

Paul's Letter to the Colossians

A favorite of mine, but I can't say exactly why. Maybe because it has some of my favorite language and concepts in the NT...

He has delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son

Creation is by him, through him, and for him

Your life is hid with Christ in God

God may open to us a door for the word

We are going to look at this book in a thematic, rather than expository, manner. I'll layout our approach to this in a few minutes, but first let's set the background for this letter.

How did the church in Colossae get started?

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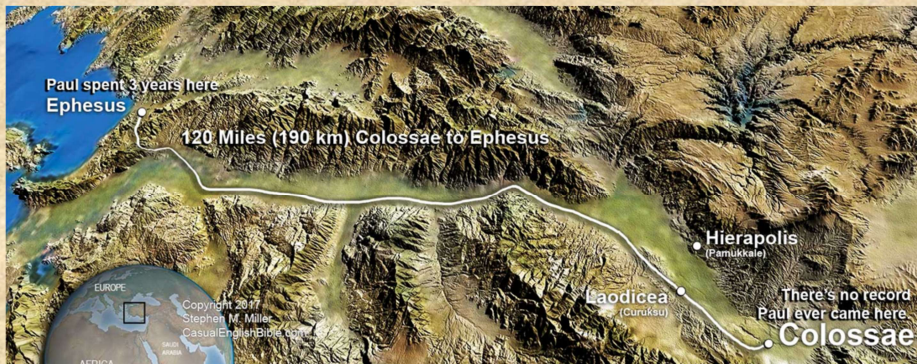
The church at Colossae was a church planted from the Ephesian church which was founded by Paul, Priscilla and Aquilla.

During his 2nd missionary journey (50-53 A.D.) Paul briefly visited Ephesus, but he left his fellow missionaries, Priscilla and Aquilla, behind. (Acts 18:18-21)

During his 3rd missionary journey (53-57 A.D.) Paul came again to Ephesus and stayed there around three years. (Acts 19:1, 8-10)

How did the church in Colossae get started?

- The church at Colossae was a church planted from the Ephesian church which was founded by Paul, Priscilla and Aquilla. (Acts 18:18-21; 19:1,8-10)
- Epaphras appears to be the founding apostle / elder / pastor for the fledgling church (Colossians 1:7-8; 4:12-13)



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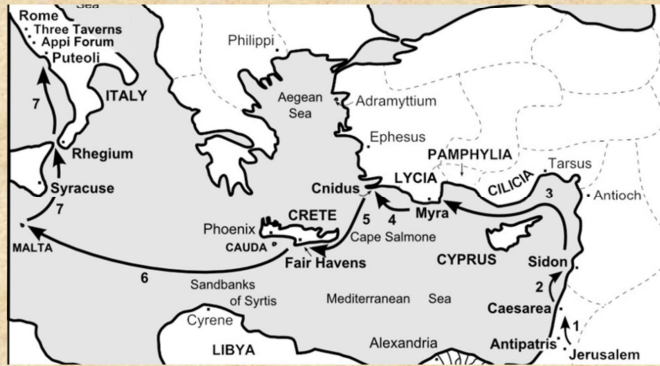
At some point between 53-57 A.D. it appears that Epaphras, for an unknown reason, made the roughly 120 mile journey from Colossae to Ephesus and, while there, became a believer.

He then traveled back to Colossae and started a church in his home town. (Colossians 1:7-8; 4:12-13)

To our knowledge, Paul never visited the church at Colossae.

When did Paul write this letter?

- Paul was arrested in Jerusalem (58 A.D.) and taken to Caesarea. Eventually he was taken on to Rome where he was under house arrest for two years from 60-62 A.D.
- During his imprisonment in Rome he wrote several letters, including the letter to the Colossian Church.



Acts 23:23-24
24:27
25:9-12
28:16, 30-31

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Acts 23:23-24; 24:27; 25:9-12; 28:16, 30-31

What prompted Paul to write this letter?

