

## STUDYING AND INTERPRETING COLOSSIANS

Colossians is a letter. Could you read and interpret a letter from a friend of yours? If so, you possess some of the skills required.

Would it be tougher to interpret if the letter was from a lawyer about an issue that might send you to jail? I think we would have to admit that we would definitely not want to miss out on anything she had to say to us. We would not seek to give our own spin on the legal documents because the potential cost is too great. She might use words and phrases that have a definite meaning in the world of legalese, but once we know this, we can readily understand whether we are entitled to money or need to hire an attorney!

Sometimes we get into trouble interpreting a letter from a friend. We may be in a bad mood when we read it. That might color the way we look at it. Perhaps it is a note from someone whom we would like to have as more than a friend. We would tend to *read between the lines* seeking a deeper meaning, one they may not have meant to convey. In that case, the fault is not in the friend who wrote the letter, but in ours for reading another meaning into the words.

The *Inductive Method of Bible Study* is designed to help us avoid reading into the text (*eisegesis*) a meaning that we would like to find there. Instead, it will help us to bring out the meaning that the author put there (*exegesis*). We have to come to the Scripture without a pre-conceived idea of what it is saying. Instead we will look at the meaning of words and the way the author put them together to communicate his message to those people.

We do this by answering four questions in a particular order:

1. **Observation** – *What did the author say?*
2. **Correlation** – *Where else is this subject addressed?*
3. **Interpretation** – *What did the writer mean for them to understand?*
4. **Application** – *How do I apply this to living the Christian life today?*

Each answer will lead us step by step toward understanding Paul and then putting the truths he taught them into practice in our life.

*What if I get it wrong?* Don't worry, you will! If we remember we are making *preliminary decisions* about what Paul meant in each step, then it is good to be wrong sometimes. It is a sign of growth and learning. If you couldn't possibly be wrong, then you are probably imposing a meaning of your own upon this letter instead of seeking to get closer and closer to the author's meaning. Fee and Stuart say,

Most of our problems in interpreting the Epistles are due to this fact of their being occasional. We have the answers, but we do not always know what the questions or problems were, or even if there was a problem. It is much like listening to one end of a telephone conversation and trying to figure out who is on the other end and what that unseen party is saying.<sup>1</sup>

Also, it is impossible to read Colossians without thinking about *how it applies to today*. This makes the practice of the steps somewhat messy, erratic, and very important. For this reason, it is best to *go through the process in order* writing down questions and jotting possible answers and applications, but remembering that all this is *preliminary*, a step *toward* sound interpretation and biblical teaching.

Let's consider each step in more detail.

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<sup>1</sup> Fee and Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 46.

**OBSERVATION – WHAT DID THE AUTHOR SAY?**

We begin to observe using six basic questions:

I keep six honest serving-men  
(They taught me all I knew);  
Their names are *What* and *Why* and *When*  
And *How* and *Where* and *Who*.

- Rudyard Kipling

Take a few minutes and see how many of these questions you can answer from *Colossians 1:1-2*:

<i>What?</i>	
<i>Why?</i>	
<i>When?</i>	
<i>How?</i>	
<i>Where?</i>	
<i>Who?</i>	

Probably the only one you didn't use is the *When* question and that will bug you until you find the answer later in the letter.

By asking, we are making observations about what Paul wrote. Our answers are preliminary and our questions will grow. The key is to make sure both question and answer arise from the verses. Some will remain questions for us to answer, others will be answers (*observations*) of the information the author put there.

We will seek to validate what we see to make sure that we have understood Paul correctly as we look at interpretation. We will need as much information as possible to help us interpret what Paul meant. Some of that can come from the other letters Paul wrote from prison: *Ephesians*, *Philippians*, and *Philemon*. When we compare them, we are *correlating*, looking for parallels.

#### **CORRELATION – WHERE ELSE IS THIS SUBJECT ADDRESSED?**

Remember this is a preliminary information quest. We want to consider the other prison letters as well as other things Paul wrote and taught. We won't stop there, but we will move out from there to other places in the Scripture where subjects Paul wrote about are addressed. Later on we will even consider what authors, even pagan poets, he would have read might have said on particular subjects.

