

IDENTITY REVEALED

A DEVOTIONAL STUDY IN COLOSSIANS

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Dedicated to my husband, Rob,
for his constant support and encouragement,
and to my dear friends, Karen and Nuvi Mehta,
for providing time and space for this project.

INTRODUCTION



It is hard to imagine what a shock to the first-century world Christianity must have been. Was it a new religion or was it a sect of Judaism? Even its strongest proponents seemed unclear on that. The movement revolved around a humble man who had walked the earth, whom many had seen and physically touched. While it claimed to change people internally, Christianity was also outwardly focused: it involved forgiveness, grace, and care for the helpless. And this new approach to faith—this gospel—not only accepted people from different nations, but it also actively *sought* them. It intentionally broke down barriers. It was strange. It was different. But it was beautiful and attracted people in throngs.

Even the people of the church in Colossae had much to figure out. They had just adopted an entire new belief system,

a new Lord, a new life. In order to help them navigate all this, the apostle Paul wrote them a letter that spoke a great deal about identity: who Christ was and who they were as believers in Christ.

It is well accepted that Paul wrote the book of Colossians. Scholars with theories contrary to historical claims pop up from time to time, but objections to acknowledging Paul as author are minimal. The exact circumstances in which he wrote, however, are a bit more debated, as we will explore in the following section.

THE AUTHOR'S ENVIRONS

The date Paul wrote Colossians has not been positively proven, but the book was likely written around the year AD 60. Paul was in prison; this is made clear by his reference to being “in chains” in 4:3 and to “fellow prisoner” Aristarchus in 4:10. The book of Acts describes how Paul was imprisoned three times: overnight, in Philippi (see Acts 16:23–40); for two years, in Caesarea (see Acts 24:27); and in his rented home in Rome—an imprisonment that lasted two years but came with some privileges (see Acts 28:30–31).

Here’s where the question arises: while most experts agree that Paul wrote during his Roman imprisonment, the

theory does pose a few problems. For example, Paul would not have been “in chains” while on house arrest in Rome (though he could have been speaking figuratively). Also, trips made by Onesimus and Epaphras from Paul’s location to Colossae are mentioned rather casually. Rome was about 1,200 miles from Colossae—no small trip in the first century, or even today!

Many Bible scholars find it highly probable that Paul spent time in prison in Ephesus, though it isn’t mentioned in Acts or explicitly in any of the epistles. N. T. Wright suggests that imprisonment there can be “inferred from 2 Cor. 1:8, 1 Cor. 15:32.”¹ Therefore, the strong possibility exists that Paul was in Ephesus when he wrote Colossians. It was only one hundred miles from Colossae, which would have made travel more reasonable for Paul’s messengers, and some suggest that the list of people who were with Paul (see Col. 4:10–14) were more likely to be found in Ephesus than Rome.

Does Paul’s location have any bearing on how we read and understand this epistle? Not really. But we can draw inspiration concerning our own service for God when we consider Paul’s circumstances. The fact that he wrote and ministered and prayed fervently for others while in prison can and should encourage us to approach the tasks God has for us with bravery and tenacity. Even being imprisoned in one’s own home, as Paul was in Rome, could easily sour

a person toward his gospel mission. But Paul became neither bitter nor self-reflective; his concern was always for new believers and his ministry was styled for maximum benefit. Whether Paul was in chains in Ephesus, house-bound in Rome, or in some other confined circumstance, he rejoiced in his predicament for the sake of the church (see 1:24).

THE RECIPIENTS

Colossae was a once-important city that was in decline. Sitting on the banks of the Lycus River, Colossae had previously risen to prominence through its wool industry. The region, which included the city of Laodicea, suffered frequent earthquakes, including a significant one around the time that the book of Colossians was written. Laodicea recovered from that earthquake, but the same money and effort were not invested into Colossae because it was already waning economically.

The Lycus Valley had plenty of Jewish influence, but Paul's repeated reference to his readers' pagan past implies that the majority of the Colossians Christians were Gentile converts.

Paul had evangelized this region of the world—Asia Minor—but had not gone to Colossae. There was a large

INTRODUCTION

Jewish influence in and around Colossae, but most of the people in the area had been raised with pagan beliefs.

