



Info for group leaders on Paul's letter to the **colossians**

See the background information on the general info sheet, and note in particular the following:

- Author** The apostle *Paul*, who was in prison in Rome. Because of this, Colossians is known as one of Paul's '*prison epistles*', along with Ephesians, Philippians and Philemon.
- Date** Around AD 60.
- Recipients** The church in *Colossae*, a city in the Roman province of Asia (present-day Turkey). Paul had never met them personally as the church had been established by his colleague, *Epaphras*.
- Carrier** *Tychicus*, one of Paul's colleagues in ministry. He was also carrying a letter from Paul to the church at Ephesus, which he would pass through en route to Colossae. With Tychicus was *Onesimus*, the runaway slave from Colossae who had been saved in Rome under Paul's ministry. He was returning to his master, *Philemon*, with a personal letter from Paul explaining the situation.
- Reasons for writing** Epaphras had reported to Paul that, while the Colossian church was generally in good shape, it was been troubled by *false teaching*—usually referred to as 'the Colossian heresy'. This was chiefly to do with the *low status accorded to Christ* by the false teaching. Paul wrote to correct their perceptions in this vital matter.
- Structure** The letter falls naturally into *two distinct parts*. The first half (chapters 1-2) is the doctrinal section, where Paul addresses the heresy and urges the Colossian Christians to give Christ the central place in their thinking that he occupies in reality. The second half outlines the kind of practical Christian living that will flow from this adjustment.

The Colossian heresy

The false teaching seems to have been an early variety of *gnosticism*. This was a mixture of Christianity, Judaism and pagan philosophy that was to become a major threat to the Christian churches later on. In some respects it was a bit like New Age teaching today. It was misleading the Colossian believers in three ways:

1. It taught that, while faith in Christ is good, it is only a stepping-stone to a higher knowledge (Greek *gnosis*) and wisdom. Those truly serious about their religion would press in to achieve this higher revelation and, in so doing, graduate out of dependence on Christ. They would penetrate the 'mystery' of the higher life.

Paul, in response, exposes this as 'hollow and deceptive philosophy' (2:8) and shows that 'all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' are in fact to be found in Christ himself (2:3). Real understanding is tackling life from a Christ-centred perspective. Paul also redefines one of the heretics' favourite words: 'mystery' (1:27; 2:2). The true 'mystery', he says, is the open secret that, through Christ, and Christ alone, we can know God and face the future with confidence.
2. It taught that there are many spiritual powers by which people can come to God. Christ is one of these, they conceded, but only one among many.

Paul, in response, insists that, far from being some minor power among many others, Christ is the ultimate power. He is, in fact, the Creator and Lord of everything that exists (1:15-17), the one in whom is concentrated all the fulness of God (1:19; 2:9) and the one who by his death has conquered all the powers of evil (2:15).

- It taught that there was great value in living by a strict code of regulations regarding special days and abstinence from certain normal human activities like proper meals and sexual activity. Progress along the path to knowledge and wisdom depended on strict adherence to these rules.

Paul, in response, affirms that the Christian life is not a matter of the legalistic observation of such rules and regulations (2:16-23). Instead, it is a matter of having died to sin and of now living out our new life in Christ. In the power of that life we are enabled to steer clear of ungodly behaviour (3:5-11) and embrace a godly way of life (3:12-17).

As you work through this letter you will realise just how much of it is geared towards the refutation of the Colossian heresy. The fact that this particular heresy is not around today does not mean that the letter is irrelevant to us. In every generation the devil's main attack has been on the person of Christ in one way or another. Today, for instance, groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses and Christadelphians reduce his status and deny his deity. The Mormons claim that Jesus was the brother of the devil and the son of Adam! So the defence of Christ's deity that Paul wrote to combat the Colossian heresy holds good for us today in maintaining God's truth in the face of different threats.