- A visit from Epaphras
- False teachings

Philemon 1:27; Colossians 4:12-13



What prompted Paul to write this letter?

The evidence points to a visit from Epaphras. We know that this letter was written from Rome and that Epaphras was with Paul in Rome. So it is reasonable to assume that Epaphras left the area he was ministering in and went in search of Paul in Rome. (Philemon 1:23, Colossians 4:12-13).

What prompted Epaphras to start the search and follow Paul all the way to Rome?

We will find out that the Colossians were dealing with the pressure of a pluralistic religious culture infiltrating the church. Epaphras must have become concerned about the teachings from the culture taking root in the church.

How did Paul deliver this letter?

- Tychicus
- Onesimus

Colossians 4:7, Ephesians 6:21, Timothy 4:12
Colossians 4:9, Philemon 1:10-12




How did Paul deliver this letter?

Paul's companion Tychicus traveled from Rome to Colossae to deliver the letter. He also delivered a letter to the church at Ephesus and, perhaps, a letter to the church at Laodicea that has not survived. (Colossians 4:7-8, Ephesians 6:21-22, Timothy 4:12)


Another interesting fact about this trip is that Tychicus was accompanied by Onesimus on his way back to Philemon. Onesimus had fled to Rome to escape slavery but had come in contact with Paul and become a Christian. (Colossians 4:9, Philemon 1:10-12)

From our timeline, this letter arrived in Colossae anywhere from 5 to around 10 years after the church was started.



And apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

(Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles ~ 2 Co 11:28)



If you were Epaphras reporting from the United States, what would you tell Paul are the top issues challenging the church?

Let's try to imagine for a moment what it would be like for Paul, imprisoned in Rome, to receive a report from Epaphras that the congregation in Colossae is in trouble.

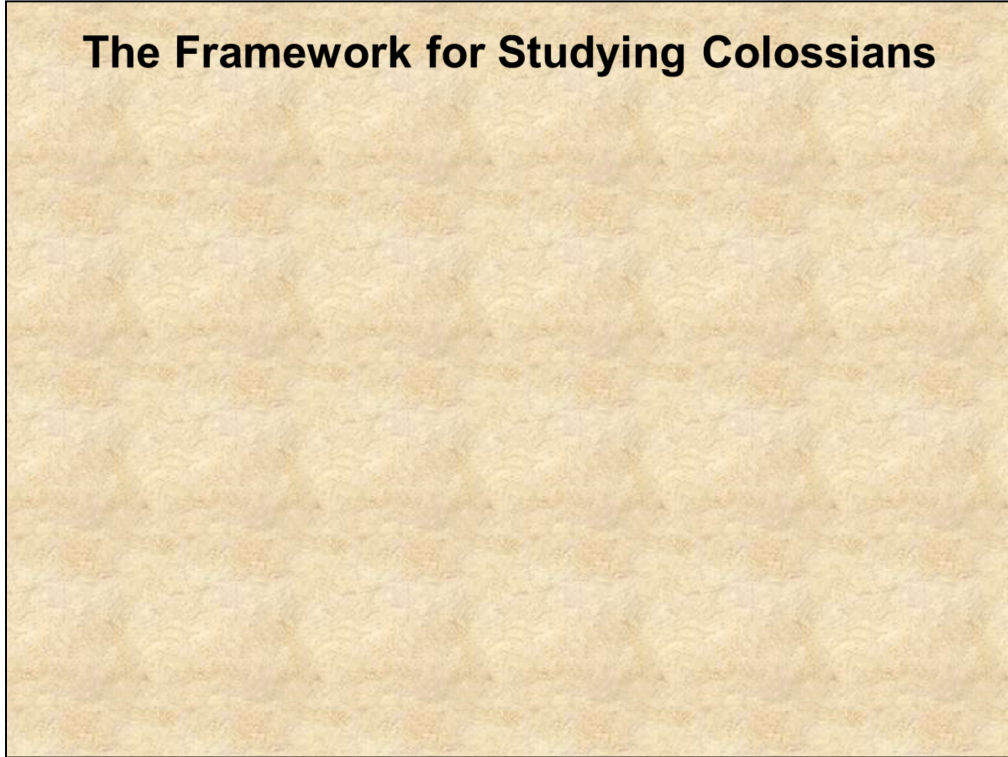
Even before being arrested and taken to Rome, Paul was anxious about the churches. As he tells the Corinthian church...

And apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. (2 Co. 11:28)

With his movement now restricted, he has to rely on intermediaries and letters to address the issues in the churches.

If you were Epaphras reporting from the United States, what would you tell Paul are the top issues challenging the church?

The Framework for Studying Colossians



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My normal practice for teaching a book of the Bible is to go through it verse by verse in an expository fashion. However, to me, the book of Colossians, though short, is a highly layered text. Paul reiterates several key themes in various ways. Therefore, a thematic approach can help us look at the main concepts one by one and see how Paul reinforces his ideas throughout the letter.

To do this, some kind of structure is needed to hang the various themes on so that we are not just haphazardly jumping around. As I was reading Colossians, I noticed a verse that provides us a framework for organizing our approach.

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*Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.
(Colossians 2:6)*

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If I were asked to summarize the book of Colossians, I would point to this verse. This is the essence of the Christian life.

We can break this verse down into three components, all of which are centered around “Christ Jesus the Lord” and use them as our framework for studying the book.

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Under this heading we will look at all the ways Paul describes the person and work of Jesus Christ in this letter. It would seem that nothing in this letter should be new to the Colossian believers, but rather it is a review of what they had learned from Epaphras.

The teaching Paul is referring to would seem to include what they learned about Jesus prior to salvation as well as after their salvation.

This brings up an interesting question:

What is the minimal that must be known about Jesus in order to believe unto salvation?

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You received Christ Jesus the Lord

Teaching someone about Christ Jesus the Lord may be both before and after he or she receives Christ Jesus the Lord, but receiving Jesus marks a turning point in a believer's life.

This turning point indicates a significant transformation for the believer, which Paul describes in various ways, and alters a believer's interaction with God, self, and others.

We call this turning point by various names – “believing the Gospel”, “getting saved”, “being converted” – and all these names point to the same reality of a changed life.

Part of the reality of a new life through receiving Jesus Christ the Lord is a deepening understanding of the change that has occurred and a life lived in light of that understanding.

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To walk in Christ Jesus the Lord is to live in harmony with him and with the change that has come from receiving him.

The first two concepts are past tense, they have already happened for the believers in Colossae. This third one deals with their current and future lives. But their future current and future lives are predicated on their past experiences.

