

BETHEL GOSPEL CHAPEL

THE PRISON EPISTLES

COLOSSIANS

INTRODUCTION

This home Bible study guide on what are now called a Prison Epistle, written by Paul during his imprisonment in Rome between A.D. 61 and A.D. 63.

From the context of this letter, it would appear that Epaphras had arrived in Rome, bringing information to Paul relating to the churches in Colosse, Laodicea and Hierapolis. From Paul's comments in Colossians 1:7, we conclude that it was Epaphras who had brought to these cities in the Lycus valley "*the word of truth, the gospel*", Col. 1:5. It was through his preaching and teaching that these people came to "*understand God's grace in all its truth*", Col. 1:6. Paul writes this letter to confirm the truth of what they had been taught and to encourage them to "*live a life worthy of the Lord*", Col. 1:10. He also warns them to be on their guard against those ideas that, in the guise of wisdom, undermine the very Foundation on which their life in Christ was built. He points out that additions to the gospel, regardless of how cleverly they are advanced or how attractive they appear, are all of them in fact subtractions from "the fullness which they had been given in Christ", Col. 2:9.

Colosse was a Phrygian city in the New Testament times situated in the Roman province of Asia, ten to eleven miles further up the Lycus valley than Laodicea and thirteen miles from Hierapolis. (See accompanying map for locations of the known churches in Asia.) Colosse originally lay on the main road from Ephesus to the Euphrates and the east and at the junction of the highways to Sardis and Pergamum.

The character of these Christian communities is vividly captured in the letters of the New Testament addressed to them. The time spent answering the questions in this study will reward you with a new appreciation of the purpose and potential of your life in Christ. It will also equip you to identify some of the additions to the truth which are undermining the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ today.

If the study of the Scriptures is to have any influence on your behaviour, you will have to take the time to answer the response questions. You will also need to discuss them with the members of your group. Your shared responses to the information and instructions contained in this letter will give you added incentive to live a life worthy of the Lord.

There are many good commentaries available on these epistles and you might want to consult one of them if you have questions. However, the study is designed so that you can answer the questions using only your Bible. The New International Version was used to prepare this study.

Sources:

New Bible Dictionary, Douglas, Eerdmans, 1965
Expositors Bible Commentary, Vol. 11, Zondervan, 1978

The Life and Epistles of St. Paul, Conybeare and Howson,
Eerdmans, 1950.

The Epistles of Ephesians and Colossians, New International
Commentary, New Testament, Eerdmans, 1957.

Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free, Bruce, Eerdmans, 1972

The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopaedia of the Bible, Vol. I,
Zondervan, 1975

STUDY I
READ: Colossians 1:1-14

1. What do you learn from the salutation of this letter, vs 1-2?

2. List the reasons why Paul is motivated to pray for these Christians, vs. 3-4.

3. How did faith and love become the dominant characteristics of the Colossians, vs. 5-7?

4. In his continuing prayer for the Colossians, what does Paul ask God to do, v. 9?

5. What is a person who is filled with the knowledge of God's will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding equipped to do, vs. 10-12?

6. Why were they qualified to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light, vs. 13-14?

RESPONSE

- 1.a) What do you think it means to have "*love for all the saints*"?

- 1.b) Where does this ability come from?

2. Since in verse 6 understanding God's grace in all its truth appears to be a precondition to producing fruit and growing, what steps can you take towards becoming a person who meets this requirement?

3. How do you grow in the knowledge of God?

4. What has to happen in your life if you are to have great endurance and patience along with joy?

STUDY 2

READ: Colossians 1:15-23

Paul obviously felt that the phrase "the son he loves" used in verse 15 required some development. We have in this letter one of the greatest statements made in the scriptures concerning the identity of the Lord Jesus Christ and the process by which He is able to present you holy in His sight, without blemish and free from accusation.

1. What do you understand v. 15 to mean?

2. List the things that owe their existence to the creative activity of the Son, vs. 16-17.

3. What other distinctives belong to the Son, v. 18?

4. Why do you think the statements made in vs. 19 & 20 are important?

5. What do you understand the teaching of vs. 21 and 22 to be?

6. What is the hope held out to you in the gospel, v. 23?

RESPONSE

1. Of all the things said about the Son's creative activity, which do you find the most helpful and why?

2. What are the factors which make the statements about reconciliation valid?

3. Reread this chapter and reconstruct what must have been the gospel as preached by Epaphras and Paul.

4. Why, after affirming in every possible way the sufficiency of the work of the Lord Jesus Christ, is the conditional statement "*if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel,*" made?

STUDY 3

READ: Colossians 1:24-2:5

1. List the reasons why Paul rejoiced in suffering, v. 24.

2. What crucial information did Paul have which allowed him to say that he presented the word of God in all its fullness, vs. 25-27?

- 3.a) What was his goal in proclaiming Christ, vs. 28-29?

- 3.b) How did he expect to reach this goal?

4. The expression "struggling for you" in Col. 2:1 captures something of the, commitment Paul had for these Christians whom he had never met. Using the information in the three parts of the letter you have studied, identify what "*struggling for them*" involved.