We have several tools to help us find parallel passages. One is the *CROSS-REFERENCES* found in many Bibles. Another tool is sometimes called a *TOPICAL BIBLE*. Looking up the word "saints" we would find many references:

**SAINTS.** After the Cross: Acts 9:13, 32; 26:10; Rom. 1:7; 8:27; 15:25, 26, 31; 16:2, 15; 1 Cor. 6:1, 2; 14:33; 16:15; 2 Cor. 1:1; 8:4; 9:1; 13:13; Eph. 1:1, 15, 18; 3:18; 6:18; Phil. 1:1; 4:21, 22; Col. 1:4, 12, 26; 1 Tim. 5:10; Philem. 1:5, 7; Jude 3; Rev. 5:8; 8:3, 4; 11:18; 13:7, 10; 14:12; 16:6; 17:6; 18:20, 24; 19:8 Before the cross Num. 16:3; Deut. 7:6; 14:2, 21 26:19; 28:9; 33:3; 1 Sam. 2:9; 2 Chr. 6:41; Psa. 4:3; 16:3; 30:4; 31:23; 34:9; 50:5; 52:9; 79:2; 85:8; 89:5, 7,

19; 97:10; 116:15; 132:9, 16; 145:10; 148:14; 149:1, 5, 9;  
Dan. 8:24 See **RIGHTEOUS**.<sup>2</sup>

As we study individual words, we will use a *CONCORDANCE* to see where else in the Bible they occur and what they mean there. This may uncover other passages that will shed light on what else the Bible says about a subject.

Having as much information as possible will greatly help us in our search for Paul's meaning in Colossians and will help us keep our applications from being off base.

### **INTERPRETATION – WHAT DID THE WRITER MEAN FOR THEM TO UNDERSTAND?**

Is it possible for everyone's interpretation of the Bible to be right? No, it meant what the author meant, not a different meaning for each person. The fact that different people misunderstand what someone says does not mean that they are right. Consider this truth,

... knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke *as they were* moved by the Holy Spirit.

2 Peter 1:20–21 (NKJV)

There are seven things we will need to keep in mind if we are to understand how they would have *interpreted* Paul's meaning:

#### (1) WHAT DID HE SAY ORIGINALLY?

We believe Colossians to be inspired by God *as Paul wrote it*, not with the changes various people made to it since it was written. Through the years it has been copied by hand so that others could read it. We have at least 10 copies of Colossians written in all capital letters (*UNCIALS*), 22 written in a combination of capital and smaller letters (*Minuscules* – like we write), 7 copies translated in ancient languages, and 6 quotations by writers in the centuries after Paul ... and that is

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<sup>2</sup> SWANSON, J. – NAVE, O., *New Nave's Topical Bible* (Oak Harbor 1994).

just for verse two of chapter one! That doesn't count thousands of later copies all of which were made by hand.

If you have ever copied something by hand, you understand *unintentional changes*. Today we might call those *typos*. Other people as they copied made *intentional changes* to what was written to make Colossians sound better or perhaps more clearly convey the meaning they understood. Both kinds of changes produce *variants* between these ancient Greek copies. Comparing English versions will help you discover these. We will deal with them as we come to them in the text.

## (2) THE STRUCTURE – HOW DID PAUL ARRANGE THE LETTER?

Sometimes we try to “force” an outline that doesn't really fit instead of discovering the way the author put it together. Colossians is a letter. Like all letters it identifies its author and greets its recipients (1:1-2); it complements and connects with them (1:3-14); deals with the subject (1:15-4:1); and finally closes (4:2-17) with a signature (4:18). In all of these parts, Paul, uses various connective words, phrases, literary and grammatical techniques to move the readers along with him through his points.

## (3) THE WORDS – HOW DID THEY UNDERSTAND THE MEANING?

All words have a range of meaning. Meaning is discerned from usage more than dictionaries. For instance, say the word “read.” We can't even pronounce it without context.

We need to look at the way Paul uses key words in *Colossians*, and in his other letters. He did not invent the language he used (Greek), so we need to consider the way Greek people of his day used the Greek words. We study more about this as we read through.

## (4) THE GRAMMAR – HOW DID PAUL PUT HIS WORDS AND IDEAS TOGETHER.

We will be looking at the way Paul put words and phrases together using our English translations. It is recommended that you have at least two kinds of Bibles: one that uses more *formal equivalence*, such as NKJV or ESV, and

one that gives more *dynamic equivalence*, such as the NLT. The order and structure of the words will help us better understand the argument Paul uses in Colossians.

(5) HISTORY – HOW DO WE UNDERSTAND THEIR TIME?

Colossians refers to real people living at a particular time in history (around 60 AD). We want to understand, from the clues given what errors they were facing coming from within the church and from outside it. We need to know how *Jews* were different from *Gentiles* in their worldview and practices. In addition to Acts 18-20, which gives some of Paul's history in the region, our quest to know will be helped because Paul wrote extensively on many of these subjects in other letters. A *Bible Dictionary/Encyclopedia* will also be a very valuable tool as well as some internet resources.

(6) BIOGRAPHY – WHAT WERE THE PEOPLE LIKE?

Colossians is the story about people who were trying to live the Christian life while making a living and raising families. They were being misled by some teachings they had heard and struggling with some sins from their past life. Some of the people mentioned in the letter by name would make for fascinating biographies. I would suggest looking into the lives of two in particular: *Onesimus* and his owner, *Philemon*, who doesn't show up in Colossians directly, but received his own letter.