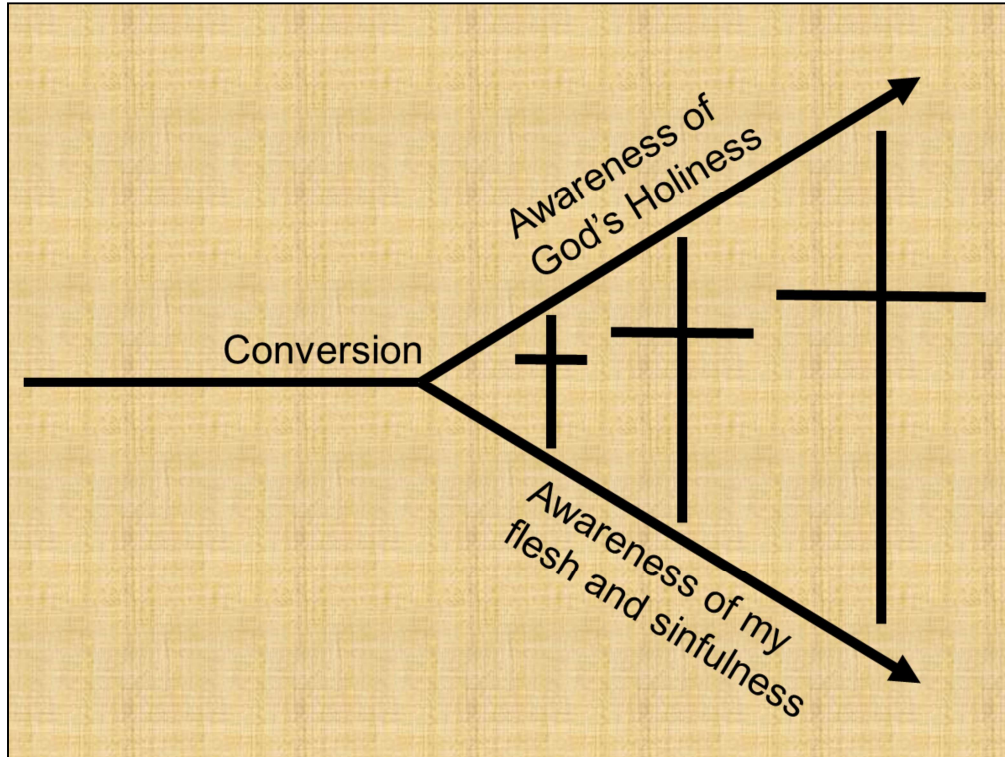
As you were taught, as you received, so walk. There is an expectation of continuing along a certain path in harmony with the teaching and receiving. This harmonious trajectory of the Christian life contains the uncertainty which has prompted Epaphras to find Paul and Paul to write this letter. It shows the need for the spiritual growth of believers to withstand the pressures that would throw them off course.

Spiritual Formation

The divinely sanctioned process by which a person is conformed to the image of Christ by union with the Holy Spirit and in conjunction with our own will and efforts, which begins in this life and continues into the next. ~ John Coe

Spiritual Growth is also known as Spiritual Formation

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Here's an illustration why Spiritual Growth or Spiritual Formation is a necessary and fundamental element in the Christian life.

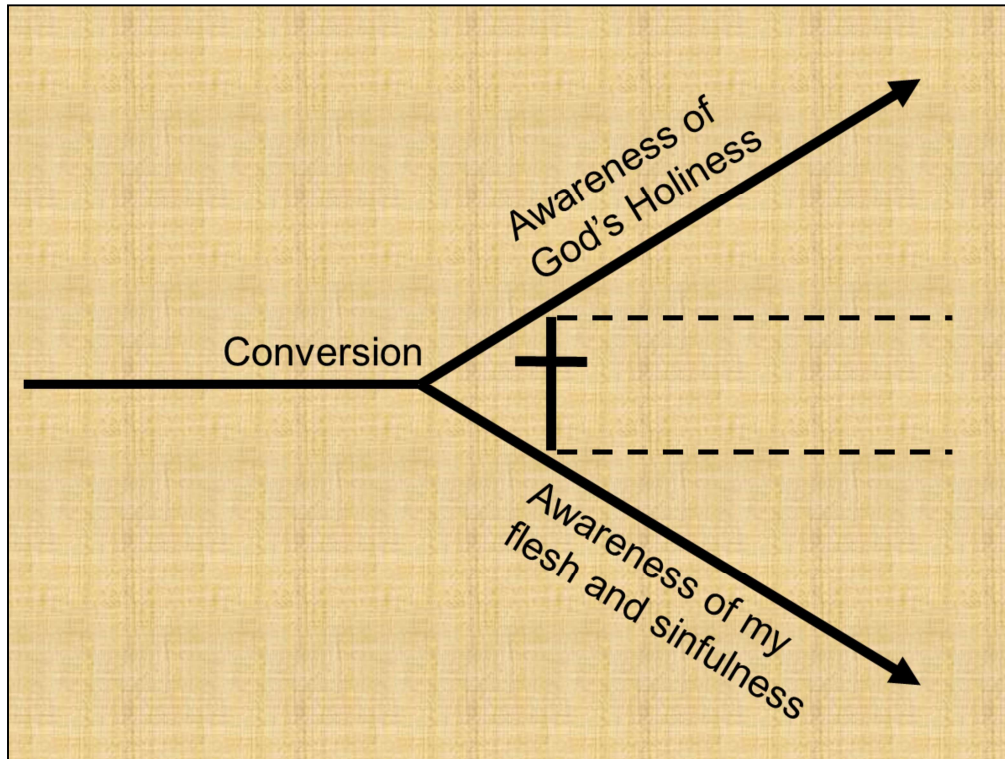
The Cross Chart from *The Gospel Centered Life* by Bob Thune

