

Colossians

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The Prison Epistles:

Philippians was one of the so-called “prison epistles” which Paul wrote while incarcerated in Rome, the others being Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon. If you’re wondering why they are not grouped together in our new testament, it’s because of their addressees; Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians are grouped together, because they are part of the “church” epistles, those epistles addressed to local churches. Philemon is at the end of the Pauline epistles, in the section containing personal epistles — those epistles written to individuals (*with 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus*). These four prison epistles were written during Paul’s initial two year incarceration in Rome, when he was under house arrest, and more or less free to move about and receive visitors. Paul was apparently released from this house arrest for a few years before being imprisoned again and eventually executed. In his epistle to Philemon, Paul expressed his confidence that he would be released soon, and be able to visit in person (*Philemon 1:22-23*). It was during this period of freedom between imprisonments that Paul wrote the epistles of 1 Timothy and Titus. 2 Timothy was written during his final imprisonment, just before his eventual execution.

There have been some scholars who have tried to argue that the prison epistles written, not from Rome, but from Caesarea or Ephesus. Paul was incarcerated in each of these two cities, but neither of these imprisonment of Paul fit the circumstances mentioned in Scripture.

The Epistle to the Colossians

Author:

There’s never been any serious challenge to the Pauline authorship of this epistle. The epistle itself claims to be written by “Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ” (*Colossians 1:1*), and there have never been any serious challenges to that claim.

From various passages in Colossians, it is apparent that Paul was not alone while writing this epistle — numerous 1st person plural pronouns are used (we, us, our). In verse 1 of the epistle, Paul states that the letter is from both himself and Timotheus (Timothy).

Date and Place of Writing:

As mentioned in the previous section, Colossians is one of the Prison Epistles, and thus was written during Paul's initial incarceration in Rome, while he was essentially under house arrest (*cf. Acts 28:30-31*). This places the date of this epistle at somewhere between AD 60 and AD 62 (the years of his first incarceration), and most likely toward the end of this imprisonment, as he expresses in these epistles his expectation to soon be released; probably AD 62.

The epistles of Colossians, Ephesians, and Philemon were all most likely written at about the same time, and probably toward the end of Paul's initial incarceration, for they were delivered to their destinations by the same pair of individuals. This epistle is said to have been delivered to Colossae by Tychicus and Onesimus (*Colossians 4:7-9*); Ephesians was delivered by Tychicus (*Ephesians 6:21*), and Philemon was delivered by Onesimus (*Philemon 1:10, 12, 17*). Most likely, these two men sailed from Rome to Anatolia (modern-day Turkey), arriving first at Colossae, and delivering the epistle to that church. The two men then went their separate ways, with Tychicus going to Ephesus, and Onesimus going to his hometown.

Another factor connecting Colossians with the Prison Epistles is the fact that many of the same people who send greetings at the end of Colossians are also found sending greetings at the close of the epistle to Philemon:

- Colossians 4:7-14 Tychicus
 Onesimus
 Aristarchus
 Marcus (John Mark)
 Jesus (Justus)
 Epaphras
 Luke
 Demas

- Philemon 1:10, 23-24 **Onesimus**
 Epaphras
 Marcus (John Mark)
 Aristarchus
 Demas
 Lucas (Luke)

The City of Colosse:

The ancient city of Colossae [Greek: **Κολοσσαί** (*Kolossai*)] was located about 120 miles almost due east of Ephesus (*about the same distance as from here to Vernal, or eastern Nevada, or southern Idaho*). Colossae was one of the most prominent cities of ancient Phrygia, a region within the Roman province of Asia Minor, in the south-central part of ancient Anatolia (*modern-day Turkey*). The city was located along the Lucas river, not far from its Junction with the Meander river, in the same general area as the cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis. In fact, these two neighboring cities are both mentioned by Paul in this epistle (*2:1, 4:13, 4:15*).