Since Christianity is centred on the person of Christ, errors regarding him inevitably lead to errors in every other aspect of belief and practice. As the old poem puts it, in a reference to Matthew 22:42,

*'What do you think of Christ?'
Will test both your state and your scheme.
You cannot be right in the rest
Unless you think rightly of him.*

Breakdown of Paul's Letter to the Colossians

1.	1:1-14	Words of encouragement
2.	1:15-20	The centrality of Jesus Christ
3.	1:21-27	The gospel: worth suffering for
4.	1:28 - 2:7	Holding fast to Jesus
5.	2:8-15	The triumph of the cross
6.	2:16-23	Living free from legalism
7.	3:1-11	Killing off our old pre-Christian ways
8.	3:12-17	Embracing the new ways of Christ
9.	3:18 - 4:6	Getting our relationships right
10.	4:7-18	The personal touch

General guidelines

To your Diggers sessions in general

- While the *NIV* is the Bible version used as the basis for the study, encourage your group also to read the book in other versions they might own. This will give different insights.
- Some people might want to comment on 'what this passage is saying to *me*'—a *subjective* approach. While there can be value in this, it is far more important to concentrate on what a particular passage means *objectively*.
- Don't dominate* the discussion by talking too much yourself. By all means contribute, but your main role is to steer the discussion forward in a helpful and purposeful way.

- *Draw out the quieter members* of the group. If necessary mention them by name: ‘John, I wonder if you have any thoughts on this verse?’
- *Tactfully restrain the over-talkative members*: ‘You’ve had quite a bit to say up to now, Sally, so for a while let’s hear what some of the others have to contribute.’
- Occasionally someone might become *argumentative and contentious*. Point out that these sessions are not about winning arguments or scoring points, but about learning together what God’s Word has to teach us.
- *Don’t pretend to have all the answers* when you haven’t. If somebody raises a question that you can’t answer, say, ‘I don’t know the answer to that one, but I’ll try to find out for next time.’ Then refer to a Bible commentary, or pass on the question to one of the elders.

- Keep it *practical*. Ideas, theories and doctrines are all fine *as long as they affect the way we live*. Keep steering things back to *life-application*. Always finish on a practical note.

- End each session with *prayer*, asking the Lord to help you all put the session’s lessons into practice.

To Colossians in particular

- Keep reminding the people that this is a very up-to-date letter for 21st century Britain. We live in a pluralistic age, where people believe there are many equally valid routes to God and are open to mixing elements of several religions if it suits them—exactly the scenario behind Colossians.
- Keep highlighting the balance between *doctrine* and *practice* that this letter represents. Some people love to argue about doctrinal issues but don’t let it affect their everyday living. Others insist that it’s practical love and kindness that matters in the end, and that doctrine is unnecessary and a bit of a nuisance. The fact is: right practice stems from right doctrine. Both are of vital importance.

Notes on the text

Session 1 (1:1-14) — Words of encouragement

There was so much going on in Colossae that Paul could have criticised, but he chooses instead this highly positive opening to his letter. He will introduce his criticisms, tactfully expressed, later on. We can learn from him in this: criticism is always more palatable if the positives can be highlighted first.

1:5	Faith, hope and love	These three cardinal virtues are brought together here. See also 1 Cor 13:13; 1 Thes 1:3; 5:8.
1:5	<i>The word of truth</i>	Or ‘message of truth’—a good description of the gospel, and one that highlights its exclusivity.
1:6	<i>All over the world</i>	That is, the known world at that time: the Roman Empire.
1:9	<i>Knowledge...wisdom</i>	The first reference to two key concepts in the false teaching. Paul begins to give them a distinctly Christian interpretation.
1:13	<i>Rescued us from...brought us into...</i>	Our spiritual parallel with the experience of ancient Israel, whom God rescued from Egypt and brought into the Promised Land.

Session 2 (1:15-20) — The centrality of Jesus Christ

Many scholars believe that this passage was (or became) an early *hymn* setting out aspects of the doctrine of Christ. It would be learnt by heart and sung by those many Christians who were unable to read; hymn-books and OHP transparencies were of course unknown in those days anyway.

It sets out the supremacy of Jesus in a way calculated to address the views of the false teachers who placed him on the same level as other 'powers'. His supremacy is total: in creation, in relation to those other powers, and in the church.

1:15	<i>Image</i>	Adam, the head of the original creation, was made 'in God's image' (Gen 1:26-27). Jesus, the head of the new creation, is God's 'image' in an altogether superior sense.
1:15	<i>Firstborn over all creation</i>	'Firstborn' here is a synonym for 'ruler' or 'head'—the position and role of the eldest son in Hebrew families. It does not imply that Jesus himself was created, as the next verse makes clear.
1:16	<i>Thrones...etc.</i>	A reference to the spiritual powers that the false teachers were putting on an equal footing with Jesus. Paul is saying that Jesus is superior to them, that he in fact created them!
1:17	<i>Before all things</i>	In the sense either of prior existence (as in John 8:58) or of importance—or probably both.
1:18	<i>Beginning...firstborn</i>	The two parts of this phrase need to be taken together, so that together the sentence means, 'He is the first of all those who will rise from the dead.'
1:19	<i>Fulness</i>	Here meaning 'God's complete revelation'—in contradiction to those who believed that there were a whole host of angelic mediators between God and ourselves.
1:20	<i>Reconcile all things</i>	Not just believing human beings, but the whole created order will, at Christ's return, be released and brought into harmony with the Creator (see Romans 8:19-23).