The starting point of the Christian life comes when I first become aware of the gap between my sinfulness and God's holiness. I trust and hope in Jesus who fills the gap between my sin and God's holiness.

But I have a very limited awareness, as I grow in the faith, I grow in awareness of both God's holiness and my sinfulness. I see more and more of God as he actually is and myself as I actually am.

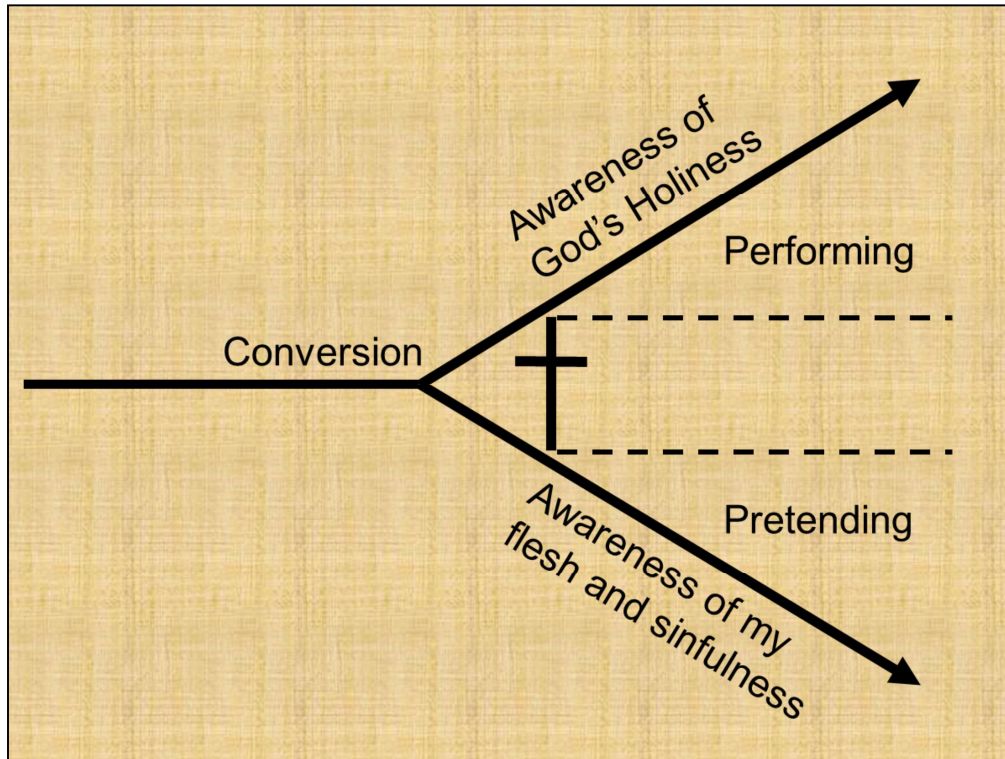
As this awareness grows, something else also grows: my appreciation and love for Jesus. The cross becomes larger and more central in my life.

Unfortunately, sanctification is not as neat as we would like...



