

## ~ The Study of the Life of Paul~

**Colossians Overview: Prison Epistle #3**

We are continuing our study of the life of Paul and his epistles, and we have now come to the point in our study that Paul writes his third prison epistle from Rome to the church in Colosse. We know this as the book of Colossians. By now it is probably the spring of 62ad, sailing is permitted again on the Mediterranean and we are starting to see more of Paul's brethren travel to Rome to meet him in prison. In fact, Paul specifically mentions 9 people who have joined him in Rome thus far. We see them mentioned in Paul's salutation in the last chapter, Col 4:7-14. Five of these men have just recently arrived in which two of them play a significant role in this epistle, that is Timothy and Epaphras.

Timothy has now joined Paul having been released from prison in Caesarea and has traveled to Rome, Heb 13:23. And is mentioned as one who is writing this epistle with Paul, **Colossians 1:1**; as he also does in the remaining two prison epistles, Philemon 1:1 and Philippians 1:1. Timothy has been a faithful companion with Paul ever since he joined Paul and Silas on his 2<sup>nd</sup> journey in 51ad in Lystra and for the last 12 years he has been by Paul's side. Now Timothy has the privilege to write three more epistles with the Apostle Paul. And later, after Paul is released from Rome, Paul will write two more epistles directly addressed to his son in the faith Timothy as he ordains him as Bishop of Ephesus.

The second man who plays a significant role in this epistle is Epaphras. Not much is known about this man, but he seems to be the founder of the church in Colosse, **Colossians 1:3-8**. Epaphras could possibly have been a student of Paul in the school of Tyrannus, and then brought the Word of Truth back to his town of Colosse and started the church. After Paul taught in the school of Tyrannus for two years, he spent nine months traveling around to all the Asian church seeing the fruit of his students, Acts 19:22. But Paul didn't personally start this church, in fact many of the members in the Colosse had never met Paul face to face, **Col 2:1**. There were three churches within a 13 mile radius in what is known as the Lycus Valley in Asia: Colosse, Laodicea, and Hierapolis. Epaphras was probably the founder of these three house churches.

The church in Colosse had been very fruitful since they heard the Word of Truth, but as Skip Heitzig says, "*Where there is fruit, there can also be bugs.*" And now it seems that a group of people have come to this church, and they are "bugging" them; wolves in sheep's clothing spreading heretical doctrine that is beginning to creep into the churches. That's what these heretics do, they don't go out and win their own converts, but rather they infiltrate into the existing churches that are bearing fruit to try and sway them away. This is the tactic of the enemy. There is never anything original with him, but instead he is always twisting and deceiving the Truth. And that is what is happening in the churches in this Lycus Valley.

As a result of this heretical teaching, Epaphras seems to have traveled back to Rome seeking Paul's advice on how to handle these heresies creeping into the church. One important note to mention about Epaphras is he seems to be in prison in Rome with Paul. In his letter to Philemon Paul says, "*Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you,*" Epaphras is a prisoner with Paul in Rome, just as Aristarchus was. We don't know if he was arrested in Rome or if he was arrested in Colosse and then brought to Rome, but it is clear, Epaphras was suffering in chains for the sake of the Gospel. This is four people that we know of so far who have suffered in prison for the sake of the Gospel, Paul, Timothy, Aristarchus, and now Epaphras. And it will only get worse as Christianity spreads over the next few centuries.

This small epistle is a letter to the Colossian church on how to battle heresy within the church. And the answer is simple; keep your focus on Jesus Christ as preeminent in every part of your life. The main thrust of this letter is that Jesus is preeminent; He is superior and holds first place to EVERYTHING!

The specific root of heresy that was creeping into this church was an early form of Gnosticism. These Gnostics, specifically in the beginning stages, developed as a result of mixing Jewish thought with Greek mythology. Philo of Alexandria, (20bc- 40 ad), a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher was one who first started introducing these heresies. Then as the message of Christianity began to spread, men started melding the

teachings of Philo with Greek philosophy and intertwining them with Christian ideas. And from this mixture of Judeo-Christian-Greek mythology, Gnosticism was born. The heresy of Gnosticism focuses on the pride of man, teaching that one can attain to salvation by obtaining a higher secret knowledge, *gnosis*, γνῶσις, of the gods. Gnostics taught this through deception and trickery claiming they were Christians and using Scripture to support their false agenda.