(7) THEOLOGY – WHAT CONTRIBUTION DOES COLOSSIANS MAKE?

Theology is an umbrella term that covers all areas of doctrine. Usually we seek to learn more about *God our Father*, *our Lord Jesus Christ*, and *the Holy Spirit*. Colossians is very big on the Lord Jesus Christ. We will learn much about Him!

We want to know more about *sin*, *salvation*, and *Christian living*. By comparing parallels in Ephesians we will see unique emphasis by observing similar expressions and differences.

**APPLICATION – HOW DO I APPLY WHAT HE SAYS TO LIVING THE CHRISTIAN LIFE TODAY?**

We are not to be hearers only, but doers! Our aim is to live our lives according to the Scriptures, but do it facing the problems of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is of necessity last, but definitely not the least important step.

Once we have studied and understood Paul, we need to put what we have learned into practice by adjusting our thinking and beliefs, responding emotionally to the truth, and then acting in obedience to God's truth. We want to *know*, *feel*, and *do* in reponse to what we learn.

To do this we must recognize the *similarities and differences* we have with the original audience to know whether things *directly apply*, or if only *principles apply*, or if *nothing applies* to us. This takes wisdom built upon knowledge gained in our study and in life. Wisdom is a divinely imparted skill for taking knowledge and making it practical:

But if anyone is deficient in wisdom, he should ask God, who gives to all generously and without reprimand, and it will be given to him. But he must ask in faith without doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed around by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord, since he is a double-minded individual, unstable in all his ways. (James 1:5-8 NET)



## BUILDING A BACKGROUND OF KNOWLEDGE

### *Colossians 1:1-2*

<sup>1</sup> This letter is from Paul, chosen by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and from our brother Timothy. <sup>2</sup> We are writing to God's holy people in the city of Colosse, who are faithful brothers and sisters in Christ. May God our Father give you grace and peace.

Getting an overview of what a book is about we call “*building our schema*” which is a term used in speed reading that means information which we already possess used in learning something new. In our case, we don't have as good a *schema* as the Colossians did about what Paul was writing to them. To make reading the book more meaningful, it will help to ‘*catch up*’ by gaining some background knowledge which they already knew.

#### THEY KNEW WHERE THEY WERE

To help us gain a little bit of *schema* about where these people were, it will help you to consult a map in the back of your Bible or in a Bible Atlas. If you find one on *The Journeys of the Apostle Paul* you will be able to find Colossae by first finding Ephesus on the west coast of Asia Minor. Once you have found Ephesus slide your finger east past Laodicea to Colossae. *What other towns do you note in the vicinity?*

By consulting with a Bible Dictionary or Encyclopedia, you may gain some valuable information about what in Paul's time was the small town of Colossae. *What do you discover from the resources you have?*

*How might life in Colossae been similar to your life today?*

*What differences do you note?*

#### **THEY KNEW PAUL'S SITUATION**

This letter is one of four which are known as the *prison letters* (4:3,10). The other letters were *Philippians*, *Ephesians*, and *Philemon*. That last letter will become important as it pertains to one of the bearers of this letter (4:7-9). *Why was Paul in prison (Acts 21:15-25:12)?*

*How might your life change if people were hostile to your religion?*

Scan through the letter looking for other people who did or did not know Paul. *Who did you find?*

#### **THEY KNEW TRUTH AND ERROR**

Paul wrote because an error was being taught to the people in the tri-city region of Colossae, Laodicea, and

Hierapolis. They were well aware of this teaching because they lived there, but we can only learn about it through studying what Paul said about it and perhaps by considering how it is like other errors he talks about in his other letters.

*What do you observe about the error (2:1-23)?*

#### **INSIGHT FROM THE SALUTATION**

The beginning of the letter has some similarities to a business letter today.

<sup>1</sup>This letter is from Paul, chosen by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and from our brother Timothy.

<sup>2</sup>We are writing to God's holy people in the city of Colosse, who are faithful brothers and sisters in Christ.

May God our Father give you grace and peace.

*What facts do you observe in these two verses?*

Is this a unique greeting for Paul in his letters? One way to check this out is to compare the greetings of Paul's other letters. Use the chart on the next page to record your observations about these greetings.

<b>Epistle</b>	<b>Greeting</b>
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<i>Romans 1:7</i>	
<i>1 Corinthians 1:3</i>	
<i>2 Corinthians 1:2</i>	
<i>Galatians 1:3-5</i>	
<i>Ephesians 1:2</i>	
<i>Philippians 1:2</i>	
<i>Colossians 1:2</i>	
<i>1 Thessalonians 1:1</i>	
<i>2 Thessalonians 1:2</i>	
<i>1 Timothy 1:2</i>	
<i>2 Timothy 1:2</i>	
<i>Titus 1:4</i>	
<i>Philemon 3</i>	

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