

The following is a rough transcript, not in its final form and may be updated.

## Expression of Christian Love

### Colossians 1:1-2

**Intro:** Having spent so much time in the OT, I thought it prudent to return to the NT and immerse ourselves once again in the doctrines of Jesus Christ. One of the best NT books to do this in is Paul's little epistle to the church in Colosse. Colossians is a small book but it packs a big punch. This letter was written about the same time as Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus and to his dear friend Philemon. Since they were written around the same time, we can surmise that they were also written under the same circumstances; most likely, Paul's first Roman imprisonment. Because of the proximity of the date of their writing, it stands to reason that there are some similarities to be found between Colossians and Ephesians but there are also some major differences.

If the primary focus of Ephesians is to portray the Church of Christ then the primary focus of Colossians is to portray the Christ of the Church. Ephesians focuses on the Body, Colossians focuses on the Head. Like Ephesians, this book also divides neatly in half with the first part being doctrinal and the second part being practical (ethical). Paul's purpose in this letter is to show that Christ is preeminent (first and foremost in everything), and the Christian's life should then reflect that priority. Because believers are rooted in Him, alive in Him, hidden in Him and complete in Him, it is utterly inconsistent for them to live their lives without any reflection of Him. Since they are clothed in His love, with His peace ruling in their hearts, they are equipped to make Jesus Christ first in every area of their lives!

Colosse was 1 of 3 cities located in the fertile Lycus Valley about 100 miles (160K) inland from Ephesus (slide) in the region of the 7 Asian churches of Revelation. Strategically located by a mountain pass on an important trade route from Ephesus to the East, Colosse was once a populous center of commerce, famous for its glossy black wool. By the time of Paul, the city was on the decline and had slipped into a second-rate position behind its nearest neighbors: Hierapolis and Laodicea. It slowly became what we'd call a small town. Yet, the church there was important enough to merit the attention of the Apostle Paul.

As you might imagine, in a city that sat on an important trade route and had experienced some measure of success, there would be a large influx of people from all over coming to take advantage of any commercial opportunities there. Along with these people came a plethora of all kinds of different philosophies and belief systems and they were all mixed up and mingled into this cosmopolitan area, so it's to be expected that religious hucksters were everywhere. There was a large Jewish colony in Colosse and there was also a large and constant influx of new ideas and influences from the East. Combine this with the regular pagan beliefs of the Romans and the local pantheon of false gods and you have fertile ground for religious speculations and out-right heresies!

This first century religious environment was not that different from our own. It was a time of religious mixing, with people borrowing a little from this religion and a little from that religion. It was like a spiritual buffet table with each group taking ideas that they liked and rejecting those they didn't care for. The only real difference between that time and our modern world is that in the first century, a person joined a group that that did the religious borrowing. In our modern religious culture, the individual does the borrowing for themselves – the gospel according to me!

The city of Colosse most likely would never have been mentioned in the NT if it wasn't for the church that existed there. The city is never named in the Book of Acts because Paul didn't start the Colossian church, nor did he ever visit it. Now, we will see that Paul had heard of their faith (4, 9), but he'd never seen these believers personally (2:1). So here was a church of unknown people, in a small and seemingly insignificant town, receiving an inspired letter from the great Apostle Paul.

How did this church begin? Though Paul had never been there, we can with certainty say that it was an outgrowth of Paul's 3-year ministry in Ephesus. In fact, Acts 19:10 says that the witness of the church in Ephesus was so effective "that all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks" and that would certainly include people in Colosse, Laodicea and Hierapolis.

If we examine the individuals who were involved in delivering the prison correspondence of Paul, we can piece together the story of how the church in Colosse was started. During Paul's ministry, at least to men from Colosse

were brought to faith in Jesus Christ – Epaphras and Philemon. Epaphras was apparently one of the key founders of the Colossian church for he shared the gospel with his friends there (1:7). He also had a ministry in the neighboring cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis (4:12-13). Philemon also had a church meeting in his home and it's likely that his son Archippus was the pastor (4:17).

As you can see by the map, Colosse was right in there with the rest of the Asian churches made famous in the first 3 chapters of the Book of Revelation. So why wasn't the Colossian church included in that list? Well, there are likely several literary and theological reasons why Colosse isn't mentioned but the greatest reason is because shortly after Paul wrote his letter to them, the city of Colosse was destroyed by an earthquake. So this church ceased to exist long before the Apostle John received his revelation of Jesus Christ.

