



Bible Study

A COLOSSAL CHALLENGE: DO NOT BE DECEIVED!

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A whole-book overview of Paul's letter to the Colossians. Read it as an article, or use it section by section for personal study or group discussion. Please have the biblical text open for reference as you read; this article is based on the NIV UK.

CHAPTER 1: FRUITFULNESS

As I read Paul's letter to the Colossians, I imagine eavesdropping on a pastor's prayer meeting in a prison cell. Paul had not visited Colossae nor met the Christians there. It was Epaphras who shared the good news of Jesus with them (1:7). Anxious that Paul, now imprisoned, should hear of this gospel growth, Epaphras seems to have travelled to Rome to share the news in person.

Both men were devoted to prayer, as is evident throughout Paul's letters and his description in this letter of Epaphras 'always wrestling in prayer for you' (4:12). It is not difficult,

therefore, to imagine them praying together as the news was shared.

Paul opens with the customary greetings (1:1-2) before recording his prayers for these new Christians in Colossae. He gives thanks for their faith, hope, and love (1:3-5, echoing 1 Corinthians 13:13), and longs for them to 'live a life worthy of the Lord' (1:10).

In my imagined prayer meeting, they soon turn to praise. Paul includes the words of one of the most ancient hymns of Christian faith, describing the supreme greatness of Christ (1:15-20). Whether Paul wrote the words himself, or quoted others, he

enables us to join the worship of the earliest Christians.

Paul concludes this opening chapter by turning from prayer and praise to proclamation (1:25-28). This is the reason for his suffering (1:24) and motivates his longing to 'present everyone fully mature' (1:28), which is only possible through the power of Christ (1:29) – a longing that is the central concern of this letter.

SELAH: PAUSE AND PONDER

The Hebrew word 'Selah', commonly found in the Psalms, may be an invitation to pause and ponder. In that spirit, Selah interludes are included in this study.

🔥 *'We have not stopped praying for you' (1:9). How consistently do you pray for fellow believers? Use Paul's prayer here to guide you in praying for yourself and others. Aim for consistency and persistence!*

🔥 *Reflect on the fruitfulness of the gospel (1:6, 10). Take comfort in the innate life force of its seed and celebrate its fruitfulness in your own life; pray for its growth around you.*

🔥 *Identify and meditate on each of the descriptions of Christ in 1:15-20, and worship him!*

CHAPTER 2: FULLNESS

Paul reiterates his goal of Christian maturity (2:2, see also 1:28) and states his purpose in writing to the Colossians: 'so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments' (2:4). He urges them not to depart from the gospel (2:6), warning them – from his prison cell – against being taken captive by 'hollow and deceptive philosophy ... human tradition ... elemental spiritual forces ...' (2:8).

Paul's counter-arguments offer insight into the earliest doctrinal battles faced by the Christian church, confronting an early form of Gnosticism, which taught:

- The physical world (and therefore the human body) is evil; Paul counters: 'in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form' (2:9).
- Spiritual fullness comes through secret knowledge; Paul counters: 'in Christ you have been brought to fullness' (2:10a).
- A greater divine being exists over the Lord God of the Bible; Paul counters: Christ 'is the head over every power and authority' (2:10b).

The false teaching led, paradoxically, both to severe asceticism, e.g. circumcision (Paul

counters, 'you were circumcised by Christ', 2:11) and to sensual indulgence (as Paul highlights in 2:23). For more on Gnosticism and its modern resurgence, see N.R. Needham's excellent, brief booklet: link.metrevive.uk/gnosticism.

Paul then refocuses his readers on Christ's triumph through the cross (2:13-15) and describes ways in which false teaching robs believers of freedom in Christ (2:16-23). He warns of those who 'have lost connection with the head' (2:19), characterised by false humility, the worship of lesser beings, and sensual indulgence. His great concern is that, having been qualified by Christ (1:12), these new Christians should not be disqualified by others (2:18) who live in the shadows and miss the reality found only in Christ (2:17).