Session 3 (1:21-27) — The gospel: worth suffering for

After scaling the heights of Christ's universal supremacy, Paul now zooms in on the Colossians' local situation—they were part of the 'all things' mentioned in v20 as being reconciled to God through Christ.

1:21	<i>Alienated</i>	That is, estranged—the opposite of 'reconciled' that appears in both the previous and next verses.
1:21	<i>Because of</i>	See NIV footnote. Which of the two comes first—hostile thinking or evil behaviour—is not clear from the original text. But either way, the two usually go together.
1:22	<i>Physical body</i>	Another hint at (and corrective to) the contents of the false teaching, which affirmed that Jesus did not truly become incarnate with a real physical body. It held that he was a spirit-being, his body being merely an illusion.
1:23	<i>If you continue...</i>	This does not imply that salvation depends on us, but that those who are genuinely the Lord's <i>will</i> continue in their faith. That, of course, does not mean our being passive, waiting to see what happens, but actively co-operating with the life of God within us.
1:24	<i>What is still lacking</i>	Paul is not saying that Christ's suffering and death were insufficient for our salvation. In context (see v23, 25), he is saying that as the gospel is taken to new areas its carriers inevitably face persecution, and, as one called to pioneer with the gospel, Paul endures such suffering in the interests of the church's growth. See 2 Cor 1:5-7.
1:26	<i>Mystery</i>	A favourite word among the false teachers. To them it meant the higher levels of spiritual enlightenment that only the most diligent could penetrate. But Paul gives it a different meaning: God's 'open secret', namely, that every simple believer can know the indwelling of Christ by the Spirit (v27).

Session 4 (1:28 – 2:7) — Holding fast to Jesus

In the final analysis, Christianity is all about *Jesus*. We need nothing beyond him—and certainly not the airy-fairy ideas that the false teachers were propounding. Paul’s great desire is to see God’s people come to maturity in Christ.

1:28	<i>Admonishing</i>	The word means ‘challenging’, in the sense of drawing their attention to defects in character or behaviour so that, becoming aware of them, they could address them.
1:28	<i>Perfect</i>	Not that we can become 100% sinless this side of Christ’s return. The word can also be translated ‘mature’ (RSV) or ‘complete’ (NASB).
2:1	<i>Laodicea</i>	The nearest city to Colossae, where there was also a church. Paul asked that his Colossian letter be read also in Laodicea (4:16). This was the ‘lukewarm’ church that Jesus challenged in Revelation 3:14-22.
2:2-3	Technical terms	Here Paul is deliberately using several words that were central to the false teaching: ‘mystery’, ‘wisdom’ and ‘knowledge’. He gives them their true meaning—in each case linked firmly to Christ. On ‘mystery’ see the note on 1:26 above.
2:4	<i>Fine-sounding arguments</i>	Those of the false teachers.
2:5	<i>Absent...present</i>	This is not to be interpreted in any spooky sense. It simply means that, since both Paul and the Colossians were ‘in Christ’, they were together in a spiritual sense, even though Paul was in prison many miles away.

Session 5 (2:8-15) — The triumph of the cross

Once again Paul extols the greatness of the Lord Jesus, and in particular the great triumph over the dark powers that Jesus achieved by his death on the cross.

