

# Participant Handouts for Colossians and Philemon

If you're working with a class or small group, feel free to duplicate the following handouts in this appendix at no additional charge. If you'd like to print 8-1/2" x 11" sheets, you can download the free Participant Guide handout sheets at: [www.jesuswalk.com/colossians/colossians-lesson-handouts.pdf](http://www.jesuswalk.com/colossians/colossians-lesson-handouts.pdf)

## Discussion Questions

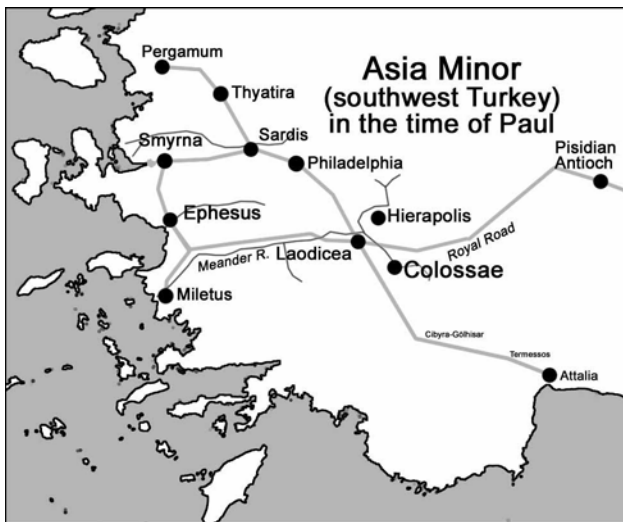
You'll find 4 to 5 questions for each lesson. Each question may include several sub-questions. These are designed to get group members engaged in discussion of the key points of the passage. If you're running short of time, feel free to skip questions or portions of questions.

## Lessons

### Introduction

1. A Prayer for the Colossian Believers (1:1-14)
2. The Supremacy of Christ (1:15-19)
3. Christ the Reconciler (1:20-23)
4. Paul's Labors for the Church (1:24-2:5)
5. Freedom from Legalism (2:6-23)
6. Guidelines for Holy Living (3:1-17)
7. Christian Households (3:18-4:1)
8. Final Instructions and Greetings (4:2-18)
9. Paul's Letter to Philemon

## Introduction to Paul's Letter to the Colossians



### City of Colossae

Colossae is an ancient city located about 100 miles east of Ephesus in present-day southwest Turkey. It was a smaller city, about 10-15 miles from its larger cousins in the Lycus River Valley – Laodicea and Hierapolis. It was near the Royal Road that ran from Ephesus east all the way to Persia.

### Peoples

The population was a mixture of native Phrygians plus a significant Jewish minority who were settled in the region centuries before.

### History of the Church

The church had been founded by Epaphras, who had probably heard the gospel when Paul had been teaching for nearly three years in Ephesus, 53-55 AD.

### Authorship and Date

The letter was written by the Apostle Paul while in prison, probably in Rome approximately 60-62 AD (Acts 20:31-32).

### Occasion of the Letter

The church is only a few years old and being threatened by an unsettling heresy. Epaphras makes his way to Rome, finds Paul in prison, and asks him to write an apostolic letter to the church that will strengthen them in their faith.

### Nature of the "Colossian Heresy"

Though the exact identity of the false teachers is debated by scholars, this seems to be an ascetic and mystical variety of Judaism, perhaps with a Christian twist.

Paul seems to characterize it (as you read between the lines in Colossians 2:8-25) as a philosophy that promoted, among other things: food restrictions and Jewish holy days, ascetic disciplines, angel worship, visionary experiences, and rule-keeping. In all this, tradition was central, rather than Christ. The believers were in danger of becoming in bondage to man-made traditions, rather than free in Christ.

The false teachers acted as if their religious practice was superior to the believers'.

### **Purpose of the Letter**

1. To encourage and ground this relatively new Christian community, and
2. To protect them from the seduction of false teachers, probably from a variety of mystical Judaism, that tended to denigrate these Gentile Christians' faith in Christ in favor of the claims of Judaism.

# 1. A Prayer for the Colossian Believers (Colossians 1:1-14)

## Discussion Questions

Q1. (Colossians 1:5-6) Paul glorifies the gospel, the good news. What words does he use to describe the action of the gospel in verses 5 and 6? Given the temptation the recipients have to adopt another religious philosophy, why do you think he reminds them of the world scope of the gospel's influence? What happens in our day when a church becomes embarrassed or unimpressed with the gospel message? How does this affect the church?

Q2. (Colossians 1:9-12a) What are the elements of Paul's prayer for the Colossian believers? What are the seven or eight specific results that he prays will be produced in their lives? Which of these are most important in a Christian disciple? Which, do you think, are least important? What happens when some are missing?