I have an ongoing tendency to “shrink the cross”. This happens when I either (a) minimize God’s perfect holiness, thinking of him as less than his Word declares him to be, or (b) elevate my own righteousness, thinking of myself as better than I really am.

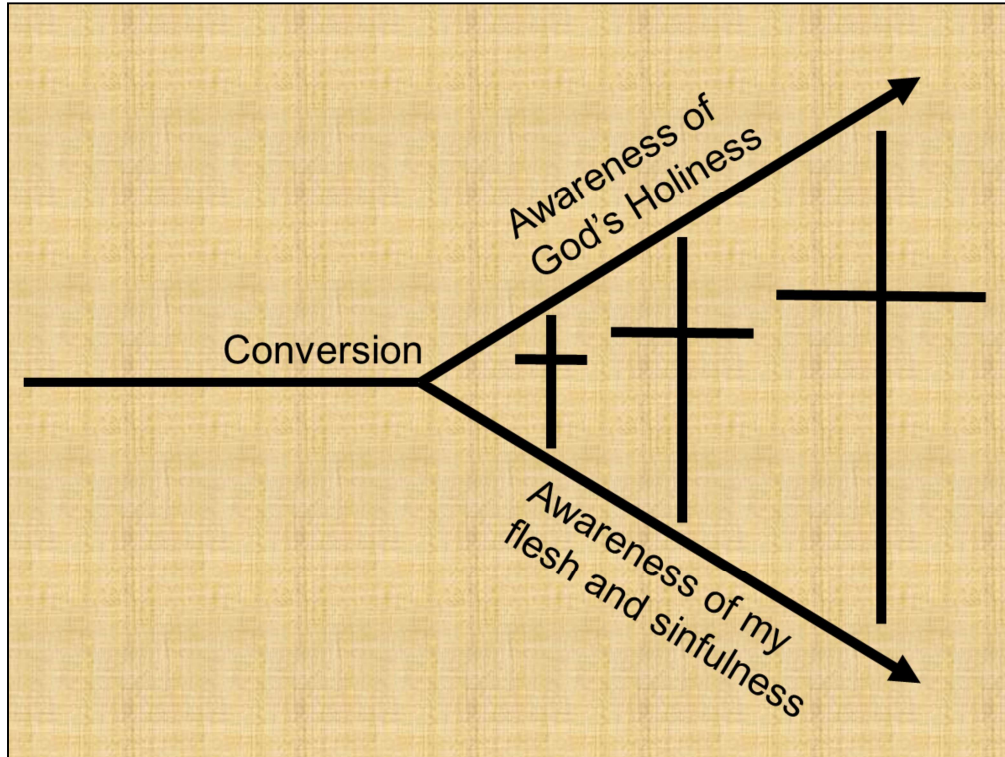
Jesus does not have as large a place in my life as he ought and I undervalue the cross.



I don't want to confront God's holiness because it's a reminder of how much I fall short. I don't want to look at my sinfulness because it feels defeating.

So to avoid my sin, I end up pretending that I'm better than I really am. I rely on comparisons with others to make myself feel better (at least I'm not like those people).

To avoid feeling like a failure, I end up basing God's acceptance of me on my performance, substituting other standards that I believe I can achieve.



So one of the most important areas we can grow in as believers is the riches of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We should never view spiritual growth as something that moves us on from the gospel.

The gospel calls us continually back to true repentance so that we can walk in Christ Jesus the Lord as we ought.

Colossians is a letter in which Paul calls the church back to a harmonious walk in Jesus Christ by growing their awareness of who Jesus is, what he has done, and how their reception of him has changed their lives.

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You received Christ Jesus the Lord

Walk in Christ Jesus the Lord

*Heavenly Father, you have instructed
the hearts of the faithful by the light of the Holy Spirit;
grant that through that same Holy Spirit
we may always savor what is right
and rejoice in his consolation.
Amen.*

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