2:8	<i>Philosophy</i>	Another reference to the false teaching, which Paul goes on to refute in the following verses by showing that Christ is sufficient; they need nothing in addition to him.
2:9	<i>Fulness</i>	Here is another word used by the false teachers (see the note on 1:19 above). Paul makes a marvellous statement in this verse: Christ is not some half-god or hybrid figure, but deity (‘godness’) in its completeness dwells in him. In other words, he is God incarnate. In its second occurrence in the verse, ‘fulness’ means something slightly different. We could translate it something like: ‘You have been fulfilled in him’. NASB has, ‘In him you have been made complete’, and RSV has, ‘You have come to fulness of life in him.’
2:10	<i>Head over every power and authority</i>	The false teachers held that Jesus was just one among many spiritual powers, and on a par with them, but Paul insists he is far superior to them and in fact rules over them.
2:11-12	Circumcision	Circumcision was the outward sign of the Old Covenant in which Jewish baby boys had a tiny portion of flesh cut off. In Christ, more radical surgery takes place: the entire old way of life is removed. And this is symbolised in the outward sign of the New Covenant, baptism.
2:13	<i>Dead...alive</i>	Terms describing our spiritual status before and after becoming Christians. ‘Dead’ implies that we could do nothing at all to save ourselves. If we were to be saved at all, God would have to do it—and he did!
2:14	<i>The written code</i>	This is figurative language and means something like a bill or an IOU. We were deeply in debt to God because of our sin; we had a large outstanding bill to pay. The ‘regulations’ listed on the bill were God’s commands that we had repeatedly broken. The good news is that, in

		Christ, God has torn up the bill and the IOU. They were nailed to the cross with Jesus, so to speak, and, by his atoning death, paid in full, leaving us in the clear and debt-free.
2:15	<i>Disarmed</i>	The devil and his hosts were like a 'heavy gang' of debt-collectors, using our sinful condition as an excuse to beat us up spiritually. But Christ has disarmed them and rendered them powerless.
2:15	<i>Spectacle</i>	In NT times, a Roman general returning from a successful military campaign would have a celebratory procession through the streets of Rome. The enemy leaders he had conquered were paraded naked and in chains at the tail of the procession, exposed to the jeers of the crowd. This is what Jesus has done with the powers of evil.

Session 6 (2:16-23) — Living free from legalism

One of the features of the Colossian heresy was legalism in matters like the observance of particular days and dietary regulations—many of which were features of the Jewish law. This, Paul insists, is not what Christianity is about at all.

2:17	<i>Shadow...reality</i>	The OT regulations were not an end in themselves but pointers to Christ. They are the shadow, he the reality. The light, so to speak, shines backwards through history, casting the shadow of Jesus back into OT times.
2:18	More features	Several other features of the heresy are hinted at here. Those who hold to them are fundamentally 'unspiritual'.
2:19	<i>The Head</i>	That is, Christ. He and his body (the church) are one, organically joined. Christianity is therefore a relational thing—a share in his life and power—not a matter of regulation-keeping.
2:21-23	Ascetic practices	The practices mentioned here merely give the appearance of discipline. In reality they have no power at all to deal with the inner sources of evil and self-indulgence.

Session 7 (3:1-11) — Killing off our old pre-Christian ways

We are citizens of heaven now, so it is right that our focus be on eternal, heavenly realities (and their earthly expression). It is therefore unthinkable that we should hold on to the ways of living that characterised our pre-Christian days. We ourselves are responsible for making the necessary adjustments.

3:3	<i>You died</i>	We died with Christ, that is, in our association with him by faith. This was demonstrated in our being 'buried' in the baptismal waters.
3:5, 8	Responsibility	Because the power of the risen Christ is available to us by the Holy Spirit, we are responsible to take action against ungodly patterns of behaviour. Notice the terms 'Put to death...' (v5) and 'You must rid yourselves of...' (v8)
3:9	<i>Taken off...put on</i>	The imagery is that of taking off one garment and putting on another. This, of course, is what one does at baptism—both literally and (as here) spiritually.
3:10	<i>Image</i>	Man was originally made in God's image (Genesis 1:26-27), but that image has been tarnished through sin. Now, through knowing God in Christ, it is in the process of being restored.
3:11	Differences	Here Paul lists some of the great social and racial divides of his time. A <i>Barbarian</i> was someone who didn't speak Greek and a <i>Scythian</i> meant something like 'a savage from the north'—both indicated someone who was socially unacceptable in polite society.

3:11	<i>Christ is all and in is in all</i>	That is, Christ breaks down all the above distinctions and is really all that matters.
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Session 8 (3:12-17) — Embracing the new ways of Christ

Here is a strong and warmly-expressed plea that, having rejected both the Colossian heresy and pre-Christian ways, they now adopt attitudes and a way of life in keeping with being in Christ.