We conclude from Paul’s comments early in chapter 1 that the Colossians had learned the gospel from Epaphras, who was from that city himself, and whom Paul referred to in 1:7 as his “fellow servant.” Although F. F. Bruce, a prominent New Testament scholar, claimed that Colossae was still a major city during Paul’s day, perhaps the fact that Paul did not make a trip there validates the more popular theory that Colossae was no longer the vital city it had once been.²

Regardless, the gospel had taken root there—and Paul took notice. While Colossae may have been a dying city in some ways, some of its citizens had received new life in Christ!

THE REASON

The overwhelming majority of scholars believe that heretical teaching was sweeping through the Colossian church.³ Paul’s first purpose for writing would have been to reestablish Christ—no one else, and no other religious practice—as the means of salvation.

Several passages in Colossians seem to poke holes in particular heresies that were common among early Christians.

A number of false teachings have been proposed as the problem in Colossae, but I would suggest that Paul addressed more than one of them. Let us entertain the possibility that several of these bad ideas were threatening the doctrine of the Colossian church:

- **Judaism, adopted by Gentiles:** New converts who lived in the pagan world wondered whether they must fulfill the Jewish law to be true Christians, since Christianity came out of Judaism. N. T. Wright notes, “It is this tendency that Paul is resolutely opposing in, for instance, Galatians, and in Philippians 3. It is my contention that a similar danger was the reason for the writing of Colossians, at least chapter 2.”⁴
- **Jewish mysticism:** F. F. Bruce observed, “While the Colossian heresy was basically Jewish, it is not the straightforward Judaizing legalism of Galatians that is envisaged in Colossians, but a form of mysticism which tempted its adepts to look on themselves as a spiritual elite.”⁵ An example of those who saw themselves as “spiritual elite” were the Essenes, who thought they possessed certain mysteries of God that others could not access.
- **Syncretism:** Arthur Patzia points out that there seemed to exist a melding together of several ideas, including:

- *Astrology*: “One of the basic tenets of astrology is that there is a correspondence between the movements of the gods above and the alterations that take place on earth.”⁶ This ideology may include worship of angels, a practice which is denounced in Colossians 2:18.
- *Gnosticism*: There were various forms of gnosticism, but in all its forms, knowledge (*gnosis*)—usually secret knowledge revealed to spiritual elites—was prized and sought. A characteristic belief was dualism between spirit and matter, which included separation from God by several cosmic spheres, each one having its own rulers. Some gnostics had behavioral restrictions so their fleshly nature didn’t control them, which seem to be alluded to in Colossians 2:16 and 23. Other gnostics were licentious, caving in to the evils of the flesh but separating that from the purity of the spirit.⁷
- *Mystery religions*: This general category includes a variety of belief systems that had secret teaching and rituals. As with Jewish mysticism and Gnosticism, those who were on the inside were thought to be on a different plane than others, possessing exceptional knowledge of the mysteries of the universe. This kind of thinking caused divisions among people, separating the enlightened from the prosaic.

- *Hellenistic Judaism*: According to Patzia, “This is not . . . the orthodox Judaism of Palestine; rather, it is a Judaism that has been thoroughly Hellenized [given a Greek adaptation].” Jewish practices are referred to (2:11, 16, 18) and the people of Colossae were concerned that they might be compelled to follow Jewish practices despite the freedom Christ promised.⁸

While establishing what Christianity *is not*, Paul also established for his readers what it *is*. The book of Colossians explained to believers what it is to find their identities in Christ: the freedom from Hebrew regulation that Christ provides, the contrast between their prior nature and their reborn selves, and how Christ provided salvation and strength for them. It taught the Colossians how to shed their previous lifestyle and embrace what Christ had created and was creating them to be.

Much of the book of Colossians was written as a defense of critical principles. This defense was not something negative; it was intended to build truth and understanding. Colossians was written in a loving tone. The whole of it was nurturing—Paul’s tone was almost fatherly. The most helpful thing that could be done for the people of Colossae was to dismantle their misunderstandings gently.

Straight out of the gate, Paul began with a defense of the glory and supremacy of Christ. He moved on to defend

the truth of the gospel against heresy in a variety of ways. Finally, he defended full liberty in Christ: liberty from rules and rituals that no longer had bearing on a person's standing before God; liberty from society's mores in favor of God's priorities; liberty from the old, sinful self, who is replaced with the new Christ-ruled self. The new identity of Christ's people is that of a liberated humanity.