SELAH: PAUSE AND PONDER

🔥 *Compare Paul's concerns with today's issues in church and wider culture (2:6-12). How, according to Paul, can we avoid being deceived?*

🔥 *Meditate on Christ's accomplishment on the cross (2:13-15); worship him, and open yourself to his continuing work, changing you from glory into glory.*

CHAPTER 3: FAITHFULNESS

Paul wonderfully summarises the gospel: Christians are raised with Christ (3:1), having died with him (3:3), and will appear with him in glory (3:4). Consequently, Paul calls his readers to faithful Christian living. The NIV translation of 3:1-2 is a little repetitive, unlike Paul's original Greek. He first calls his readers to 'seek the things above', echoing Jesus' call to 'seek first his kingdom' (Matthew 6:33), and then to be 'above-minded', or 'heavenly-minded'. Despite the common dismissal ('so heavenly-minded to be of no earthly use') Paul taught the opposite: greater heavenly-

mindedness leads to greater earthly usefulness for the Lord.

Continuing the imagery of dying and rising (3:5), and then adopting the metaphor of changing clothes (3:9, 12), Paul emphasises that conversion to Christ must produce changed life, involving a lifetime of hard work. Having described the beautiful virtues with which Christians clothe themselves



(3:12), it becomes clear that Paul is primarily addressing relationships within the church ('as members of one body', 3:15). Participation in the body of Christ is to be characterised by the word of Christ and by the sound of his praise (3:16).

Paul then pens one of his most controversial passages (3:18-4:1), addressing faithful Christian living within the home. The words were controversial then,

as they are now, though for the opposite reasons. The submission of wives, and the obedience of children and slaves, were taken for granted. It was Paul's insistence on husbands' Christlike love, fathers' encouragement, and masters' fair treatment that was radical.

As wives and husbands, children and parents, slaves and masters explored their freedom and

equality newly-found in Christ, Paul presented a vision for faithful Christian living marked by submission and love, obedience and encouragement, wholehearted integrity and fairness (3:18-4:1, see Ephesians 5:21 on mutual submission).

SELAH: PAUSE AND PONDER

🔥 *How would greater devotion to 'the things above' change your life? (3:1-2)*

Identify strategies and pray that it would be so.

🔥 *What do you need to 'take off' and 'put on' (3:5-14)? Again, identify strategies and pray for help.*

🔥 *How might the beautiful Christian virtues of 3:15-4:1 be more fully developed through your life, in church, home and workplace?*

CHAPTER 4 – FRIENDSHIP

Paul emphasises friendship in this final chapter, asking for prayer for an open door for his message (4:3) and clarity in proclamation. Strikingly, Paul the prisoner prays for an open door, not for himself, but for his message. He urges readers to live in ways that open doors for their own clear proclamation of Christ (4:5-6).

Paul closes the letter by naming some friends (4:7-15), a reminder of our dependence on the prayers and support of others. I like to give nicknames to four of them:

- **'Locked Up'** (Aristarchus) – He may have voluntarily submitted to imprisonment to be alongside Paul (4:10a).
- **'Made Up'** (Mark) – who was reconciled with Paul after a significant disagreement (4:10b, see Acts 16:36-40).
- **'Turned Up'** (Justus) – This is his only mention in the Bible; seemingly, he turned up in the right place at the right time and helped Paul when he needed it most (4:11).
- **'Gave Up'** (Demas) – who, Paul would later write to Timothy, sadly gave up on the faith (4:14; see 2 Timothy 4:9)

Thus, even in this list of warm, friendly greetings, there is a stark and sobering reminder of the seriousness of Paul's colossal challenge. In the subtle storms of

false teaching, Christians must guard against deception. No one is immune. Like the Colossians, and their great pastors, we must 'devote ourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful' (4:2). Paul's concluding challenge to Archippus comes to each Christian in every age and place: 'See to it that you complete the ministry you have received from the Lord' (4:17).

SELAH: PAUSE AND PONDER

🔥 *Inspired by 4:2-6, join these early Christians in praying for open doors for the gospel and clear proclamation, especially through your own daily life.*

🔥 *To whom could you be a 'Locked Up' friend, supporting them in great need, even at significant personal cost? With whom could you be a 'Made Up' friend, seeking reconciliation and restoration? For whom could you be a 'Turned Up' friend, helping because you are in the right place at the right time? Let's be a 'Locked Up' friend to some, a 'Made Up' friend to others, and a 'Turned Up' friend to many!*

🔥 *Pray for yourself and fellow Christians, that none would be known as a 'Gave Up' friend. What lessons from Paul's letter will help you to avoid being deceived, and to complete faithfully your God-given ministry (4:17)?*

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