

***Colossians 1:1-8 (Opening)***

*<sup>1</sup> Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,*

*<sup>2</sup> To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae:*

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father.*

*<sup>3</sup> We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, <sup>4</sup> since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, <sup>5</sup> because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, <sup>6</sup> which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, <sup>7</sup> just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf <sup>8</sup> and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.*

Have you ever written a letter to someone you didn't know?

Well, I've written a few cover letters for jobs and such, and some generic letters to one office or another to tell someone something or ask someone to do something, but I've never written a personal letter to someone I didn't know.

It must be difficult to work from second-hand knowledge to write a letter, especially if you're writing to help the group you're sending it to, or to explain something better to them. That's what Paul was doing with the letters to Colossae and to Philemon. It's very likely (although there has been some argument) that Paul had never been to Colossae, and had never met Philemon, although he knew their character, and had been told about them.

Let's make this letter writing a little bit worse, shall we? Not only has Paul probably never met his audience with these two letters, but he is in prison in Rome during the time he's writing. I say he as in Paul was writing to the people, but in fact, most of the writing was being done by a scribe, and Paul usually only wrote a small amount at the end of the letter to show that it was actually coming from him.

Paul wasn't alone while he was in Rome writing these letters; in both Colossians and Philemon he includes Timothy in the salutation; Paul includes Timothy as a sender of the letter.

### ***Colossians 1:1, 2***

*<sup>1</sup> Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,*

*<sup>2</sup> To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae:*


*Grace to you and peace from God our Father.*

### ***Philemon 1-3***

<sup>1</sup> *Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,*

*To Philemon our beloved fellow worker <sup>2</sup> and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house:*

<sup>3</sup> *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Apphia may be Philemon's wife, and Archippus may be one of the  Elders of the church that meets in Philemon's house (or is it Archippus' house? It's not really clear). Most scholars agree that Philemon was from Colossae, although some believe that he actually was from Laodicea, and the letter mentioned in Colossians 4:16, where it says to read the Colossian letter in Laodicea and the Laodicean letter in Colossae, is actually the letter to Philemon. We don't know for sure. Most scholars believe the letter from Paul to the Laodiceans has been lost.



### ***Colossians 4:7-14***

<sup>7</sup> *Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. <sup>8</sup> I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts, <sup>9</sup> and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here.*

<sup>10</sup> *Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, welcome him), <sup>11</sup> and Jesus who is called Justus. These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me. <sup>12</sup> Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God. <sup>13</sup> For I bear him witness that*

*he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis.* <sup>14</sup> *Luke the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas.*

Tychicus and Onesimus were delivering this letter from Paul in Rome to the church in Colossae. Tychicus went with Paul to Jerusalem, as a delegate from the church in Ephesus, when Paul took the collection to the saints in Jerusalem. He was also to deliver the letter to the Ephesians, and quite possibly, since Onesimus is mentioned in both Colossians and in Philemon (as the primary subject of the letter to Philemon), the letter to Philemon.

When letters were delivered to a church congregation during these times, the letters were read aloud when the group would meet for worship. I've found it very interesting to listen to Colossians and Philemon read aloud. Colossians takes  about 15 minutes to read aloud (assuming you don't stumble too much on the difficult names), and Philemon takes only about 4 minutes. You could easily read both letters and still have time for a short sermon  explaining them, even by today's standards.

Paul also mentions Aristarchus, Mark, and Justus, fellow Jews that were in prison with him in Rome. It may be that Paul mentions the fact that these three are Jews because there was a problem with people trying to enforce Jewish law on the Christians in Colossae.

Throughout the letter to the Colossians, Paul comments about how he's never met the people there, so it's very possible that Epaphras, mentioned here, and in Colossians 1:7 and verse 23 of Philemon, was the person who planted the churches in Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis.

Paul also mentions "Luke the beloved physician" and Demas here and in the letter to Philemon. Luke was the author of the Gospel that bears his name, and also the book of Acts. Demas, unfortunately, is also

mentioned in Second Timothy 4:10 as having deserted Paul and gone to Thessalonica.

I've mentioned a lot of places this morning. Colossae and Laodicea, along with Hierapolis are in an area of what is now the western central part of Turkey that was known as Phrygia. Laodicea was about 100 miles east of Ephesus; Colossae was about 12 miles east of Laodicea, and Hierapolis was about 6 miles north of Laodicea. Colossae was initially the largest of the three cities, but began to decrease in size after the road was relocated some distance away. Colossae was known for its red wool, and Hierapolis and Laodicea were both known for their hot springs.