5th century BC historian and geographer Herodotus described Colossae as “a great city in Phrygia,” where the Persian king Xerxes stopped on his way to wage war against the Greeks. Xenophon, another 5th century BC writer, described the city as “a populous city, wealthy and of considerable magnitude.” Strabo, a Greek philosopher and historian who lived just before the time of Christ, notes that the city was famous for its wool trade, from which it drew great revenue. 1st century AD Roman writer Pliny the Elder records that the wool of Colossae, which was commonly dyed a beautiful shade of purple, was so famous that it gave its name, “*colossinus*,” to the pinkish-purple color of the cyclamen flower.

According to the 4th century AD church historian Eusebius, Colossae, along with the cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis, was destroyed by an earthquake in approximately 66 AD, but quickly recovered, and without any assistance from Rome. As discussed in the previous section, the epistle to the Colossians was written in around AD 62, and thus this catastrophe would have occurred approximately 4 years later.

The city continued to thrive throughout the Byzantine period, until it was eventually destroyed in the late 12th century AD.

The Church at Colosse:

The church at Colossae was *possibly* established by the apostle Paul (*see remarks in the following paragraph regarding this subject*). Although there is no express mention in the book of Acts of Paul establishing a church at either Colossae or Laodicea, Luke does state in Acts chapter 16 that Paul and Silas, after having met Timothy while in Derbe and Lystra, “went through the cities” of southern Asia (*Acts 16:4*), and that they traveled “throughout Phrygia and the region of Galatia” (*Acts 16:6*) during Paul’s 2nd missionary journey. Then, in chapter 18, Luke records that they “went over *all* the country of Galatia and Phrygia in order, strengthening all the disciples” during Paul’s 3rd missionary journey (*Acts 18:23*). It’s certainly more than plausible that Paul and company could have established a church in Colossae during one of those trips, even though it is not expressly recorded by Luke in Acts.

There are quite a few scholars, however, who don’t believe Paul was the one who initially established the church in Colossae. They base this opinion, in part, on a statement by Paul at the beginning of chapter 2 of this epistle, where he expresses the great conflict he had “for you [*the Colossians*], and for them at Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh” (*2:1*). From this statement it is assumed that the people in Colossae and Laodicea had never actually met the apostle Paul in person. The simpler explanation, in my opinion, is that Paul is expressing concern for those in Colossae and Laodicea whom he had personally met when he established the church is there, as well as for those who had been added to these churches after Paul had departed, who had never seen Paul in person.

As pointed out in the preceding paragraph, since Paul and his traveling companions “went through the cities” of south-central Asia, and “throughout Phrygia and the region of Galatia,” it stands to reason that the apostles would have stopped at the various major cities along the way, which would almost certainly have included Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis. But again, this is simply my opinion. There is other language in the book of Colossians which tends to support the theory that Paul *did not* initially established this particular church:

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| Colossians 1:2 | “to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ which are at Colosse” [<i>Not addressed to <u>the church</u> at Colosse; Ephesians is the only other church epistle Paul addresses this way. However, in Colossians 4:15, Paul does mention the church that is in Nymphas’s house in Colossae.</i>] |
| Colossians 1:4 | “since <u>we heard</u> of your faith in Christ, and of the love which ye have to all the saints” [<i>Paul and Timothy <u>heard</u> of their faith</i>] |
| Colossians 1:7-8 | “Epaphras ... who also <u>declared unto us</u> your love in the Spirit” [<i>Epaphras had <u>declared unto them</u> the Colossian believers’ love in the Spirit</i>] |
| Colossians 1:9 | “since the day <u>we heard it</u> ” [<i>Paul and Timothy <u>heard</u> of their love in the Spirit</i>] |
| Colossians 1:23 | “... and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel, <u>which ye have heard</u> , and which was preached to every creature which is under heaven; <u>whereof I Paul am made a minister</u> ” [<i>just the generic phrase “ye have heard” the gospel, which Paul explains he was made a minister of</i>] |
| Colossians 2:1 | “For I would that ye knew what great conflict I have for you, and for them at Laodicea, <u>and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh</u> ” |

When you couple these verses with the fact that no mention is made in the book of Acts of Paul ever establishing a church at Colossae, a good argument can be made that Paul is writing this epistle to a church that he did not personally establish, but wanted them to be grounded in the faith nonetheless. And this would not be without precedent either, as the book of Romans is also addressed to a church which Paul had never visited.