Paul wrote this letter because there were some serious theological problems arising among the Christians in that church. Even though Colosse was a small and unimportant city, Paul apparently believed the situation there was important enough for apostolic attention. The doctrinal problem (also known as the Colossian Heresy) is difficult to accurately describe but, by comparing the prison letters, we can try to reconstruct this potentially devastating crisis.

While Paul was in prison in Rome, Epaphras traveled to visit him because he needed Paul's help. New doctrines were being introduced to the believers in Colosse and they were invading the church and creating problems. The heresy that threatened the Colossian church was most likely a combination of Eastern mysticism, Jewish legalism and elements of the pagan philosophy of gnosticism. This term comes from the Greek work gnosis – to know. The gnostics claimed to be people who were “in the know” when it came to the deep things of God. They considered themselves to be the spiritual aristocracy of the church.

To start with, this heresy taught people that they could have such a close union with God that they would attain to a spiritual perfection. Spiritual fullness could be achieved but only if they entered into the prescribed teachings and ceremonies. There was also a full knowledge – a spiritual depth – available that only the initiated could enjoy. This new and previously

hidden wisdom would release them from the bonds of earthly things and put them in touch with heavenly things. Each of things may sound wonderful and spiritually appealing but they were nothing more than man-made philosophies based on traditions and not on divine truth.

Added to these philosophical speculations was a form of good, old fashioned Jewish legalism. These false teachers believed that the rite of circumcision was helpful in the spiritual development of believers (2:11). They also taught that the OT law, especially dietary laws, was useful in attaining spiritual perfection (2:14-17). They believed that the OT rules and regulations were sufficient to tell NT believers what was evil and what was good (2:21). They believed that all matter was evil and the only way to control their human nature and conquer evil matter was by adhering to rigid discipline and stark asceticism.

This kind of false teaching directly undermines the foundations of Christian faith because in order to promote this false doctrine, heretical teachers must attack the person and work of Jesus Christ. To them, Jesus was merely one of God's many emanations and not the very Son of God come in the flesh. The incarnation of Christ literally means God with us (Emmanuel) but these false teachers claimed that God was keeping His distance from us! When we trust the Son of God, there is no longer any need for intermediary beings between us and heaven!

In His work on the cross, Jesus settled the sin question and completely defeated all evil satanic forces. He also put an end to the legal demands of the law. Jesus Christ alone is the Preeminent One! All the believer needs is Jesus!

The reason we have to piece together what the Colossian Heresy might have been is because Paul doesn't feel the need to address it directly. Nowhere in this letter does Paul ever attempt to refute or even mention the specific heresies. Paul never dwelt on the problem in the church; he only dwelt on the solution! The solution to heresy is a better understanding of Jesus Christ. Paul doesn't spill any ink on their heresy because he's too busy emphasizing the reality of Christ. Paul understood that truth is the greatest weapon he could use against false doctrine.

So, with that small introduction behind us, let's see what Paul has to say...

**1**- Like the letter to the Philippians, this letter begins with a greeting from its senders, which again is from Paul...and Timothy. There is one major difference, though. Paul describes himself here as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God. When Paul wrote to the Philippians, he was effectively among friends, having won some of them to the Lord personally; so he was comfortable describing himself and Timothy both as bond-servants of Christ (**Phil 1:1**). But, having never been to Colosse, being unknown to most in the church and being about to launch into a serious theological discourse that will step on a lot of toes; Paul finds it necessary to establish his spiritual credentials.

Firstly, Paul is an apostle. The word simply means 'one who has been sent' as in an official envoy or messenger. But, by this time in the first century church, it was already becoming a technical term for one sent directly by Jesus and, even more precisely, one who had been a witness of the risen Christ (**1 Cor 9:1**). Paul fit the bill precisely for both of these requirements: he had seen the risen Lord (on more than one occasion) and because of his divine calling, he was an authorized spokesman for God, both commissioned and empowered to act as His representative.

Secondly, as an apostle, Paul is chosen by God. Though he was living and ministering in a different time and place, Paul still understood his calling to be exactly like that of the OT prophets, particularly **Isaiah (6:8)** and **Jeremiah (1:4-10)**. Like Jeremiah, Paul had the sense of being chosen against his will. He clearly had no intention of being an apostle of Jesus Christ as he was traveling on the road to Damascus but he met Jesus on that road and when it was all said and done, he was left with no other option but to proclaim the gospel. But, unlike Jeremiah, Paul doesn't reveal any reluctance to accept his calling.

