



**SESSION OBJECTIVE: COLOSSIANS 1:1-8**

To understand the background and purpose of the letter to the Colossians.

## No One Reads the Preface

If you surveyed any number of people, you would likely find that most people do not read the Preface of the books they read. There aren't any real statistics, but I've read enough blog posts and Reddit threads to know this is at least somewhat accurate. People typically struggle to read to begin with, and the Preface is usually boring and filled with spoilers. However, it's there for a reason, or the author wouldn't have included it. It usually provides some backdrop for the story to rest upon. If we aren't careful, we can be guilty of reading the Bible this way as well. Often the beginning portions of books of the Bible are filled with greetings, names we have trouble pronouncing, and it's tempting to skip ahead to the, "good stuff." However, don't forget: "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

We are beginning this morning with a kind of preface to the letter that the Apostle Paul wrote the church in Colossae. Paul begins most of his letters in a traditional, Greco-Roman format. He identifies the author, and then addresses his audience. He also gives some information regarding the church's formation and the quality of faith in the body there. Understanding the historical context and the author's intent greatly enhances our ability to understand what is at the heart of God's message in each book of the Bible we read. Don't skip the preface! It matters. It's profitable. We are made complete by it.

## The Colossian Heresy

One major aspect of the letter to the Colossians is something that has come to be known as, “the Colossian heresy.” Paul addresses several key elements to the faith that were apparently being challenged by false teachers in the church (Col. 2:8). As we will learn, the Colossian church was not a church planted by the Apostle Paul, but of someone trained by Paul. While the gospel was advancing in Colossae and all of the Lycus Valley (where Colossae was located, an area in Asia Minor), there was some concern regarding these false teachers. It is likely that Epaphras, the leader there in Colossae, needed some help in dealing with these false teachers and their feigned humility (Col. 2:23). Paul’s unfolding of the Divine Supremacy of Jesus and His active role in creation are likely a rebuke against the false teachers peddling a theology that denies the Deity of Christ.

## Authorship & Audience

Below is an overview of the authorship of this letter.

### ***PAUL, AN APOSTLE OF CHRIST JESUS***

The letter is written by the Apostle Paul, a claim in the letter itself and attested by the early church unanimously. Only until the 20th century Tubingen scholars has the authorship of Paul been an issue, and it is an issue not significant enough to even address. There is no reason beyond *wanting* to deny Paul’s authorship to think that Paul didn’t write it. Paul also includes the phrase, “by the will of God,” to emphasize the sovereign working of the Holy Spirit in the letter. This is not merely Paul’s opinion; it is God’s will.

His usage of the term, “Apostle” is also telling. Typically, Paul references himself in a more humble manner (“a servant of Christ Jesus,” etc.). However, the purpose of the letter demanded confrontation, and his Apostolic authority carried a lot of weight on theological issues.

### ***TIMOTHY, OUR BROTHER***

Apparently, Paul authored this letter in conjunction with Timothy, the pastor of the church planted by Paul in Ephesus (Ephesians), and the recipient of the two New Testament letters aptly named (1 and 2 Timothy). He does later clarify that Paul is the main author, but Timothy’s involvement should be noted. Perhaps he was included because he was the “heir apparent” of Paul’s ministry, or maybe he had some contact with the church in Colossae that the Scripture does not mention. Timothy came from the area of Lystra and Derbe, just to the east of the Lycus Valley. Because Timothy would carry on the ministry of Paul in that area, it is likely that Paul mentions him in order to introduce him as an authority.

### ***TO THE SAINTS AND FAITHFUL BROTHERS IN CHRIST AT COLOSSAE***

The audience is not surprising; the letter is directed to the believers in Colossae. The church, however, was not a church plant of the Apostle Paul himself. Paul raised up a leader named Epaphras during his Ephesian ministry, and Epaphras brought the Gospel to the Lycus Valley and planted the Colossian church (Col. 1:7; 4:12). He is described as, “a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf” (Col. 1:7), who has, “made known to us your love in the Spirit” (Col. 1:8). The church members there had likely never met the Apostle, but were certainly aware of who he was, and because Christ had transformed them into new creations (2 Cor. 5:17), they had a love for the Apostle and the other believers in Rome (likely where Paul was writing from) and for those in Ephesus (where Timothy pastored). It is also likely that the majority of them were Gentiles, given the content of the letter.

## Prayer & Faith

Paul writes in verse 3, “We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you.” This verse is jammed with some great theological points. Below is an exegetical outline of some of these concepts.

### **THE FATHER OF JESUS**

Paul thanks God, who is, “the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” It is not shocking to us to hear of the Fatherhood of God or the Sonship of Jesus Christ. The church has, historically speaking, adopted a Trinitarian view of God from the Scriptures. Here, Paul affirms the 2/3 of the Triune nature of God. God exists, eternally, as one God in three persons: The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. He is not three Gods, but one God, one substance, but three distinct persons. The significance of this cannot be overstated. What we will discover in this letter as one of the significant themes is the Deity and Supremacy of Christ. If God is the Father of Jesus Christ, then Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and gives a foundational authority for what Paul will outline of Him in verses 15 through 20 of this chapter.