Q3. (Colossians 1:12-13) Why does Paul use the terms darkness and light to portray his readers past and future? Why does he remind them where they came from? What is "the inheritance of the saints in light" that he mentions? In verse 13 we find two terms used of governing bodies? How are they contrasted in verse 13? In what sense are subjects "governed" in each?

Q4. (Colossians 1:12-13) What are the three or four action verbs in verses 12 and 13 that paint a picture of salvation? Who performs the action? Who is it performed on? In what way were we "qualified/enabled/made meet"? In what way were we "rescued" or "delivered"?

Q5. (Colossians 1:13-14) What are the two qualities mentioned in verse 14 that characterize the "kingdom of his beloved Son"? What did the idea of redemption mean in the Greek? In what way did Christ "redeem" us? What is the significance of the fact that our sins are forgiven in this kingdom?

## Key Verses

"All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth."  
(Colossians 1:6, NIV)

"For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."  
(Colossians 1:13-14, NIV)

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## 2. The Supremacy of Christ (Colossians 1:15-1:23)

### Discussion Questions

Q1. (Colossians 1:15a, 19) The great understanding of Judaism was that God is spirit, not physical. That he is invisible. Any idol that tries to depict him is blasphemous. So what is the significance of the statement that Jesus is “the image of the invisible God”? According to verse 19, to what degree does this image accurately represent God? Is Jesus actually God in the flesh, or only a manifestation of God, a kind of holograph?\*

\*A holograph might be like Princess Leia in Star Wars sending a message through R2-D2: “Help me Obi-Wan Kenobi, you’re my only hope....”

Q2. (Colossians 1:15b-17) What does “firstborn of all creation/every creature” mean? Is Jesus a created being? If not, what does “firstborn” mean here? What do verses 16-17 teach about Jesus’ pre-existence? What does verse 16b teach about the purpose of creation? According to verse 17, what is Jesus’ past role in creation? What is his present role in creation?

Q3. (Colossians 1:16) “Thrones,” “powers,” “rulers,” “principalities,” “authorities,” etc. probably refer to both earthly as well as angelic and demonic dominions. What does this passage teach about the relation of these powers to Jesus? How should this affect our fear of them? How should it affect our prayers?

Q4. (Colossians 1:18) How should the assertion that Jesus is the “head of the body, the church” affect the way we conceive of the church? Is he talking about the universal church or a local congregation, or both? If we believe that Jesus is the head of the church, how should that affect the way we “do church”? In what ways does the visible church represent the “head”? How well do we do it?

### Key Verse

“For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” (Colossians 1:16-17, NIV)

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### 3. Christ the Reconciler (Colossians 1:20-23)

#### Discussion Questions

Q1. (Colossians 1:20-22). What does “reconcile” mean? What was our state before reconciliation? (verse 21)

Q2. (Colossians 1:20-22) By what means did Jesus accomplish this reconciliation? What does “the blood of his cross” have to do with it? What is the purpose of this reconciliation (verse 22)? To whom are we “presented” (verse 22)?

Q3. (Colossians 1:22) How can we be presented “holy,” “without blemish,” and “free from accusation” since we are not perfect? How is this possible?

Q4. (Colossians 1:23) If our salvation depends upon the grace of God, not us, why is it necessary for us to “continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved”? What happens if we don’t? What is the nature of the security we have in Jesus according to this text (and this text only\*)?

\*Please don’t use proof texts from other verses in the New Testament, but interpret Colossians 1:23 in its appropriate context.

#### Key Verse

“But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation-- if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel.” (Colossians 1:22-23a, NIV)

## 4. Paul's Labors for the Church (Colossians 1:24-2:5)

### Discussion Questions

Q1. (Colossians 1:24) How could Paul's sufferings in prison complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions? Is Paul referring to Christ's sufferings on the cross? Or is he seeing suffering in some kind of cosmic sense? If so, in what sense are your sufferings for Christ of value to the church?

Q2. (Colossians 1:26-27) What is the mystery that Paul talks about? In what sense was, "Christ in you, the hope of glory," hidden prior to this? In what sense is "glory" used here? What does "the hope of glory" mean in this context?

Q3. (Colossians 1:28-2:1) What is the purpose of Paul's labors according to verse 28? What does "perfect in Christ" mean? How does Paul accomplish this goal? In what way is he "struggling" for them?

Q4. (Colossians 2:2-3) In what sense are "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" hidden in Christ? What does that mean?

### Key Verses

"To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory." (Colossians 1:27, NIV)

"We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ." (Colossians 1:28, NIV)

"... Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." (Colossians 2:2b-3, NIV)

## 5. Freedom from Legalism (Colossians 2:6-23)

### Discussion Questions

Q1. (Colossians 2:8) Philosophy refers to a prevailing belief system. How can a belief system be empty and false? Have you ever personally experienced being captivated by a belief system only to find it deceptive and hollow?

