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Bible Study

7 Sessions for Homegroup
and Personal Use

***The Letter to the
Colossians***

In Christ alone

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Introduction

The world of the Colossians was, spiritually speaking, surprisingly like ours. Roman peace, the Pax Romana, ensured a settled civilisation with a stable economy, good communications, adequate food supplies and little civil unrest. Yet good as these things were, the hearts of many people were dissatisfied. What had become of spiritual life? True, the official religion of Rome was in place and people dutifully paid lip service to the gods, but Rome was far away and few believed that political religion could ever satisfy the soul.

Instead, people were searching for deeper, more tangible roots to give their lives meaning. They turned to the ancient Greek and Roman mystery religions where it might be possible to enter a mystical state of being through ritual, self-denial and sacramental acts. By these means they sought to attain the beatific vision – a profound spiritual experience of the death and rebirth cycle that might grant them a form of afterlife. Today, in the nominally Christian West, we might equate this with the rise of the New Age movement and the interest in alternative spirituality.

It was into this world that a member of Paul's apostolic team, a man named Epaphras, came preaching the gospel. His mission field included the Lycus Valley in Asia Minor and it took him to the city of Colossae, where he had good success and founded a community of believers. Colossae itself had been a prosperous city noted for its glossy black wool, but in latter years was eclipsed by Laodicea and Hierapolis. However, it stood in a fertile valley on a main trade route from Ephesus to the East and as such retained an influence on the many traders who passed through – and with traders came ideas and religions.

Paul himself never visited the church in Colossae but received news of it from Epaphras. This led him to write to the church during his Roman imprisonment in AD 60. Delighted as he was by Epaphras's glowing report, Paul was also made aware of the encroachment of the mystery religions on the faith of these young converts. They faced two temptations. One was to combine their faith in Christ with elements from those other spiritualities – Eastern, Jewish, Greek and Roman mysticism. This is called 'syncretism'. It was later to flower into a full-blown threat to Christianity called 'Gnosticism'. The other was to feel that their faith came a poor second to these alternatives and their bold esoteric claims. This is called inferiority!

Paul tackles both, not by berating the Colossians, nor by condemning others' spiritual search out of hand. Instead, by encouragement and by using some of the same language and terminology as was used by the mystery religion adherents themselves, he demonstrates the adequacy, completeness and superiority of salvation in Christ alone.

Colossians is one of the most important New Testament books for us to study in today's climate of resurgent religious and spiritual interest. Historic Christendom may have had its day but there is a ready hearing for those who walk the earth with grace and humility, whose lives evidence an authentic spirituality demonstrated in wise living and love for our neighbours. For the challenge facing us today is not whether we will be spiritual – as opposed to merely religious – but what kind of spirituality will deliver the goods.

We hope that this study will help us understand better the hope within us and enable us more effectively to share our faith in Christ with those who are seeking to satisfy their spiritual hunger.

WEEK 1

The Apostolic Heartbeat

Opening Icebreaker

Members of the group wash each other's hands in perfumed water as an act of kindness, and to represent leaving behind the grime of life.



Bible Readings

- Colossians 1:1–14
- Proverbs 8:1–7



Key Verse: 'For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.' (1:9)

Focus: If you become a follower of the Way, you will qualify for a share in the world of spiritual enlightenment.



Opening Our Eyes

We in the West live under a remarkable materialistic peace, but it has not satisfied our souls. Many people are searching for something better; they are engaging in a spiritual journey to find the inner wholeness that no amount of retail therapy or overseas travel can deliver. At the same time, the majority of the population has dismissed historic Christianity as violent, chauvinistic and irrelevant. Today's searchers are drawn more to paganism – to the earth-mother mysticism of Gaia, or Isis, or the Sacred Prostitute – in their quest for enlightenment.

But supposing there is another route to wholeness: a set of secret mysteries discovered by a community dwelling in the Lycus Valley – citizens of ancient Colossae who called themselves followers of the Way. What had they found, and could it transform our lives today?

We learn about this community from a letter written by one of the leading teachers of the Way, Paul of Tarsus. He addresses his readers as *holy ones* – people set apart – and he starts by commending them for their lifestyle of faith, hope and practical love. The teaching they had received was in fact not unique to them, but was spreading like a fruitful plant all over the known world. However, it was not imposed by imperial might or religious dictatorship; this was a grass-roots movement spread by humble messengers like Epaphras.

Paul and Timothy were delighted to receive Epaphras's report concerning this new group of followers and it had stimulated them to pray for their spiritual development ever since. Specifically, they prayed for them to experience a full revelation of the mind of God. This is no mere intellectual quest, but is a different kind of intelligence – genuine spiritual wisdom. Not that this should make them proud or self-gratifying. Rather it is so

that they might live transformed, God-pleasing lives in their community. Nor is this a pathway of sombre religion or flesh-denying asceticism. Their growing spiritual enlightenment will fill them with joy and thanksgiving, so that they might persevere in their new-found faith, whatever the difficulties.

Paul reminds them that their discovery of the Way has qualified them for a glorious future, an inheritance that is no less than eternal life – the birthright of all those set apart for the kingdom of light. These Colossians and their fellow believers have been liberated from the prison house of spiritual tyranny and darkness. Now they have a new citizenship in the realm of light. It is not a hard-earned right but a free gift from the Divine Source Himself – God the Father. Yet it is not cheap; the Father’s filial expression, the Son, paid a high price for their spiritual salvation. For at the root of their questing and ours lies the insurmountable problem of personal evil and corruption. We need more than enlightenment; we need redemption. God’s Son offered up His own life so that all followers of the Way might experience the forgiveness of sins.

Faith in the Son of God that is demonstrated in transformed behaviour is the surest proof of genuine spiritual experience. This is why Paul describes the Colossians as ‘holy and faithful brothers’ and offers the benediction of grace and peace upon their lives. Such primitive purity challenges our own faith and its outworking. Do we find ourselves sharing the same apostolic heartbeat as these Colossians? Or have we settled for less?



Discussion Starters

1. How do you view New Age seekers? Are they demonised to the eyeballs, or have they something to add to our faith? Or are they on the road towards Christ and just need our help?

2. What is the difference between Bible knowledge and spiritual wisdom?

3. If true spiritual wisdom is demonstrated by our lifestyle, what practical characteristics should that lifestyle incorporate?

4. We need more than enlightenment; we need redemption. Discuss.
