



## Background information on Paul's letter to the Colossians

# Colossians

**The name Colossians describes the inhabitants of the city of *Colossae*, in present-day Turkey.**

The apostle Paul had never been there personally. While he was at Ephesus on his third missionary journey (see Acts 19) one of his colleagues, *Epaphras*, had travelled the 100 miles east to Colossae, preached the gospel and established the church there.

### Links with Ephesians and Philemon

At the time of writing, Paul was in prison in Rome. Epaphras had come to him with news of the Colossian church (1:7-8). It was strong and stable, but some wrong teaching had come in, with upsetting results, prompting Paul to write and address the problem.

He sent his letter with another colleague, *Tychicus*, who almost certainly took a letter to the Ephesians at the same time (the two letters have quite a lot in common).

Travelling with Tychicus was *Onesimus*, the runaway slave from Colossae who had become a Christian through Paul and was now going back home to his master *Philemon*. Philemon was a Christian in the Colossian church and Onesimus carried a letter to him from Paul.



### A Christ-centred letter

Because the false teaching in Colossae questioned the supremacy of Christ, Paul's main concern was to show the Colossians that Christ belongs at the very centre of things. This is his thrust in the first half of the letter (chapters 1 and 2).

In the second half (chapters 3 and 4) he outlines the kind of Christian behaviour that should stem from putting Christ first. So the first part is mainly doctrinal, the second part mainly practical—a good balance that we all do well to maintain. We will tackle this letter in ten sections, as follows.

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

### **What happened to the Colossian Christians?**

Paul was in prison in Rome around AD 60. The Roman historian Tacitus records that the area around Colossae was devastated by an earthquake at about that time. So did Tychicus and Onesimus arrive safely with Paul's letter? And what happened to the Colossian Christians?

Since there is no mention of the earthquake in the letter it seems likely that it had not happened at the time of writing or that, if it had, the news had not yet reached Rome. The fact that the Holy Spirit has seen fit to preserve this letter as part of holy Scripture suggests that it was in fact received in Colossae. But we have no idea whether the earthquake killed or injured any of the believers there.

### **How to make the most of this Diggers study**

- The Bible version being used as a basis for the series is the *New International Version* (NIV). Try to bring a copy to the sessions as it is much easier if everybody has the same version as a starting point. But by all means use other versions alongside it for reference. You may, for example, have the *Good News Bible* (GNB), the *New American Standard Bible* (NASB) or *The Message*.
- The letter to the Colossians is short (only four chapters), so try to *read the whole letter through* at least half a dozen times during the series. This will give you a balanced view of the book.
- *Before* you come to each session *read the passage to be studied*—several times if possible.
- *Jot down* your thoughts and observations as you go along so that you can come to the group with something to contribute.
- Read it with an eye to its *practical application* in everyday life. Sound doctrine (ch 1-2) is meant to lead to sound practice (ch 3-4).

