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WORDS FOR LIVING MINISTRIES
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and then been resurrected, you and I would have no savior and would be hopelessly lost in sin.

Beyond the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, Pilate and his wife disappear from the biblical record.

I wanted to know what happened to them, and I dug into the ancient documents; I was amazed at the information there. I have written the rest of their story; it is too long to publish here, but it is posted on our web site. The website address is www.wordsforlivingministries.weebly.com. From the home page, click on "More"; under "More," click on Teachings and Testimonies, and you'll find it on that page. And for those with no internet access, if you call or write to the office, we will mail it to you.

Thank You!

We want to say thank you to all of you who sent Christmas cards and letters. As always, they have been much appreciated!

Bible Study Guide Excerpt—Introduction to Colossians



Photo by Patrick Fore on UnSplash

Colossians is the 3rd of the four "prison epistles," written from Rome about 60 AD, at about the same time as the other three prison epistles--Ephesians, Philippians and Philemon.

Dear ones,

I am currently spending a great deal of time in Kentucky, where my very dear friend Ed Clement has been in a desperate struggle with cancer. Ed passed into the heavenly kingdom February 2, just as I was working on this newsletter. Some of you knew Ed and what a wonderful brother in the Lord he was. Please pray for his wife Nancy and the children, who have been caring for him around the clock. If you would like to send them a word of comfort, their address is this: The Clement family, 19168 Marion Rd., Fredonia, KY 42411.

We do need each other!

* * * * *

What Ever Became of Pontius Pilate and his Wife?

It is strange that we know so little about Pontius Pilate, one of the most significant people in all of human history. Had not Pilate reluctantly ordered the crucifixion of Jesus, and had Jesus not died on the cross

Colossians is sometimes referred to as the twin of Ephesians. Both Colossians and Ephesians are carefully wrought statements of the great doctrines of the gospel, rich in foundational Christian truth; and the two are noticeably similar in many of their passages.

Colossae the City. Colossae (or Colosse), like Ephesus, a city of southwest Phrygia, was about 100 miles east of the seaport of Ephesus, and about 12 miles southeast of Laodicea¹. Today this area is in western Turkey.

Colossae was a mercantile city on the Lycus River, and was situated on the great overland trade route between the seaport of Ephesus and the Euphrates Valley.

Epaphras and Philemon lived there.

Although Paul had spent three years in Ephesus, it appears probable that he had never been to Colossae at the time of his writing this epistle². The area including Colossae and Laodicea was probably evangelized by Epaphras (and, perhaps, by Timothy), while Paul was at Ephesus.

The Great Earthquake. According to the Roman historian Tacitus (ca 55-117 AD), Eusebius (ca 260-340 AD) and other ancient historians, Colossae was destroyed by a massive earthquake in the 9th year of Nero's reign, about 60 AD; this would mean that it occurred soon after this letter was written³. The same earthquake destroyed Laodicea, only 12 miles away. Both cities were rebuilt; but subsequent earthquakes and, finally, the conquering Muslims, destroyed both cities so completely that they were abandoned. Their locations have been rediscovered only in recent times; Colossae today is only a large mound (a small, rounded hill), rising above the Lycus plain, with only scattered broken pottery, squared stones and remnants of arches to attest to its former importance.

Nearby today is the Turkish village of Chonas.

The dates of the final destruction and abandonment of Colossae and Laodicea are unknown. We do know, however, that the church at Laodicea still existed at the time of the writing of Revelation, about 35 years after the writing of this letter, for one of the seven letters in Revelation, to the churches of Asia Minor, is to Laodicea⁴. The fact that Colossae is not mentioned in Chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation may mean that it was part of a different bishopric (not the responsibility of

John, as were the other seven churches) or that by that time the church at Colossae no longer existed; or, it may simply mean that the divine Author of Revelation chose not to include it.

Our knowing that this letter was written when a disastrous earthquake was soon to occur, undoubtedly killing many of the Christians at Colossae, gives its instructions an aspect of urgency. We should live so as always to be ready to meet our Maker.

A. Author. The human author is Paul; and, as in all of his epistles, with the exception of Hebrews, he tells us this in the first verse⁵. His authorship and its authenticity have been accepted since the 1st Century, and Colossians was frequently quoted by the Church Fathers.

Here he includes Timothy in the salutation, as he does in three other letters to churches (Philippians, I and II Thessalonians). This may have been done because Timothy played a role in establishing those churches; or, his reason may simply have been to enhance Timothy's authority for future ministry in those places. Paul also included Timothy in the salutation of his personal letter to Philemon, and the church which met at his house, perhaps for one or both of the same reasons.