3:12, 14	New clothes again	Paul continues with the clothing metaphor in 'clothe yourselves with' (v12) and 'put on' (v14).
3:14	<i>Love</i>	Love is portrayed as the outer garment, the one that holds the others in—and the one that people see most clearly.
3:15	<i>Rule</i>	Literally, the word means 'act as umpire'. Courses of action that, when considered, disturb our peace in Christ are to be avoided.
3:16	<i>Admonish</i>	The word means to challenge one another's behaviour and attitudes with a view to seeing an improvement.
3:16	<i>Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs</i>	These are not exact categories in Greek and should not be pressed to far into the mould of the English terms. They are simply different ways of describing singing of a Christian (spiritual) nature.

Session 9 (3:18 – 4:6) — Getting our relationships right

Paul zooms in on the relationships that always test our progress along the path of holiness: husbands and wives, children and parents, slaves and masters, and relationships with outsiders. This passage has much in common with Ephesians 5:22f.

3:18-4:1	<i>Lord</i>	Note how frequently this word appears in these verses. In Greek, the word 'masters' and 'Master' in 4:1 is the same word elsewhere translated 'Lord'. This shows that the emphasis here is on Jesus as the one in charge, with a governmental role over our lives.
3:22	<i>Slaves</i>	Paul was not a social revolutionary attacking slavery. He accepted that it was a normal part of life in his day and urged both slaves and their masters to adopt good attitudes towards each other. But there is no doubt that he would have been happy to see it abolished (1 Cor 7:21). He no doubt expected that, with the progress of the gospel, it would come to an end. One commentator notes: 'Actually there were few independent wage earners in those days, and the so-called freedman often led a type of parasitic life attached to the home of a rich landowner. A large percentage of the population of the Roman Empire was made up of slaves, and the danger of rebellion was always present. Paul wishes Christian slaves to be distinguished by their spirit of service.' ¹
4:3	<i>In chains</i>	A reference to the fact that Paul wrote from prison in Rome.
4:6	<i>Seasoned with salt</i>	Various ideas come together here. Salt adds flavour, so our talk must have some quality and not be bland. In Paul's day salt was a preservative (no fridges and freezers then), so our speech must be wholesome, countering the decaying effects of non-Christians' speech. 'Salty speech' was a common metaphor for 'witty talk', that is, our speech should occasionally bring a smile to the lips and a spark to the eye. And salt was a common metaphor for 'wisdom', so our speech should have some substance and depth to it.

¹ *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* in loc

Session 10 (4:7-18) — The personal touch

Paul concludes his letter by mentioning some individuals by name—some of them with him in Rome and others among the Colossian recipients. This shows that Paul did not just deal with ‘churches’ as collective units but that he enjoyed a close relationship with a large number of individual Christians (see also Romans chapter 16).

4:7	<i>Tychicus, Onesimus</i>	The carriers of Paul’s letter from Rome to Colossae (see introduction).
4:10	<i>Aristarchus</i>	A colleague of Paul’s and in prison with him. He is mentioned in Acts 19:29; 20:4 and 27:2, as well as in Philemon 24.
4:10	<i>Mark</i>	That is John Mark, the writer of Mark’s Gospel. He is mentioned in Acts 12:12, 25; 13:13; 15:37, 39; 2 Tim 4:11; Philemon 24 and 1 Pet 5:13. He had defected from Paul on the First Missionary Journey (Acts 13:13) but had later recovered his reputation and again become Paul’s fellow-worker.
4:11	<i>Jesus Justus</i>	Mentioned only here and nothing more is known about him. The name Jesus was quite common among Jewish men.
4:12	<i>Epaphras</i>	The man who had first preached the gospel in Colossae and established the church there (see 1:7).
4:13	<i>Laodicea and Hierapolis</i>	The names, not of people, but of two cities very close to Colossae (see map).
4:14	<i>Luke...Demas</i>	Luke, the Gentile doctor, was the author of the Gospel of that name, and of Acts. Demas was later to be tempted back into worldly ways and deserted Paul (see 2 Tim 4:10).
4:17	<i>Archippus</i>	The recipient of a personal exhortation here from Paul. It seems from Philemon 1-2 that he was a member of Philemon’s household. What his ‘work’ was, referred to by Paul, we do not know.
4:18	<i>My own hand</i>	Paul normally dictated his letters to an amanuensis (secretary). He would then identify them as his by adding a few words at the end in his own handwriting. See also Gal 6:11; 1 Cor 16:21.