5. What was the purpose of his struggle for them, 2:2-3?

6. Why is it desirable for all Christians to have the full riches of complete understanding, vs. 4-5?

RESPONSE

1. The statement that Paul's sufferings "*fill up in his flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body*" must be considered against the unanimous teaching of scripture that the work of Christ is complete and that our salvation and security is absolute, inasmuch as God raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly realms (Eph. 1:20-21). See also Hebrews 1:1-3 and Romans 1:1-5. Therefore, Paul cannot be calling into question the validity of that which he affirms everywhere else, so he must be thinking of an aspect of present suffering that is in harmony with what we already know about Christ's work. Read Matthew 15:40-45 and Acts 9:1-6.

What do these scriptures suggest about people's actions which help us to understand what Paul is saying in Col. 1:24?

2. Suggest at least two ways in which you can contribute toward presenting everyone perfect in Christ.

3. In what ways can you join in the struggle for Christians today?

4. How can you prevent yourself from being deceived by fine sounding arguments?

STUDY 4
READ: Colossians 2:6-15

1. What is the normal pattern of life for Christians, vs. 6-7?
2. Against what kind of diversions are you to be on guard, and why, v. 8?
3. What are we told about Christ in v. 9?
4. List the things which take place when a person comes to know Christ, vs. 10-12.
5. What was your situation prior to coming to know Christ, v.13?
6. Why is it possible now for God to forgive you all your sins, vs. 14-15?

RESPONSE

1. Think about your own experience and describe the process by which you have been strengthened in your faith.
2. Can you identify any systems of beliefs today that fall under the warning issued in v. 8?
3. What is the significance of the statements made about Christ in these verses?
4. Why do you think Paul stresses that all the benefits that come from knowing Christ are connected to the cross?

STUDY 5
READ: Colossians 2:16-23

1. Why are judgments based on religiously motivated scruples no longer valid, vs. 16-17?

2. List the distinguishing characteristics and teaching of those whose opinion should not influence your behaviour, v. 18.

3. What do you think "*he has lost connection to the head*" means and why is this serious, v. 19?

4. On what are the basic principles of this world based, vs.20-21?

5. Why is a Christian's behaviour not to be based on these principles, vs. 20-22?

- 6.a) Why are these regulations appealing to us, v. 23?

- 6.b) What is the basic fault of all such regulations?

RESPONSE

1. What is your responsibility in responding to the religiously based scruples which you and other people have?

2. What is the best defence against people like those described in v. 18?

3. Why do you think the rules based on human commandments and teaching continue to be used as a basis for what is and what is not acceptable behaviour among Christians?

4. Why do you think the behaviour described in v. 23 is ineffective in restraining sensual indulgence?

STUDY 6
READ: Colossians 3:1-11

1. List the reasons why you should set your heart on things above, vs. 1.

2. List the reasons why you should not set your mind on earthly things.

3. What do you think it means to "*put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature*", v. 5?

4. What activities are identified as belonging to your earthly nature, vs. 6-9?

5. What is the enabling power behind the behaviour of the new self which you are to put on, v. 10?

6. Review vs. 1 - 11 and list what you found most important to you today.

RESPONSE

1. What do you think is involved in setting your mind on things above?

2. Why do you think the things which belong to the old self are described in such detail?

3. What proof is there in your church that people have put off the old self and put on the new self?

4. What practical point is being made in vs. 11? How can we profit spiritually by remembering it?

STUDY 7
READ: Colossians 3: 12 - 4:1

1. Make note of the relationship between believers and God in vs. 12.

2. How are relationships between believers to be managed, what does God expect from His children vs.13 -14?

3. List the other responsibilities given to those who are members of Christ's body vs. 15 - 17.

4. What is to accompany the Christian's words and deeds?

5. When a person becomes a Christian his or her relationships remain the same. However, there are behavioural changes expected of the Christian that will change the way they relate. What is the appropriate behaviour for people in these particular relationships, 3:18-4:1?

Wives:

Husbands:

Children:

Fathers:

Slaves:

Masters:

RESPONSE

1. What is it about love that enables it to bind virtues together?

2. What steps do you think are involved in "*letting the Word of Christ dwell in you richly*"?

3. Explain what doing all things in "*the Name of the Lord*" means?

4. Why are the appropriate behaviours listed in question 5 above so difficult to practice?

STUDY 8
READ : Colossians 4 : 2 - 18

1. What instruction is given in regard to prayer, vs. 2-4?
2. What is your responsibility to outsiders, vs. 5-6?
3. Describe in your own words the work that Tychicus and Onesimus were to do in Colosse, vs. 7-6.
4. What do you learn about Paul from verses 10-18?
5. Check the people spoken of in vs. 10 - 18 elsewhere in the New Testament for other insights and information.
6. Why is Epaphras so committed to the welfare of the Christians in Colosse, Laodicea and Hierapolis, vs. 12-13? (see also Col. 1:3-7)

RESPONSE

1. Why is your behaviour toward outsiders important?
2. What do you think "*Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.*" actually involves?
3. What does Paul's request for prayer for himself suggest about his attitude towards himself and his ministry?
4. Check out Archippus in Philemon 1 and try to suggest the meaning of 4:17.
5. In what way are you challenged by the example of Epaphras?