There was a major attack from the enemy directed toward these Asian churches. Paul warned the Ephesian elders on the docks of Miletus about this, Acts 20:29-31. The Gnostics said they followed Christ, they even said they believed the teachings of Paul, but they would twist the Truth to fit their false agenda. They would use Christian vocabulary and twist it to mean something different. Words such as... Truth (ἀλήθεια), Wisdom, (σοφία), Life (ζωή), Logos (λόγος), Light (φῶς), Ecclesia (ἐκκλησία), Christ (Χριστός), Faith (πίστις), Grace (χάρις)... these are all characteristics of who Jesus is. In this letter to the Colossians, Paul specifically uses these Christian terms that the Gnostics were corrupting and shines the Truth of Jesus Christ on them to refute the Gnostic heresies.

The basic Gnostic belief was they had divine beings in the heavens called Aeons with these names of the attributes of Jesus. These so-called gods would inhabit the invisible universe, called the Pleroma. <sup>Irenaeus Against Heresies</sup>. They also believed in an evil god named Demiurge who created everything material with the help of his Archons, ἀρχᾶς, translated in our English Bible as Principalities. Their false heresy taught that these evil beings created the material world and therefore, as a result, they believed anything material was evil because it was created by this evil god. And the goal of mankind was to be rescued out from this evil material world and brought back into oneness with the Aeons of the pleroma. And they believed Jesus was the Savior sent by the Aeons to bring the revelation of the light of the gods and rescue mankind back into oneness with them.

The Gnostics said they believed in Jesus as Savior, but only that Jesus was a being who was endowed with the powers of these 30 Aeons so that He could bring the spark of knowledge to the world. And anyone who would attain to this knowledge, γνῶσις, could be redeemed from this evil creation and brought back into Fellowship with the gods. They denied Jesus as God, they deny Jesus came in the flesh as the Son of God (They taught that Jesus was only a phantom or an apparition that looked real but didn't literally have human flesh because how could the savior put on evil flesh.). They denied Jesus died as the Lamb of God taking on the punishment for sin. They don't believe in the redeeming blood of Jesus, or in His resurrection as the resurrected God-Man seated at the right hand of the Father. They don't believe in the True Jesus.

The question is... which Jesus do you believe in? Jesus the Lamb of God or Jesus the spark of Knowledge? In this letter to the Colossians, Paul tells us the Truth of Jesus... that He is the preeminent One. The Man who died for our sins and rose from the dead and rescued all those who believe in Him out from darkness and into His Kingdom.

### Premise of the Letter:

## JESUS IS SUPERIOR AND PREEMINENT ABOVE ALL

### Chapter 1~ The Preeminence of Jesus Christ

Let's start reading chapter 1 and see how Paul describes Jesus and begins refuting these Gnostic heresies, **Colossians 1:9-18**. That is our Savior Jesus, the One who created all things and holds them together, but also the One who became a Man and died for us and rose again so that all who believe in Him can have Eternal Life.

Throughout this small epistle, Paul will use specific terminology in the correct way to refute these Gnostic teachings, such as Wisdom, Knowledge, Spiritual Understanding, Principalities, Pleroma. Explaining that Jesus is not some created being that was endowed with the Aeons, but that He is preeminent over everything that was created because He created everything and in Him the pleroma and everything in it is held together, **Colossians 1:19-23**.

Notice that last warning... if you continue in the faith. The dangers of Gnosticism is that to the unlearned person, this may seem like Christianity because they are using the same vocabulary and even some of the same ideas of being brought back into oneness with the Father, but that is the deception of this cult. It has just enough truth to entice people away from The Truth, who is Jesus Christ. This wasn't a heresy that died out in the first few centuries. No we are still dealing with these same lies, they just have different names, such as Mormonism... Jehovah's Witness... Christian Science... Progressive Christianity... Postmodern Christianity... Ecumenism... even Christian Gnosticism <sup>sophian.org</sup> These false religions preach a false Jesus. All these are pseudo-Christians, false Christians trying to deceive by confessing a false Christ; distorting Truth; trying to get us to doubt God's Word by saying, "Has God really said?" Gen 3:1. The Gnostics created this doubt within the first few centuries when they rewrote the New Testament to fit their own agenda.

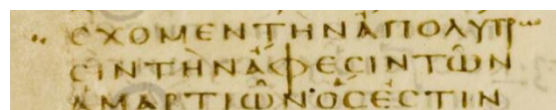
## Chapter 2- Warnings of False Teachers

Paul continues in chapter 2 warning of these false teachers and teaches the Truth of who Jesus is, **Colossians 2:1-10**. Notice the exaltation Paul is using over these Principalities and Powers and these Aeons who the Gnostic's say are greater than Jesus because they gave Him their power. Notice these next few verses. Paul annihilates this thinking by Jesus' work on the cross, **Colossians 2:11-15**. Jesus triumphed over every demon and fallen angel and exposed their lies when He was resurrected from the dead!

