

# Introduction to Colossians

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(Colossians 1:1-2)

Our goal is to study this book in order to understand its message and the principles which believers today can use to increase their devotion to Jesus Christ and to live lives that are worthy of His calling. Just as we would handle any letter (whether ancient or modern), we need to determine what message the author of this letter intended to communicate. We are not free to interpret the author's words any way we want to, because it is the author's intended meaning that we need to understand. These words were written by a real person to other real people who were in a situation where they needed to hear an important message with some relevant information that would help them to handle their circumstances.

## Col 1:1 – Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

In ancient times letters would start with what we might call the *signature*. The signature would be followed by the *address*, then there would be a *salutation*, an *ascription of appreciation*, and finally the body of the letter.

**Paul** gives his name as the author. By Paul's own testimony (Philippians 3:5-7) he was "circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless". That is quite a pedigree from a Jewish perspective. Later in his ministry when he defended his apostleship against attack by false teachers in the city of Corinth, Paul correctly claimed that he was not "in the least inferior to the most eminent apostles" (see 2 Corinthians 11:22-28). After telling us his name in Colossians, **Paul** then gives a brief description of himself.

**Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ** = An **apostle** was an important office that was active during the early stages of the Church. It involved the work of laying the foundation for the New Testament Church and recording divinely inspired instructions for the Church age (see 1 Cor 3:9-11 and Eph 2:19-22).

**Paul, an apostle...by the will of God** = Paul's apostleship was not of his own making or choosing, nor was he appointed by the Church – he was an apostle because God called him and set him apart for this office (see Acts 9, 22, and 26). Jesus confronted Paul and called him to be an apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 13:47). This is the man **Paul** who is writing this letter. Almost half of the New Testament books were written by Paul. By identifying himself as the apostle Paul he was establishing his authority for writing this letter to these people.

**and Timothy our brother** = Paul associates himself with Timothy in the heading of this letter. This does not mean that Timothy was the co-author of the letter, but that he was someone with Paul at the time he wrote the letter and someone who would have been respected by the readers. You can read more about Timothy's life and ministry starting in Acts 16.

Notice that **Paul** is an **apostle**, but **Timothy** is a **brother**. This tells us that once the foundation of the New Testament was completed by the apostles, there was no need for any more of them. The remaining work of building the Church was carried on by faithful **brothers** who ministered to the needs of the Church, and Timothy was a stellar example of such a brother.

**Col 1:2 – To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ [who are] at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.**

Here in the first part of verse two the *address* is given – in other words, who were the recipients of the letter.

**to the saints and faithful brethren = saints** is the Greek word *hagioi* which could be translated “holy ones” or “ones who are set apart by God.” This letter is addressed to believers in Jesus Christ whom God has set apart as His own special people.

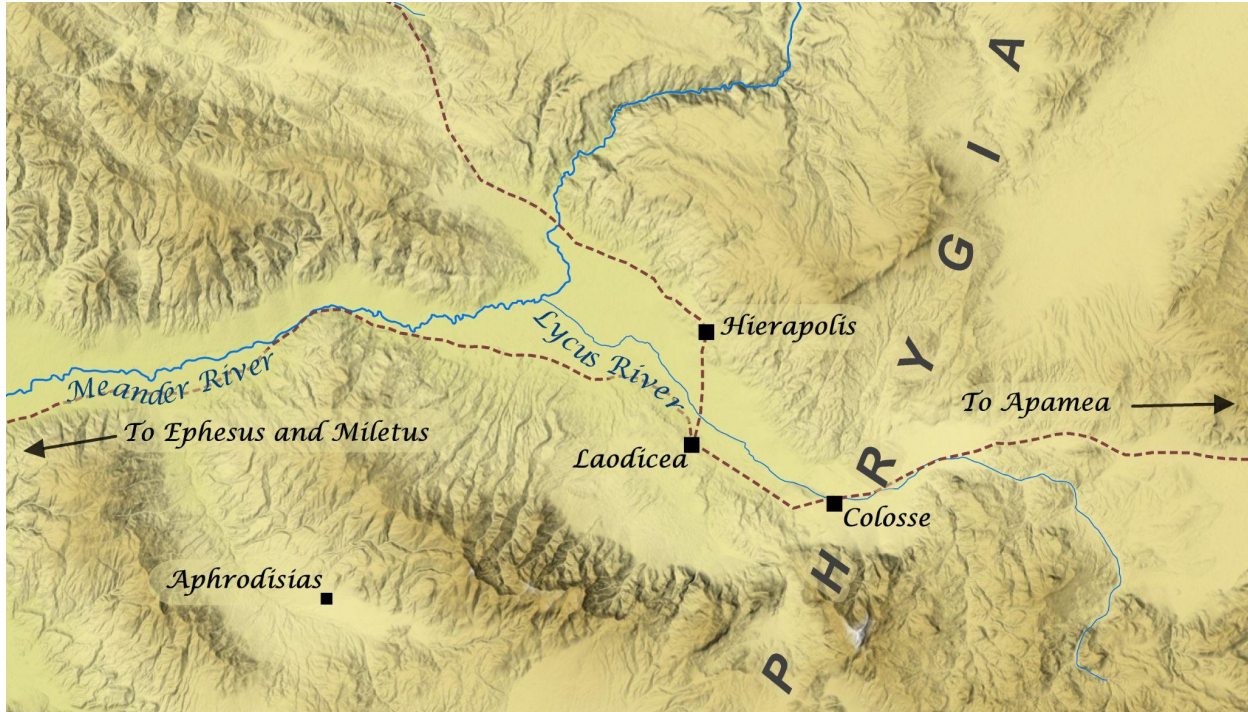
**faithful** is the Greek word *pistos* which could be translated as “believing” or as “faithful and steadfast”. *pistos* carries the idea of “firmness in faith” or “fully trusting” and therefore trustworthy in their commitment to the Savior.