Many people today—even followers of Jesus—struggle to define exactly what Christianity is. Just like in Colossae, the world today is fraught with misunderstanding, confusion, and deception. And so, Colossians still speaks. Let us explore what it has to say to us.

1

FROM APOSTLE TO SAINTS

COLOSSIANS 1:1–2



On January 21, 2019, it was announced that Edgar Martinez, a native Puerto Rican who had spent his entire baseball career as a Seattle Mariner, would be inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame. The next day, the *Seattle Times* featured a story about Martinez. His brother told the reporter that when they were children he would pitch rocks to Edgar for hours and he would bat them with a broom handle.¹ Martinez’s story is one of metamorphosis: from an impoverished little boy who didn’t even own a bat and ball, to a wealthy, famous major league baseball star honored as one of the best in his profession. We may not think our lives are as exceptional as Edgar Martinez’s—but really they are! We have been and are being transformed and we claim a different identity from who we once were. Once we were spiritually impoverished and ill-equipped

for living a godly life. Now we have access to everything we need.

APOSTLE, BY GOD'S WILL (COL. 1:1)

The book of Colossians begins with Paul establishing his authority, granted to him by God as a result of the transformation Christ had brought about in his life. Unlike the Corinthian and Galatian churches, the church at Colossae had not actually challenged Paul's authority. Nevertheless, it was fitting for him to establish himself before giving instruction from the Lord to them. So he identified himself as an apostle, chosen by God's will.

While it is sometimes suggested that an apostle had to receive a commission directly from Christ, the use of the word *apostle* is not so stringent in every case throughout the New Testament (see Acts 1:26, 14:14; Rom. 16:7). One could effectively argue that an apostle was a person whose entire life was committed to spreading the gospel and further educating those who already embraced it. Paul qualified on both counts. He was chosen and commissioned by Christ on the road to Damascus (see Acts 9), and he gave his life over to the mission of spreading the good news of Christ. For the sake of the gospel he had:

Been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. (2 Cor. 11:23–28)

Paul wanted the Colossians to remember that his role as an apostle was by the will of God. It is doubtful that anyone could be an apostle outside the will of God, so why did Paul stress this? He wanted to remind his readers that the calling on his life could not have been misinterpreted. It was direct and specific: he encountered Christ while traveling to persecute Christians. There were witnesses:

The men traveling with Saul [later referred to as “Paul”] stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. (Acts 9:7)

But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man [Saul/Paul] is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.” (Acts 9:15)

Paul stressed that his mission was through the will of God so that the important things he needed to say would be accepted readily.

God calls all believers to share the gospel, and sometimes he gives very specific direction to people of his choosing. Occasionally—regrettably—some people claim to be appointed or called to something God has never asked them to do. In the church, we must be careful to know the difference. I once saw a woman usurp a beautiful Sunday morning worship service with an unnecessary admonition to the congregation, claiming she had a “word from the Lord,” while in fact all she did was summarize the poignant sermon we had just heard. People absolutely get timely, particular messages from God, but we must be discerning as to what is really of God and what isn’t.

In the case of Paul, his vision of Christ, heard by those who were with him and attested to by God Himself to Christians in Damascus, was an obvious stamp of authority

on his life. One of the strongest ways that we can affirm that something is the will of God is by checking with other believers in our Christian community to see whether they are convinced of the same.

GOD'S HOLY PEOPLE (COL. 1:2)

Names and titles are important in the Bible. Abram became Abraham. Jacob became Israel. Gideon was given the title of “mighty warrior.” Saul became Paul. The names represented a permanent change in those men. Names and titles are important in society today. We identify ourselves by titles: I’m a mother, a wife, a Salvation Army officer, a Seahawks fan, and so on. The more I own these titles, the more I live up to them. I could also tell you that I’m a Libra—but I don’t care about that one iota; I don’t own it so it doesn’t impact the way I view myself.

Many Christians refer to themselves as “a sinner saved by grace.” This phrase is interesting. It is helpful in that it reminds us of our imperfection and the ease with which we could revert to our old ways. But as a nameplate metaphorically worn on the foreheads of God’s children, it doesn’t seem very theologically sound.