So, Paul is writing to the Colossian church with the authority of one who has been sent by God to speak His Word. At the same time, Paul is never a loose cannon or lone ranger. He's always ready to work with supporters and helpers in the overall context of the Church's mission. So this letter also comes from Timothy, who's described here simply as a fellow Christian, a brother. Timothy was an honored companion of Paul, but he was not an apostle. He has never been thought to have any part in composing the letter but was most likely Paul's scribe.



**2a-** Like Philippians, this letter is addressed to the saints (holy ones) of Colosse who are in Christ. Saints is Paul's general term for Christians. Many people are used to thinking of saints as particular Christians who in one way or another have been widely (even formally) recognized as examples of holiness. But Paul refers to all Christians as holy ones. As we learned in our Leviticus study, holiness primarily means set apart for God. The saints are those individuals who, by responding to God's call, have been set apart in several ways. They are now part of God's people, different from others in that they are aware of God's love for them and His gracious offer of salvation. They are also set apart because they recognize a different ultimate authority: they are now citizens of heaven, obeying its laws rather than those of merely human institutions. In short, they are holy because they belong to God in a special way: they are His children, adopted through faith in Christ. They are, in fact, in Christ Jesus.

Paul also writes to the faithful brethren in Colosse, which would also include sisters. This doesn't mean Paul is only addressing the orthodox or trustworthy members of the church. He is writing to all the Colossian Christians, both those who are in error in their understanding of their faith and those whose grasp of the truth of Christ is more sure. What this teaches us is that ultimately, important though understanding and doctrine are, the Colossians, together with all Christians, are saints not because of their understanding of Christ or even their faithfulness to Christ but simply because they are in Christ. Is that not a comforting thought?

**2b-** To this church in Colosse, Paul sends greetings in the grace and peace of God. While this greeting may seem familiar to us, it is no less heartfelt. These are no empty words. For Paul, they lie at the very heart of the gospel. Grace is a free and undeserved act of giving. In Christian terms, grace is God's giving of Himself in love. He gives salvation to sinners, love to His enemies and the Holy Spirit to His people. God's grace is the distinctive hallmark of the gospel. It's the declaration that God reaches out to us before we turn to Him. It's God's unconditioned goodwill towards humanity which was beautifully illustrated and effectively accomplished in the saving work of Christ.

What follows from our acting upon God's grace is peace! Peace is the state of mind that flows from knowing God, not just knowing about Him but really knowing Him, personally, intimately. Paul is no doubt thinking along the lines

of the Hebrew shalom, a word that carries connotations of wholeness and well-being as well as the absence of trouble and strife. But, the peace of God is not so much about living a quiet and calm life as it is about knowing that under all the troubles and cares of life lies the certainty of God's love and the hope of eternal life.

These kind words from Paul to the saints in Colosse teach us another important spiritual principle. This letter, which is full of love and concern, written to a church Paul had neither planted nor visited, shows the power of Christian love. Paul didn't need to see or meet or even directly know these Colossian Christians in order to love them and be concerned for them. His love and concern for them wasn't over when he concluded his letter. No, he also had to send one of his helpers to carry the letter to Colosse. In Paul's mind, their need for the truth of who Jesus is and their understanding of what His person and work means to their faith was more important than any personal comfort or assistance he may miss out on. Paul loved these believers and was willing to do everything within his power to help strengthen them in their faith.

It's that same Christian love that brings us together every Sunday that compels us to pray for those who are hurting, whether it's physical pain, emotional distress or whatever the need may be. But Christian love compels us to do more than just pray – it causes us to serve, to come along side those with various needs and offer our assistance to the best of our ability and, sometimes even beyond it. It's Christian love that causes us to pray for believers in foreign lands that we have never met and will probably never meet in this lifetime. It's Christian love that compels us to offer financial support to missionaries who work in places we'll never see and minister to people we'll never know this side of heaven. We do these things willingly, lovingly and faithfully because this is exactly what God has done for all of us.

If you've received God's grace and now live in peace with Him, there's nothing that can prevent you from serving Him faithfully and effectively.

God has shown grace – His undeserved favor – and has called all people to respond to His gift of salvation, not by following rigid rules and regulation or by participating in religious rituals or ceremonies but by putting their faith in Jesus Christ, trusting Him to be Who He says He is and to do what He has said He will do. Only faith such as that can successfully bring peace with

God because, when we accept Jesus Christ as Savior, the long-standing breach between God and His creatures has been healed: the war between humanity and God is over. This leads to the personal experience of peace, an inner calm and sense of wholeness that is based on the certainty of your salvation. 😊