**brethren** or *brothers* indicates the close family relationship in the household of faith. This letter was intended to be read by believers. For a succinct statement of the gospel message, see Paul’s earlier letter to the church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 15).

**in Christ** = If there were any doubt about the spiritual position of the recipients of this letter, we see that they are **in Christ** – because of their faith and trust in the work of Christ to purchase their salvation, the Holy Spirit has set them apart and placed them into the body of Christ. As Paul says later, their lives are “hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:3). When God looks at the believer, He sees the righteousness of Christ.

These believers are spiritually in Christ, but they are physically located at Colossae. Colossae was one of the earliest and most important cities in the Lycus River valley, which is located in what today is southwestern Turkey. It was in a region called Phrygia, and as early as 480 BC the Greek historian Herodotus referred to it as “a great city” on the established trade route between the Aegean Sea and the Euphrates River valley. Persian kings Xerxes and Cyrus the Younger both marched along this route during their military conquests. Around 400 BC the Greek historian Xenophon wrote that it was “a populous city, wealthy and large.” But later in Roman times Colossae became what the Roman geographer Strabo called “a small town.”

In New Testament times its population consisted mainly of native Phrygians and Greek settlers, along with a number of Jewish colonists who came to the area around the time of Antiochus III in the second century BC. In Paul’s day Colossae was a small market town, focused mainly on produce such as olives and figs. Sheep pastured in the area contributed to a wool industry which included a popular wool dyed dark red or purple. In the first century AD, the Roman historian Pliny wrote about the purple wool that Colossae was famous for.



The area of the Lycus River valley is prone to earthquakes, and there was a major earthquake about AD 60. The important cities nearby were quickly rebuilt, but Colossae continued its decline. It was sparsely populated as the residents moved to the more prosperous commercial centers of Laodicea and Hierapolis just a few miles away.

Unlike many sites mentioned in the New Testament, the city of Colossae was not studied by archaeologists until very recently. In a 2022 photo there is some recent activity on the acropolis mound of ancient Colossae. A 5,000 seat amphitheater has been identified on its eastern slope, which may be located near the *agora* or marketplace next to the city's main north-south road. There are sections of columns in nearby fields, some of which may mark the location of an early church.

A cemetery has been found north of the Lycus River. One Colossian burial monument dated to the late first century AD was discovered about a century ago in a nearby city, where it had been taken from the ancient site and put on display.

The native Phrygians had a tendency to emotional forms of religious expression with exciting music and frenzied dancing. There were many pagan Phrygian deities, but when Rome imported the Phrygian rituals, many considered them too extreme and were not allowed to participate in them. Many Roman coins from Colossae show the name of the city, of Roman officials, and various gods including Artemis, Helios, Dionysis, Demos, Boule, Tyche, Isis, Serapis, and a local river god. The coins show that the typical Greek and Roman deities, plus local Phrygian gods, were worshiped in the region.

Closer to the Lycus River water channels are visible which were carved out of rock with complex sluice gates and pipes that allowed water to be diverted from the river for irrigation, washing, and commercial use. An early second century AD inscription on the base of a marble statue honors the repairer of Colossae's baths, showing that these pools were one of the city's important institutions. Colossae was largely abandoned by the 5th century AD, then it was attacked by Muslims in the 7th century AD, and it was totally destroyed in the 12th century AD.

**Grace to you and peace from God our Father** = In the last part of verse two we see the *salutation* of the letter. In Paul's time the salutation was often expressed using a form of the Greek word "rejoice" (*chairein*), which was used to mean: "May you be glad" or "I wish you well" or simply "Greetings." Among the Jews the customary greeting was the Hebrew word *shalom*, "Peace." The apostle Paul typically combines these two salutations in most of his letters. He used the Greek word *charis* (a form of the word *chairein*) that expresses the unmerited favor of God, which is His goodness toward those who cannot earn or do not deserve His favor. Then he added "peace" which expresses an inner harmony due to our restored relationship with God. Paul expressed it in the form of a wish or prayer: **Grace to you and peace**. Notice that the source and provider of these blessings is **God our Father**.

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Ask yourself these questions:

- What is the status of your own faith?
- Would the apostle Paul consider you someone who is "set apart for God?"
- If Paul were writing to you, could he address you as a *brother* in Christ?

If you're not sure, then you can fix that right now. Jesus voluntarily went to the cross to suffer and die in your place, and after paying the ultimate price for your sins and mine, He rose from his tomb on the third day. You can know those facts but still not be a Christian. The Bible talks about having *faith* or *believing*, and this means that you know what Jesus did for you, you accept that it is true, and you are completely relying on these truths for your eternal destiny.

Simply acknowledge what Jesus did by dying for you and tell Him that you are trusting in that alone to reconcile you to God. It's the only hope that any of us have, and it's the most important step you can take in this life. As it says in John 3:16 – "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life." Put your trust in Jesus Christ.