Another factor which tends to support the idea that Paul had never personally visited Colossae is the fact that nowhere in this epistle does Paul speak of his time there. It was common in Paul’s church epistles for him to refer to the time he spent in that church. You find this in 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and 2 Thessalonians (all of his church epistles except for Romans and Colossians). The fact that it’s absent here, like it is in his epistle to the Romans, suggests that, like Rome, Paul have never personally visited Colossae.

Purpose and Theme:

The book of Colossians contains several notable memory verses, the most well-known of which is probably Colossians XXX — “XXX” Other well-known verses are:

- Colossians 1:13 **(13)** Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated *us* into the kingdom of his dear Son:
- Colossians 1:14 **(14)** In whom we have redemption through his blood, *even* the forgiveness of sins:
- Colossians 1:15 **(15)** Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature:
- Colossians 1:16-17 **(16)** For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether *they be* thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: **(17)** And he is before all things, and by him all things consist.
- Colossians 2:3 **(3)** In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.
- Colossians 2:8 **(8)** Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.
- Colossians 2:9 **(9)** For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.
- Colossians 2:13-14 **(13)** And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses; **(14)** Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross;
- Colossians 2:16-17 **(16)** Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath *days*: **(17)** Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body *is* of Christ.
- Colossians 2:18 **(18)** Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind,
- Colossians 2:23 **(23)** Which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting *{margin: or, punishing}* of the body; not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh.
- Colossians 3:1-2 **(1)** If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. **(2)** Set your affection on *{Greek: Think on}* things above, not on things on the earth.
- Colossians 3:16 **(16)** Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.
- Colossians 3:17 **(17)** And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, *do* all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.
- Colossians 3:23 **(23)** And whatsoever ye do, do *it* heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men;
- Colossians 4:5 **(5)** Walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time.
- Colossians 4:6 **(6)** Let your speech *be* always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man.

Correlation Between Colossians and Ephesians

According to the *Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges* commentary, one particular scholar¹ drew the following connections between Ephesians (and Colossians) and Peter’s first epistle, which announces itself as a Circular to the Churches of Asia Minor (*1 Peter 1:1*). He points out the following parallels of thought, topic, and expression between Ephesians and 1 Peter:

(a)	Ephesians 1:4	“chosen in Him before,” etc.	cp. 1 Peter 1:2
(b)	Ephesians 1:19	“the inheritance”	cp. 1 Peter 1:3-5
(c)	Ephesians 1:20-21 [cp. Colossians 2:15]	“the connexion of the [Death,] Resurrection, and Ascension with the subjection of all heavenly powers”	cp. 1 Peter 3:22
(d)	Ephesians 2:3	the contrast of the past and present position and condition of the Jewish [?] converts	cp. 1 Peter 1:14-15
(e)	Ephesians 2:18	“access” to God through Christ	cp. 1 Peter 3:18
(f)	Ephesians 2:20	“the Corner-stone”	cp. 1 Peter 2:6
(g)	Ephesians 3:5	Angels watching the course of man’s redemption	cp. 1 Peter 1:11
(h)	Ephesians 4:11	all gifts to be used for “service”	cp. 1 Peter 4:10
(i)	Ephesians 4:11	“shepherds” a designation of Christian ministers	cp. 1 Peter 5:2
(j)	Ephesians 5:21 to 6:9 [cp. Colossians 3:18 to 4:1]	family duties in the Christian aspect, especially on the principle of submission	cp. 1 Peter 2:18 to 3:7, 5:5
(k)	Ephesians 5:10	resistance to “the diabolos”	cp. 1 Peter 5:8

¹ Bernhard Weiss; *Lehrbuch Der Einleitung in Das Neue Testament (Textbook The Introduction to The New Testament)*, German Reprint edition; pp. 271, 272; excerpted from the *Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges: Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 57 volumes; Introductory notes to the epistle to Philemon, Appendix B: “The Epistles to the Colossians and Ephesians and the First Epistle of St. Peter.”