The area of Phrygia had a long history of, shall we say, bad behavior. The people of Phrygia, for at least a thousand years before Christianity came along, had two primary gods; Cybele and Bacchus. Cybele was the mother goddess, and is still worshiped today by several religious cults, including Wiccan. Bacchus was the god of grapes and wine, and seems to be worshiped on most college campuses worldwide.

But seriously, the combination of the worship of Cybele and Bacchus made Phrygia the capital of sex, drugs and rock-n-roll style worship. I'll leave out the details of the worship, but if you think of all the frat parties you may have ever heard about, that's probably just scratching the surface of what was going on.

So, you see what the Colossian Christians were facing from the beginning; they had a serious uphill battle to understand what Christianity was all about. Epaphras, since he was from that region, understood how to relate to the people there, and could more easily explain Christianity to the people there.

But there were more problems than that, and that's why Paul wrote to the Colossians. It seems that some group was infiltrating the church there and teaching something other than the truth about Christ. There

are no real details in Colossians, but there are some clues. However, the Greek is extremely difficult to translate in some places. Some of the words used are only used in a few other places in Ancient Greek literature that's been found, and nowhere else in the Bible, so there's a lot of conjecture as to what was actually going on in Colossae.

Some scholars think there were Jews or Jewish Christians who had gone to the area of Phrygia to teach that the Jewish law had to be followed to be a Christian – Judaizers. Some scholars think it may have been some of the Christians relapsing back into the Cybele and Bacchus worship practices, and convincing others to slide back with them. Some scholars believe it was the beginnings of Gnosticism, a basic belief that there was a special knowledge granted only by God (or the gods) that could give you salvation. Gnosticism gets its name from the Greek word for knowledge.

We don't know for sure what was going on in Colossae, but we do know that people were teaching error, and causing people to sin. This is what Paul was writing to try to stop; writing because he couldn't leave Rome, because he was in prison.

Well, that kind of explains the reason for Paul writing to the Colossians, but what about Philemon? Why was that letter written?

Well, Onesimus was a run-away slave that ran to Rome, quite possibly to try to start a new life. You see, if run-away slaves were caught, they could be punished in whatever way their masters saw fit, from some simple punishment, to public flogging, to death. If I had run away from where I was a slave, I would have gone a long way, too.

Evidently, Onesimus met Paul somehow, and was baptized. Paul convinced Onesimus that the right thing to do is to go back to his master, Philemon, but Paul wrote a letter to Philemon explaining that Onesimus was now not only his slave, but his brother in Christ, and that

Philemon should not treat Onesimus harshly, even though it was his right. Interestingly, Onesimus is Greek for useful.

### ***Philemon 10-16***

*<sup>10</sup> I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. <sup>11</sup> (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) <sup>12</sup> I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. <sup>13</sup> I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, <sup>14</sup> but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord. <sup>15</sup> For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, <sup>16</sup> no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.*

There are a lot of good teachings in both Colossians and in Philemon, and over the next few weeks, we'll start looking at them, one or two ideas at a time. But why tie the two letters together? Like I said earlier, it seems that Onesimus was accompanying Tychicus back to Phrygia, Colossae and Laodicea specifically, so that Onesimus could return to Philemon, and hopefully not face severe punishment. It also may be that Onesimus was sent with Tychicus as a second witness like it says in Deuteronomy 19:15 which implies that any truth can be verified by multiple witnesses.

### ***Deuteronomy 19:15***

*<sup>15</sup> "A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established.*

So, we have two letters from Paul, to two groups, possibly in the same city, possibly in near-by cities, with different messages, carried by the same people, quite probably at the same time. The key for us today is that Colossians and Philemon were both written to gentile Christians, not Jewish Christians, so it's very likely we can actually understand better where the Colossians are in their relationship with God when Paul's letter gets to them.



***Numbers 6:24-26 (Closing)***

- 24**    *The LORD bless you and keep you;*  
**25**    *the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to*  
         *you;*  
**26**    *the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.*

Questions:

1. Have you ever had someone read an entire Epistle to you from the Bible in one sitting, or listened to one on CD or on tape? How is it different from reading it on your own?
2. How difficult is it to become a Christian after living the “Sex, Drugs, and Rock-n-roll” lifestyle?
3. What was it about Christianity that got your attention?