics here also saw the incompatibility of God with His creation. They would have been confused about the following notion: “How could the holy, invisible, changeless, and bodiless God, the eternal Spirit, create a changeable, visible world?” To them, the world was basically “yucky.” People are conceived in passion and born in blood, lived in pain, died in ignorance, and returned to dust. How could the true God have anything to do with this?

To the Gnostics, God’s fullness came as a series of emanations, each one derived from its predecessor and a little more distant from the original divine “center.” These were also called “eons.” To them, perhaps Christ was the last “link” in this divine chain stretching from the original “center” right down to the created world. By creating this series of gods, the Gnostics comforted themselves in thinking that the original true God did not have to be directly involved in the material world, but was only related to it through a long series of “eons.” To the Gnostics, they would have considered that the angelic “principalities and authorities” had their place in this divine “fullness” and that they were to be worshipped.

Saint Paul largely addresses this heretical line of thinking in the first two chapters of his epistle to the Colossians. For instance, in Colossians 1:15-20, Saint Paul gives us the proper teaching regarding the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. In chapter two, Saint Paul demonstrates his concern for the believers at Colosse and advise them to avoid false theology and spirituality.

In chapter three, Saint Paul largely addresses the spirituality of the church and her members. Having been raised with Christ through baptism, their whole spiritual behavior ought to change. The believers ought to put away all evil and cling to that which is good, and put on love as the bond of perfection (3:14).

Since the Gnostics considered the material world and familial relationships as impure, Saint Paul takes time in chapter three to address spirituality in the home: the role of husbands, wives, and children, as well as the role of bondservants.

Lastly, Saint Paul gives greetings and instructions to the church of Colosse, demonstrating his great care for them, as well as the love of their bishop Epaphras, who greets them from Rome and labors for them fervently through his prayers (cf. 4:12-13).

### ***Conclusion***

In conclusion, we see Saint Paul at the height of his pastoral care. Although in prison, Saint Paul demonstrates his great care for the church and brings a sense of optimism and hope to a church faced by the threat of heresy.

**Glory is due to God forever. Amen.**