Q2. (Colossians 2:9-10) What does verse 9 teach about Christ's full divinity? In what sense are we "complete" or "come to fullness" in Christ? What does this mean? Why do we sometimes fail to understand this fullness?

Q3. (Colossians 2:13-15) How did forgiveness free us from the Law? What is the significance of nailing the Law to the cross? What does this symbolize? How did the cross bring triumph over evil spiritual forces?

Q4. (Colossians 2:20-23) Why are legalism and asceticism unable to restrain the sinful nature? What alternative to legalism does Paul offer in Colossians 2?

### Key Verses

"God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross." (Colossians 2:13b-14, NIV)

"And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." (Colossians 2:15, NIV)

"These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ." (Colossians 2:17, NIV)



## 6. Guidelines for Holy Living (Colossians 3:1-17)

### Discussion Questions

Q1. (Colossians 3:1-2) What does it mean to “set your heart/mind” on the things above? Does this mean that we’re “too heavenly minded to be of any earthly good”? If not, what *does* it mean? What happens when we don’t take control and direct our thinking and meditating?

Q2. (Colossians 3:5) Why is sexual lust so difficult for people, especially males? Though we cannot deny that we are sexual beings, how can we keep sexual desire from controlling us and causing us to sin?

Q3. (Colossians 3:8) Why are sins of the tongue so easy to slip into? In what ways do they damage us and others? How can we break free of sins of the tongue?

Q4. (Colossians 3:12-14) Why are Christian virtues so important to Christ? Why are they so important to the church? Why are they so important to non-Christians? Why are they so important in our homes?

### Key Verses

“Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.” (Colossians 3:2-3, NIV)

“Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.” (Colossians 3:13, NIV)

“And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” (Colossians 3:17, NIV)

## 7. Christian Households (Colossians 3:18-4:1)

### Discussion Questions

Q1. (Colossians 3:18-19) Why do you think Paul chose these directions to give to wives and husbands – considering all the things he could have said? Why is true submission difficult for wives? Why is unselfish love difficult for husbands? What prompts harshness in a husband? Is the cause inner or outer?

Q2. (Colossians 3:20-21) In what way does obedience prepare a child for everyday life in the future? For spiritual life in the future? What can fathers do to keep from discouraging their children?

Q3. (Colossians 3:22-24) If you apply Paul's instructions to slaves to the role of being an employee, what is the role of sincerity as an employee? How do we live this out when working under a poor boss? In what sense are we actually "working for the Lord"? What would happen in the workplace, if we actually began to live by these attitudes of heart?

Q4. (Colossians 3:25-4:1) What instructions does Paul give masters – or employers, in our culture? What would happen in the workplace if employers sought to live by this rule?

### Key Verse

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. (Colossians 3:23-24, NIV)

## 8. Final Instructions and Greetings (Colossians 4:2-18)

### Discussion Questions

Q1. (Colossians 4:2) What guidelines does Paul give us to form our praying habits? If you put these into practice fully, how would they affect your prayer life? What problems would they help correct?

Q2. (Colossians 4:3-4) What prayer request does Paul ask of the Colossian believers? What does it mean to pray for an “open door.” Why does he ask for prayer in communicating the gospel? Isn’t he an “old hand” at this? Why does he need help?

Q3. (Colossians 4:5-6) What instructions does Paul give us in sharing our faith with non-believers? Why, do you think, we sometimes let opportunities slip by? How will our conversation being “full of grace” help us represent Christ well?

Q4. (Colossians 4:17) Why do you think Archippus was singled out in verse 17? If you could invent a story of his role in the Colossian church, how would you describe Archippus? In what ways does he remind you of yourself?

### Key Verses

“Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.” (Colossians 4:2, NIV)

“Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.” (Colossians 4:5-6, NIV)

“Tell Archippus: ‘See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord.’” (Colossians 4:17, NIV)

## 9. Paul's Letter to Philemon

### Discussion Questions

Q1. (Philemon 12) Why does Paul send Onesimus back to Philemon where he can lose his freedom again? Why is it necessary for Paul to do this? Why is it necessary for Onesimus to do this?

Q2. (Philemon 14) Why doesn't Paul come right out and command Philemon? Is this out of respect for his personhood or to build moral character in him -- or what?

Q3. (Philemon 18-19) Paul vouches for Onesimus and puts up his money (at least in theory) to cover Onesimus's debts to Philemon? Is this wise in all cases? Why does Paul do it here? How does Christ vouch for us? When should we vouch for our Christian brothers and sisters?