As we will see as we progress through the book, Colossians teaches us about our identity in Christ. To identify ourselves

as sinners is to identify with who we *were*. Isn't it more helpful to identify ourselves as who we *are* and who we *are becoming* in Christ? Shouldn't we wear the title that God has given to us as a result of the liberating work of Jesus Christ, rather than the title that harkens back to our days of slavery? I do not say that Christians will not sin. But I do say that we have been given a new name, and it is *saint*, not *sinner*. When we sin, it is a slipup; it is not the normal order of things. It is not what defines us. If we are to grasp our identity in Christ, we must understand holiness (not carnality) to be our skeletal structure.

The people of Colossae were holy people: saints.² They were the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ. To address them in this way was to honor what Christ had done in their lives. Our impression of their faithfulness to God wouldn't be the same if Paul had written: "To the sinners saved by grace in Colossae."

GRACE AND PEACE (COL. 1:2)

"Grace and peace" is a typical greeting or benediction in the letters of the New Testament. It bestows blessing and approval. Even today, many Christians use these words or something similar as a sign-off on an email or other communication.

Of course, one person can't pass God's grace on to another. *Grace*, as Paul defined it, is strictly the work of God, between God and an individual. In Romans 3:24 he wrote: "All are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." By speaking grace from the Father upon his readers at the onset of the book of Colossians, Paul expressed his great hope that his readers would experience a deeper understanding of the grace God had already given them.

Paul also wished peace upon the people. Though the book was written in Greek, the word *eirene* that Paul used reflects on the Jewish idea of *shalom*. Shalom is not always readily understood by English speakers. We translate the word as *peace*, but it means more than the absence of war, the absence of fighting, and the presence of calmness. Shalom is peace in every aspect of a human life: it is spiritual and physical wholeness and wellness.

We can't control many circumstances in our lives. Shalom doesn't mean that our house is clean and our kids are behaving and the mortgage has been paid off. But shalom occurs when we are spiritually and emotionally whole and unrattled in the midst of the burdens and surprises of life.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Paul established himself as an apostle, and his life proved his worthiness to speak on the Lord's behalf. What kind of barometer do you use to judge whether a person has enough spiritual authority to speak into your life?

2. Have you ever received what you considered to be a specific message from God? How did it come to you and how did you verify it?

3. I've expressed my feeling about the common phrase "a sinner saved by grace." What are *your* thoughts on it?

4. What do you think it means to be a *saint*, as Paul used the term?

5. Do you know someone (or are you someone) who demonstrates a shalom-style peace even during hardship? What does that look like?

NOTES



INTRODUCTION

1. N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon* of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 12, ed. Leon Morris (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 37.

2. See F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), 5.

3. A significant voice of disagreement is Morna D. Hooker. "The strangest feature about this reconstruction of the situation behind the Colossian epistle is the extraordinary calm with which Paul confronts it. If there were within the Colossian Christian community any kind of false teaching which questioned the uniqueness of Christ . . . Paul would surely have attacked such teaching openly and explicitly." *From Adam to Christ: Essays on Paul* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1990), 122.

4. N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 25.

5. See F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New

Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), 22.

6. Arthur G. Patzia, *Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 5.

7. Patzia, *Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon*, 5–6.

8. Patzia, *Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon*, 6–7.

DEVOTION 1

1. Larry Stone, “Inside the Room: Edgar Martinez Brings His Trademark Cool to Hall of Fame Moment,” *The Seattle Times*, January 22, 2019, www.seattletimes.com/sports/mariners/edgar-martinez-brings-his-trademark-cool-to-hall-of-fame-moment/, accessed February 2019.

2. While NIV uses the term *holy people*, the NRSV uses the word *saints*.

DEVOTION 3

1. A discussion of the possible heresies is found in the introduction under “The Reason.”

2. Bruce B. Barton, Mark Fackler, Linda K. Taylor, and Dave Veerman, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, Life Application Bible Commentary, edited by Philip Comfort (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1995), 154. The NIV reads “all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives.” Other translations read “all spiritual wisdom and understanding.” To the second translation, Ralph Martin said: “[These two words are] qualified by the adjective ‘spiritual,’ which is not a courtesy reference but a direct appeal to the Holy Spirit whose help is invoked to make it a valid prayer request.” Ralph Martin, *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 103.