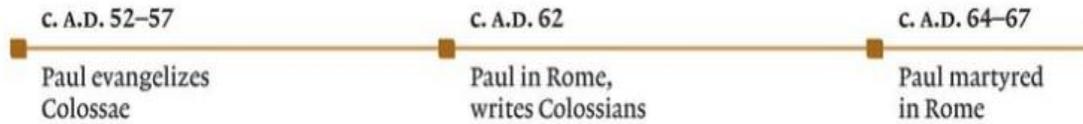


Introduction to Colossians



Author, Date, and Recipients

The apostle Paul wrote this letter to Christians while living in the city of Colossae—probably around A.D. 62, while in prison in Rome (Acts 27–28). This was about the same time he wrote Ephesians and Philemon. All three letters were sent with Tychicus and Onesimus.

Theme

Christ is Lord and preeminent over all things visible and invisible. His primary work is the redemption of his people which enables them to participate in his death, resurrection, and fullness.

Purpose, Occasion, and Background

A dangerous teaching had invaded and was threatening the church at Colossae. This teaching lessened Christ's role and undermined the new identity that believers had "in Christ" (1:2, 28). Paul writes to warn the church against this false teaching and to encourage all believers in their growth toward Christian maturity. He emphasizes Christ's authority over all evil powers. We are united with the risen Christ, and therefore we share in Christ's power and authority. Paul also encourages us to fight against sin, pursue holiness, and live distinctively Christian lives.

Key Themes

- Jesus Christ is preeminent over all creation, Lord over all human rulers and cosmic powers (1:15–20; 2:9–10; 3:1).
- God has acted through Christ to secure redemption and reconciliation for all who put their faith in him (1:13–14, 20–22).
- Believers are in Christ, and so they share in Christ's death, resurrection, new life, and his fullness (2:9–14; 3:1–4).
- Christ has defeated the powers of darkness on the cross. Christians share in his power and authority over that realm (2:10, 15; see also 2:8, 20).
- Jesus is the fulfillment of Jewish expectation. Christians share in the heritage of the old covenant people of God through their union with him (1:12, 21–22, 27).

- Believers are called to grow in spiritual maturity by getting rid of sinful practices and developing Christian virtues (1:10–12, 28; 3:1–4:6).

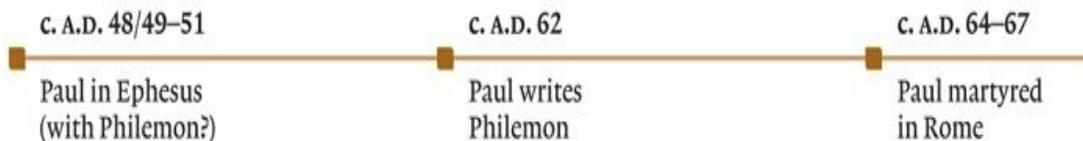
Outline

1. Greeting and Thanksgiving (1:1–8)
2. Prayer and Praise (1:9–20)
3. Reconciliation to God (1:21–23)
4. Paul’s Labor for the Gospel (1:24–2:3)
5. The Heresy at Colossae (2:4–23)
6. Christ and the Life Above (3:1–4)
7. Instructions the Christian Life (3:5–4:6)
8. Personal Greetings, Directives and Closing (4:7–18)

The Setting of Colossians (c. A.D. 62)

Paul wrote his letter to the Colossians while in prison, probably in Rome. The church at Colossae was likely established during Paul’s third missionary journey as he ministered for three years in Ephesus. It appears that Paul did not personally plant the church there, but instead a Colossian named Epaphras traveled to Ephesus, responded to Paul’s gospel message, and then returned to share the good news in Colossae.

Introduction to Philemon



Author, Date, and Recipients

This is a personal letter from the apostle Paul to Philemon, a wealthy Christian from Colossae. It was also intended to be read to the entire church that met in Philemon’s home. It was probably written around A.D. 62, while Paul was in prison following his voyage to Rome (Acts 27–28).

Theme

The theme of Paul’s letter is the power of the gospel to transform individual lives (v. 11) and human relationships (v. 16). Onesimus had experienced that transforming power in his life (“formerly he was useless” but “now he is indeed useful”; v. 11). So, Paul urges his friend Philemon to form a new relationship with Onesimus, his runaway slave.

Purpose

Apparently, during Paul's three-year ministry in Ephesus (A.D. 52–55), Philemon heard the gospel and was saved. He began serving Christ in the Colossian community. He opened his home for a group of Christians to meet there regularly.

At some point, Onesimus, one of Philemon's bondservants, fled to Rome. Before he left, he possibly had stolen money or property from Philemon. While in Rome, Onesimus came into contact with Paul and became a Christian. As he grew in Christ, he was a great help to Paul during Paul's imprisonment.

As much as Paul would like to have retained the services of Onesimus, Paul knew that Onesimus's wrongdoing against his master Philemon needed to be addressed. He wrote this letter urging Philemon to appreciate the transformation that had occurred in Onesimus. Paul asked Philemon to receive Onesimus back not merely as a bondservant but as a "beloved brother" (v. 16).

It is difficult to know if Paul sought Onesimus's full freedom. It is clear, however, that he was seeking a transformed relationship between bondservant and master. This new relationship would defy all of the ingrained status distinctions of the surrounding Greek and Roman culture. It would have been difficult for the kind of servitude practiced by Rome to survive in the atmosphere of Christian love exemplified by the letter.

This simplified letter is in the form of letters that people ordinarily write, in contrast to the more stylized and literary five-part format of most NT epistles. The letter is a masterpiece of persuasion as Paul seeks a favorable reception for the returning bondservant, where normally one might expect the master to be vindictive.

Paul's strategy follows that prescribed by Greek and Roman rhetoricians of the day: begin by building rapport and goodwill with an audience (vv. 4–10), then lay out the facts in a way that will convince the mind or intellect (vv. 11–19), and finally appeal to the emotions of the audience (vv. 20–21).

Key Themes

- Reconciliation is the theme of this letter. Onesimus is reconciled to God. He is in the process of being reconciled to a fellow believer.
- The basis for Paul's appeal to Philemon is the supreme Christian virtue of love. Paul praises Philemon for the love he has shown not just to him but to all the believers in that area.

Outline

1. Greetings, Thanksgiving, and Prayer (vv. 1–7)
2. Paul's Appeal to Philemon for Onesimus (vv. 8–20)
3. Personal Remarks and Greetings (vv. 21–25)