B. Place and Date. Colossians was written from Rome, ca 60 AD.

C. Occasion. Epaphras had traveled to Rome from Colossae, apparently bringing word of dangerous heresies that were finding acceptance in the church there. Philemon 23 suggests that Epaphras, upon reaching Rome, was himself made a prisoner with Paul.

There was in the region of Phrygia a popular, humanistic Greek philosophy in the form of self-glorifying Gnosticism (essentially, salvation by acquiring "higher" knowledge); its confused beliefs even reduced Christ to the position of a lesser god. There were also the Judaizers, those Jewish Christians who believed that to be a Christian one must first be an observant Jew, i.e., to obey the Old Covenant Law. Some false teachers were even claiming to have received visions requiring extreme self-denial, and the worship of angels (especially the archangel Michael) who, they believed, protected them. Doctrinal things at Colossae were definitely getting out of hand; and Epaphras had traveled to Rome for help from Paul.

¹ There were people from Phrygia in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, listening to Peter's inspired preaching (Acts 2:10).

² Paul's reference in 2:1, to those who have never seen him, could be a reference to new Christians who have become part of the churches since he was there in person--not necessarily proof that he has never been there. Yet 1:4, 1:7, and the overall tone of the epistle, suggest that Paul had never been there.

³ Tacitus, *Annals*, Book 14, 27; Eusebius, *Chronicles*, 210.4; Adam Clarke: *Commentary on the Bible*, Colossians, Introduction.

⁴ Revelation 3:14-19.

⁵ Concerning the reasons to ascribe the authorship of Hebrews to Paul, and for the likely reason for his not identifying himself in the letter, see "Introduction to the Epistles" at the beginning of the study guide to Romans, and "Authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews" in Part IV (Selected Topical Summaries)..

Food for Thought—Philip the Evangelist

I have always liked the story of Philip the Evangelist, and there are a number of things to ponder in it.

The story begins when the early Christians in Jerusalem begin to be severely persecuted. In response, many Christians leave Jerusalem and scatter, sharing the good news of Christ in the places they pass through and the places they settle. This is a good reminder that God can use hard times for good.

Jesus had indicated many times to the disciples that the good news was for the Samaritans, but this is the first time, it appears, after the resurrection that the gospel has been taken there. Philip is entering new territory both geographically and spiritually. It is a good reminder that God sometimes pushes us into new territory (territory we might not have entered without that push).

The people of Samaria listen gladly to Philip; they have seen miracles of healing and deliverance through Philip, and they have recognized the reality they see. God doesn't always use miracles as the means of getting people's attention (sometimes He might use the evidence of a person's changed life or a markedly different attitude from the world's attitude). But it is an encounter with some form of God's reality which will cause people to listen and open their hearts. These Samaritans listened, opened their hearts, became believers, and there is "great joy" in Samaria (Acts 8:8).

When the disciples in Jerusalem hear what is going on in Samaria, Peter and John come, and even more ministry ensues. One significant thing I notice here is that Philip is just fine with that. There is nothing to indicate that he was jealous of them nor that he felt territorially about the revival. This is important. Resentfulness is poison and kills. But in absence of jealousy and resentment, life flourishes.

Next, we come to Simon the sorcerer. He had been a spiritual bigshot in Samaria, but when Philip comes, Simon too becomes a believer. When he sees Peter and John's ministry, he wants to buy from Peter an ability to endow the power of the Holy Ghost. Peter bluntly tells him that the gift of the Holy Spirit can't be bought and that Simon's heart is not right. He tells him to repent and ask God's forgiveness. Simon's response is interesting.

“Between Scylla and Charybdis.” As the early Church was finding its form, there were factions, each contending for its particular vision for the Church, and there were two doctrinal extremes. On the one hand there was the influence of Greek philosophy, with its ever-changing, free experimentation with new ideas, adopting what seemed appealing to the mind. On the other hand, there was hard-nosed, rigid, legalism, insisting that a Christian must obey a strict set of rules. As is often true, the truth is to be found somewhere between extremes, and the church at Colossae needed to find this balance.

In Greek mythology (Homer's "Odyssey"), Odysseus, the hero, had to make his way through the Strait of Messina, the narrow sea lane between Sicily and mainland Italy. On one side of the strait was a sea monster, Scylla, and on the other side there was another sea monster, Charybdis. Both monsters were waiting to destroy Odysseus, and he had to find a way to pass between them. To apply this metaphor to the Colossian Christians, those familiar with Greek mythology would say that the Colossians were "between Scylla and Charybdis." This situation has its modern form in our expression, "between a rock and a hard place," and, more appropriately, "between the devil and the deep blue sea." Dr. C.I. Scofield expressed the Church's situation this way: "Pure Christianity lives between two dangers, ever present: the danger that it will evaporate into a philosophy...and the danger that it will freeze into a form."