### **WE ALWAYS THANK GOD**

Prayer, in practice, includes a constant thanksgiving for other believers. This brings out a theology of prayer that is helpful for our involvement in Christian community. When you pray for other believers, you always are to thank God for them, specifically for their, “faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven” (Col. 1:4-5). The mutual love within the community of faith is

cyclical. I have love for the believers I do life with *because of* my faith in Jesus Christ, and as a result of that love, they respond in love by praying for me and thanking God for my faith that allows me to love them *because of* their faith in Jesus Christ, and vice versa. Faith and love are at play. Prayer for believers in Christian community is built upon love for believers in Christian community.

**“Prayer for believers in Christian community is built upon love for believers in Christian community.”**

### **SAFE DEPOSIT BOX**

Paul mentions the hope that believers have that is, “laid up in heaven.” The Greek term here is ἀπόκειμαι (apokeimai) which means something like, “to store away for safe keeping.” The image here is that believers have in their possession a hope because of their faith in Jesus Christ for eternal life, and that hope is protected by being placed in a safe deposit box in heaven.

## Like Wild Fire

It is important to remember the origin of the Gospel. Christianity is an extension of Judaism, in that Jesus Christ is the Messiah that the Hebrew Scriptures prophesied of for centuries. However, the Gospel itself is not pronounced until the incarnation of Jesus and His subsequent earthly ministry. Jesus begins ushering in the Kingdom of God with 12 disciples. It’s a seemingly small operation. After the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, and the coming of the Holy Spirit, the church is born and immediately the numbers begin to rise. Before the end of the first century, the Gospel had penetrated a vast part of the world, in part because of the efforts of people like Epaphras (and obviously Paul, as well). Paul mentions this spread in this passage. It isn’t just that the Gospel had reach the Lycus Valley. He says in verses 5 and 6, “Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing.” The advancement of the Gospel was well in place, and people were aware of it. It is true today, as

well. Given the COVID-19 pandemic, we are more and more aware of how quickly something can spread by mere contact with it. Imagine a Gospel pandemic; imagine it because it can actually happen if we are obedient to share it. Why? Because grace is the most appealing, shocking, controversial, scandalous news that we can hear as broken sinners (Col. 1:6).

## Study Questions

### Day One

1. Read Colossians 1:1. Who is listed as the author(s) of this letter? What descriptors are given for each of the authors?

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2. Read Colossians 1:1. What is the significance of the phrase, “by the will of God.” What does this indicate about the Apostle’s authority in this letter?

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### Day Two

1. Read Colossians 1:2. Who is this letter written to? How are they described? What does Paul say to them in his benediction? What is the significance of his words?

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2. Read Colossians 1:3-4. What does Paul say he always does when he prays for them? What two things does he mention that he has heard, regarding them?

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### Day Three

1. Read Colossians 1:5. What is laid up for believers in heaven? What does the word, “laid up” mean in the original language? (Hint: See above notes) What is the Gospel equated with here?

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2. Read Colossians 1:6. To whom has the Gospel gone out to? Why does it spread so quickly? (Hint: See above notes)

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### Day Four

1. Read Colossians 1:7. Who brought the Gospel to Colossae and planted the Colossian church, and how does Paul describe him here?

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2. Read Colossians 1:8. What has he relayed to Paul and the believers Paul was with regarding the Colossian church?
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## Week 1 Discussion: Prayer

In Colossians 1:1-8, one of the details the Apostle Paul unpacks is a theology of prayer. While it is not comprehensive (there is a great deal more that the Old and New Testaments have to say about prayer), it does shape our practice some. We are to remember other believers and give thanks for them because of their love for us and their faith in Christ. Talk as a group about how faith and love motivate your prayer life, and how you can carry out this practice consistently in your faith walk.

1. Icebreaker: How often do you pray for the people in this group? Be honest. This is not meant to make you feel bad for your shortcomings, but simply be a diagnostic to help you get better about praying.
2. How does your faith in Christ motivate you to pray for other people?
3. Is it easier to pray for someone when you know they love you and are committed to your well-being? Why or why not?
4. How important is unity within the body to prayer within the body? Why?
5. Challenge: Commit to pray for the group every day this week. Send a text message to at least one person in the group each day (pick a different person each day) and tell them you prayed for them.

## Takeaways:

1. The church in Colossae was planted by a man named Epaphras, a convert of Paul from Ephesus.
2. The Gospel was advancing well not only in Lycus Valley, but in the world at large.
3. Christians ought to pray for others and give thanks for others regularly because of their love for one another and their faith in Jesus Christ.

### ***PRAYER REQUESTS:***