Notice in verse 12 how Paul includes us as being raised from the dead along with Jesus. The Gnostics taught that if a person attained enough secret knowledge of the gods, then someday they might be brought back into the Divine Light of the Pleroma. But Paul says we are raised up with Jesus Christ because He died for our sins, wiped out the handwriting of ordinances that was held against us, this is the judgement of the Law for our sins, and He wiped it clean having nailed it to the cross. And then resurrected us with Him to be reconciled with the Father because of His death and resurrection on the cross. And through this made an open show of these principalities and powers, fallen angels and demons, by exposing them in His glory. Therefore, because of Jesus' victory on the cross, Paul tells us not to be deceived by traditions of men, **Colossians 2:16-23**.

In chapter 2, Paul continually warns of false teachers infiltrating the church, **2:4, 8, 18**. And our defense to this is to stand on the Word of Truth, **1:23; 2:6, 19**. The enemy knows it is the Word of Truth that guards us from error, so even since the beginning he has always tried to get us to doubt God's Word, "Hath God really said?" So as the New Testament began to be written, Satan went to the source of Truth, God's Word, and started trying to destroy the written Word of God by corrupting Paul's teachings and rewriting certain parts of the Bible to align with their baseless fictions. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lyons (120-202ad) was so appalled by these Gnostic heresies in the church that he wrote a 5 volume book titled, "*Against Heresies*," in which he exposes their lies and their deceitful tactics within the church <sup>Against Heresies Book 1: Preface: 1; 8:1</sup>. Paul even warned Timothy of these Gnostic heresies in 1 Tim 6:20.

In the book of Colossians, we see one of those instances of which the effects of these Gnostic corruptions have even crept into our modern Bibles today, except for the KJV and the NKJV, because all these other modern translations use the Alexandrian Codices as their underlying Greek text, specifically the Codices Vaticanus, Alexandrinus, and Sinaiticus. But the problem is these Alexandrian manuscripts were corrupted by the Gnostics who had their headquarter in Alexandria Egypt. And they were trying to rewrite the Bible to fit their own false agenda, and we even see an example of this heresy back in Colossians 1:14 where they deleted the phrase, *through His blood*. The Gnostics denied that Jesus came in the flesh, and they rejected the Truth of Jesus Christ, so they rewrote parts of the Bible to exclude these precious Truths.



4<sup>th</sup> c. Codex Vaticanus: Colossians 1:14  
Scribal indicator dots "umlauts" proving these verses were deleted from original

## Chapter 3-4:6 How we must live as Christians

Since Jesus is preeminent we set our minds on Him and nothing else, **Colossians 3:1-4**. Putting off the old man and putting on the new, 3:8-15. But we can't do this ourselves. We can't just stop sinning on our own. We have to look to Jesus and let His Word sanctify our soul, Colossians 3:16- *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom...*

Paul continues by telling us how we must treat others in the body of Christ as we place Jesus as first place in our lives and walk in love, 3:16-4:6. Look at verse 23-24 specifically. This has become my life verse for ministry. I have this verse taped to my computer monitor so I am reminded of this everyday... Colossians 3:23-24-<sup>23</sup> *And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men,* <sup>24</sup> *knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ.*

## Chapter 4:7-18- Ending Salutation

In this last section, Paul takes the time to mention those working with him for the Gospel. And as we study the life of Paul we can gain great insight into Paul's heart and the network of the Gospel during that time.

**Tychicus**- Paul's delivery guy who delivers three of his epistles to the Asian churches, Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon, v. 7-8

**Onesimus**- the runaway slave of Philemon is traveling back to Asia with Tychicus, v. 9

**Aristarchus**- traveled with Paul from Caesarea as a prisoner, Acts 27:2.

**Mark**- originally deserted Paul and Barnabas on their 1<sup>st</sup> journey has now reconciled with Paul in Rome. Paul makes mention in his last letter that Mark is useful to him for ministry, 2 Tim 4:11. An amazing transformation of growth and maturity.

**Justus**- these last three: Aristarchus, Mark, and Justus are Paul's only fellow-workers for the kingdom who are Jews.

**Epaphras**- mentioned earlier, probably the founder of the churches in the Lycus Valley: Colosse, Laodicea, and Hierapolis. (Paul may have also written a letter to the Laodicean church that is no longer extant, v. 16)

**Luke**- the beloved physician and deep friend to Paul

**Demas**- listed last in this list and with no other accommodations. Demas will eventually forsake Paul having loved this present world, 2 Tim 4:10.

Paul greets the Colossian house churches and give encouragement to **Archippus**, v. 15-17; Philemon 2

Paul ends as he does all his letters saying,

This salutation by my own hand—Paul. Remember my chains.

*Grace be with you. Amen.*