The church at Colossae was in this situation theologically, and the book of Colossians might be thought of as a chart for safely finding the way through this dangerous situation to the simple, unchanging truth of the gospel of Christ.

D. Theme. The theme of Colossians is the deity and preeminence of Jesus the Messiah and the **all-sufficiency** of his redemptive work. To express mathematically the requirements for salvation, we might say: Jesus + 0 = everything; and Jesus + anything else = 0; it seems to be this simple⁶. Adding self-redeeming requirements for salvation, things that we must do to earn it, is to denigrate the atoning sacrifice of Jesus, saying that what He did for us was good, but not enough⁷. We cannot work our way into a redemptive relationship with Christ, seated with Him in heavenly places; it is a gracious gift. However, once we have received this gracious gift of redemption, we must grow into maturity as Christians, serving, ever learning, and renewing our minds. He does all the redeeming; but we must do all the growing and the renewing of our minds. And we do this with applied self-discipline and the help of the Holy Spirit, daily reading the Scriptures, praying, Christian fellowship, and functioning in the Church.

⁶ This proposition is expressed clearly and succinctly in Gal 4:31-5:6.

⁷ See in this regard the study guide to John 19:28-30, and Gal 5:2-4.

He seems afraid to pray to God directly; he instead asks Peter to pray for him. Simon couldn't quite see God as a person he could have a relationship with. And, Simon seemed to see the Holy Spirit as a commodity rather than a person.

What happened with Simon? Did Peter say "OK, I'll pray for you"? Did Simon try to pray and repent? Did Simon's wrong approach to God mean that he hadn't really believed on the Lord ever? The Bible doesn't make that totally clear. Several early church writers indicate that a Simon Magus became an enemy of the church and an influential gnostic or syncretic leader. Whatever was going on with Simon, however, it was not a good thing, and Peter perceives and tells Simon (and us) that the root cause of Simon's wrong heart is... bitterness (and the bondage of sin). I would've expected Peter to name involvement in the occult or something like that as the core of Simon's messed up ideas and desires. But apparently bitterness had been what started him on a wrong path, perhaps the thing that even led him into sorcery in the first place. We tend to underestimate the destructive power of bitterness.

Next the Lord tells Philip to head for the road that goes from Jerusalem to Gaza. It must've seemed a little strange. God had sent Philip to a place full of people who were ready to hear the gospel (Samaria). His new orders send him to a place in the wilderness where the chances of finding anyone to speak to were slim. He obeys, and finds that there is someone there out in the middle of nowhere—the Ethiopian Eunuch struggling to understand a scripture passage (Isaiah 53). Wow! What were the odds of that? And God tells Philip to do another odd thing—to approach the Ethiopian (he was a VIP in the Ethiopian court, and I know I'd feel a bit embarrassed and awkward jogging over to his moving chariot and striking up a conversation), but Philip didn't let the awkwardness stop him.

Philip knows well the passage the Ethiopian is struggling with, and explains to him whom the passage is about—which is what the Ethiopian is puzzling over. Philip explains that it is about Jesus and his self-sacrificial suffering. This is a reminder that we need to do our best to understand the scriptures and our faith and be ready to answer questions.



Rembrandt's painting of Philip and the Ethiopian
By Rembrandt - postcard, Public Domain,
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=7417249>

Right after the Ethiopian is baptized, Philip is suddenly snatched away by God and zapped to Azotus (long ago the city of Ashdod of the Philistines—a place, like Samaria, which used to be a very bad place spiritually). Now, this zapping a person from one place to another never happened to any other disciples or apostles—only to Philip. Again, what did Philip NOT do? He did not teach the people at Azotus to venerate teleportation. No, Philip's eyes remained on the Lord. He shares the good news to the people of Azotus and other towns in that region and finally settles in Ceasarea (which is where we see him again in Acts 21, clearly still walking strong with the Lord).

Finally, when the Ethiopian gets on the road again, headed for Ethiopia, verse 39 tells us he went on his way "rejoicing." Joy was in Samaria; Joy is with the Ethiopian. Joy is a hallmark of the Lord's presence.

--Sally

A FINAL WORD

Treasure and use each day as if it were your last, and never give up hope: God has a limitless supply of new beginnings, and He makes beautiful things out of broken pieces.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Sally'.