

THE LETTER TO COLOSSE

Colossians is another letter in the ‘prison’ series, and from its similarity to the Ephesian epistle may have been written at the same time. The readership, however, was very different. Colosse in the first century was a small town 120 miles (200 kms) east of Ephesus, and overshadowed by nearby Laodicea. The apostle had not visited Colosse during his travels. How, then, had the gospel come to this town? The answer appears in the first chapter, where Paul commends his fellow worker Epaphras. It was from his lips, he says, the Colossian brothers and sisters had learned the gospel. Presumably Epaphras had heard Paul preach, perhaps during a business trip to Ephesus, and had been baptised. On his return he vigorously set about telling his friends the good news, and a new church had been formed. So Paul was writing to people he had not met face to face.

Since Epaphras sends his greetings with the letter (Colossians 4:12), it seems he was currently with Paul in Rome. And the reason for writing the letter was that Epaphras had brought disturbing news. The infant ecclesia was being attacked by a new philosophy. Reading between the lines, we can see from that there were two ideas circulating in Colosse – first, that Jesus was not very important, and second, that we must afflict our bodies if we want to be saved.

Paul weighs in on the first error with some vehemence. Jesus, he declares, is God’s firstborn. He was not born first. Adam was. And Adam was lord over the first Creation. But Adam sinned. So God has elevated Jesus (as Isaac was promoted over Ishmael in the Old Testament, and Jacob over Esau) to be lord over a new Creation, not of animals and plants, but of holy people, reconciled to God through his blood.

“And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross” (Colossians 1:18-20).

As he did with the Galatians, Paul insists that they must stick to the gospel they had heard, and not shift from it (Colossians 1:23). There is no place for additions. This is a salutary warning to us, for many religious leaders over the centuries have claimed to have new revelations from God which contradict the teaching of the apostles.

The second error was more subtle – the idea that we need strict rules about what to eat and what to avoid, and to make certain days of the year special. This was a Greek version of the rule-book approach of the Jewish law-keepers. The apostle is emphatic – Christians are not bound to observe the Sabbath or avoid pork. That approach satisfies the human desire to appear righteous, but does not change the heart (see Colossians 2:16-22). This is an important point in our day, when there is such an emphasis on creating a perfect body by diets and surgery and cosmetics. The body will perish. It is our mind that will decide our eternal future. Jesus crucified the body, and we must put to death the desires of the flesh, not just the gross sins of immorality and covetousness, but anger, too, and malice and lies. As in Ephesians, Paul has two coats, one to take off and another to put on, and the new coat represents kindness, compassion and forgiveness. The belt that holds it on is love (Colossians 3:12-14).

The letter concludes with the three pairs we found in Ephesians (we have to admit using the same paragraphs in our own letters to different friends), and a list of greetings and instructions. Among these is the order that this letter should be passed on to the brothers and sisters at Laodicea, and they should read the (unpreserved) letter to Laodicea (Colossians 4:16). This shows that Paul's letters were intended to be circulated and read as exhortations to all.

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