

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY IN PAUL'S LETTER TO THE COLOSSIANS – INTRODUCTION AND CHAPTER ONE

It is comparatively easy to write about deep personal issues to those we know well but much more difficult to find the words to say to strangers. This letter to the Colossians is the only one of Paul's letters included in the New Testament which was written to a church he never visited, so far as we are aware. Yet it is personal and passionate. Paul cared deeply about those he wrote to and felt strongly the importance of what he had to say.

The gospel first came to Colossae through a Colossian, Epaphras,(1:7; 4:12; Philemon 23). It is likely that he was one of Paul's Bible school students in Ephesus because it was during that time that the whole of Asia Minor heard the word of the Lord.(Acts 19:10) Colossae was presumably part of the spontaneous outreach programme which followed Christ centred Bible teaching over a period of two years. Epaphras continued to keep in touch with the church, and to care deeply about those with whom he had been the first to share Christ.(4:12,13)

Colossae was an ancient but rather insignificant city by the first century AD. It had once been on an important trade route. It was situated on a main trade route from the East to Greece and had been a melting pot of cultures and therefore religions and philosophies, hinted at in 2:8,18. It was in a valley, close to the two cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis,(4:13) 100 miles east of Ephesus in Asia Minor, the south-western part of what is now Turkey. It was famous for nothing in particular.

Paul himself was a prisoner of the Emperor in Rome when he wrote. He could not come in person so he sent another good friend and fellow worker, Tychicus, who had travelled with Paul on his third missionary journey.(Acts 20:4) He was also from the province of Asia and had probably been one of Epaphras' fellow students. He appears to have been a willing letter carrier,(Tit.3:12) who not only knew how to deliver the mail safely but to follow it up with personal ministry.(Eph.6:21; II Tim.4:12) He was responsible not only for this letter but for one to Laodicea, a nearby city, which did not find its way into the Bible.

Paul's purpose in writing this letter was first to encourage a very faithful group of Christians to continue as they had begun,(1) and to apply their faith in all their human relationships.(3,4) At the same time he was aware of philosophical pressures on them and concerned to help them deal with these effectively(2). This combination of needs led Paul to make some of the deepest and simplest statements he ever offered about the nature of the Christian life. For many people the message of this book has been life changing. May it be so for you also!

Before beginning a detailed study of the book, read it straight through several times aiming first to become familiar with its overall message and emphasis. Look particularly for people and repeated ideas. Put yourself in the position of a Colossian of the first century hearing these words for the first time, wondering just why Paul, the apostle, had felt it necessary to write to your little fellowship. Then as you read again look for a theme for each chapter and try to express it in a short title. You may decide you can improve on this later. Expect that your 4 chapter titles will express ideas which follow on from each other. Now let us move to looking at chapter one in detail. Divide the chapter into paragraphs and again look for a title for each one. My suggestions for division are verses 1,2; 3-8; 9-23 and 24-29 but you can choose your own.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION ON CHAPTER ONE

Section 1 – 1:1,2

Q.1 How does Paul describe himself in his introduction? How had he become an apostle? (Acts 9) In what other letters does he emphasise how he became an apostle, and for what reason?

Q.2 Whom does Paul link with him in the writing of this letter? What past and future role might his co-writer have had in the pastoral care of the Colossian Christians? (Acts 19:22; I Tim.1:3) Here he describes his co-writer as his brother. Elsewhere he calls him his child and son? (I Tim.1:2; II Tim.1:2) How could he be both a son and a brother?

Q.3 How does Paul describe the Colossian Christians? If a saint, or a holy one, is someone set apart for the exclusive use of the owner, and faith is wholehearted trust in God not ourselves, what is the connection between being a saint and being a faithful brother? Is a saint a very special Christian or a normal one?

Q.4 What two greetings does Paul use? How are both words used and explained further in the rest of the chapter? How do these two words together sum up the whole gospel message? Section 2 – 1:3-8

Q.5 What three words for prayer does Paul use in verses 3 and 9? How does he explain each one? How did his prayer for the Colossians prepare him to write an effective letter to them? As he prayed for them what can we assume God poured into his heart? (Rom.5:5) What happens if we pray before we write a letter?

Q.6 What three things had Paul heard about the Colossians? What quality does each need to have to be effective? (I Thess.1:3) Which is most important and why? (I Cor.13:13) What comes before any of them? How then does one lead to another? How does each show in our lives and how is it apparent if they are missing?

Q.7 What do verses 5-7 teach us about the nature of the gospel, its effect on those who believe it, and our responsibility regarding it? What do we know about Epaphras which would show us why his ministry to his own people was so fruitful?

Section 3 – 1:9-23

Q.8 Describe step by step, first in the words of the Bible, then in your own words, what the gospel can do in our lives, according to verses 9-12. What is the difference between knowledge, wisdom and understanding? (1:9) Chapter three goes on to explain how the gospel will change life in marriage and the family. Try now linking the description of the effect of the gospel to home life. Be practical.

Q.9 What according to verses 13 and 14 are the two most important facts about the gospel? Again put them into your own words. In verses 3-12 there are 12 words which show how Christianity is a faith of extremes. Find them and review them in terms of your own relationship with Christ.

Q.10 Compare verse 15 with Gen.1:27; 5:3; Rom.8:29 and II Cor.3:18. What do these verses teach about man before and after the fall of Adam into sin, about Jesus Christ, and about what a Christian is really meant to be?

Q.11 Who, according to verses 16 and 17, was the creator of everything? Compare this section with Jn.1:1-3. Don't these passages contradict Gen.1 which repeatedly states that God created? Why does Paul refer to creation at this point in his letter? What difference would it make to us as Christians in our daily lives if we did not believe in special creation by God?

Q.12 What further important facts about Christ do verses 18 and 19 tell us? What do verses 20-22 explain concerning the need for the cross and what it accomplished? Put these ideas together to show the effect they have on, for example, conflict in a marriage or between parents and children. What according to verse 23 must be our response to the gospel if verses 3-22 are to make a difference in our lives?

Section 4 – 1: 24-29

Q.13 In the last part of this chapter, Paul talks about being a minister. Is it going to be easy to be a minister of the gospel? How did he cope with the tough times? What really is a minister and how did Paul become one? What is his task and how is it going to be accomplished?

Q.14 What is 'the mystery'? How had it been hidden and how has it now been revealed? What according to verse 27 is the message of a minister? What does 'the hope of glory' mean in plain English? How according to verse 29 can we undertake the hard work of ministry without burning out in the process?