

# Brief Surveys of Some New Testament Epistles

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## Introduction

The following brief introductions to and surveys of 2 Corinthians–Colossians are part of the book, *A Bible Handbook—Authored by Preachers in the Churches of Christ*, edited by Jerry Moffitt. Bible students will find in this book much more than introductory/survey content such as what I have written below. This book is an interesting, practical, informative, and helpful treasury of additional material, which both novice and advanced students may read with great profit (publication details are in the notes at the close of my MS).

## 2 Corinthians

### **Authorship**

The second Corinthian epistle claims to have been written by the apostle Paul (1:1; 10:1). That he was the human author (inspired by the Holy Spirit, the actual author) of 2 Corinthians has rarely been questioned, even by the most extreme skeptics. Both internal and external evidence is so strong as to be irresistible and incontrovertible. Very early uninspired writers quoted this letter, including Polycarp (cir. A.D. 105), Irenaeus (cir. A.D. 185), and Clement of Alexandria (cir. A.D. 210). It is not likely that an imposter would depict Paul as being in a position of having to defend his apostolic authority or having to fight vigorously to keep the church from apostatizing.

### **Date, Division of Scripture, and Period of Its Writing**

Paul established the Corinthian church near the end of his second great preaching trip (Acts 18:1–11). He began the church under the proconsulship of Gallio (v. 12). Archaeology helps us with the date of Paul's first visit to Corinth. Archaeologists have discovered an inscription mentioning the appointment of Gallio in the year A.D. 52 in the ruins of Delphi. Apparently, the church was established shortly before Gallio took office (vv. 8–12). Given the intervening events between Paul's departure from Corinth and the writing of 2 Corinthians, it was likely written no earlier than 55 and no later than 57.

This letter is one of twenty-one epistles in the New Testament, written variously by James, Jude, Peter, John, and Paul. It is sometimes classified as a "special epistle," not because it is superior to other New Testament documents in its content, its literary style, or other such things, but because it was addressed especially, specifically, to a named recipient—

the church at Corinth. It is one of at least thirteen such letters written by Paul (fourteen, if he wrote the Hebrews letter, which I believe he did).

Paul wrote this letter sometime during his third preaching trip—before he returned to Jerusalem and was arrested (Acts 20:16; 21:10–16, 31–35; 22:24ff). Some of his statements in the letter indicate that he was in Macedonia when he wrote it (e.g., 7:5; 8:1; 9:2–4). This visit to Macedonia is likely the one of which we read in Acts 20:1.

### ***To Whom Paul Wrote It***

It is obvious from the very name of this epistle in our New Testament that it was written to people who lived in the city of Corinth, Greece (Achaia). More particularly, however, Paul addressed it to “...the church of God which at Corinth...” (2 Cor. 1:2). We usually think of the church in its relationship to the Christ, second Person in the Godhead (Mat. 16:18; Acts 20:28; Rom. 16:16; Eph. 1:22–23; 5:23, 25–27; et al.). However, it is also correctly called the “church of God” because it came into existence as a result of His eternal purpose to save mankind through His Son (Eph. 3:9–11).

Paul spent at least a year and one-half (likely longer) in Corinth establishing this congregation (Acts 18:11, 18). The church came into being under circumstances of extreme opposition to the Gospel from certain Jews (18:6; 12–13). This Gentile city had a world-wide reputation for its flagrant immorality. Prostitution was not merely tolerated, but also promoted as an economic benefit to the city. Sexual immorality had actually been religious “respectability” in Corinth. The temple of Aphrodite, the Greek equivalent of Venus, the Roman goddess of love, was in Corinth. It employed 1,000 priestesses who serviced the “worshippers” with their “services” of prostitution. Paul almost certainly wrote his letter to the Romans from Corinth, and his surroundings may have served as the model for his description of the grossest forms of sexual immorality (Rom. 1:21–32). Things appeared so dismal and discouraging, even to this veteran soldier of the cross, that the Lord appeared in a night vision to him telling him not to be afraid nor to be quiet, for He had “much people in the city,” in spite of the way things might look to mere human eyes (Acts 18:9–11).

The pagan and immoral atmosphere of the city itself seems to be reflected in some of the problems Paul addressed in 1 Corinthians (e.g., incest, errors concerning marriage, divorce, and remarriage, and meats offered to idols). Following the list that included many immoral behaviors, Paul added, “...and such were some of you” (1 Cor. 6:9–11)

### ***Why Paul Wrote It***

The letter we know as 2 Corinthians was written to address the reaction of at least some of the Corinthian brethren to 1 Corinthians. He received word from Corinth from the family of Chloe concerning serious problems in the church (1:11; 5:1). He had also received questions from the Corinthians about various problems (7:1; 8:1; 12:1; 15:1; 16:1), likely brought to him in Ephesus by Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus (16:17–18). Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to correct these problems and address these questions. In its very nature it was vigorously corrective. Due to the sternness of 1 Corinthians, Paul was anxious about the way it was received. He therefore arranged for Titus (whom Paul had sent to Corinth, likely when Paul sent 1 Corinthians, 16:1–2; 2 Cor. 8:6) to meet him with a report from Corinth, which meeting occurred in Macedonia (2 Cor. 7:5–6).

Titus' reported that the Corinthians had responded to Paul's letter positively for the most part, which brought comfort and rejoicing to Paul (vv. 7, 13–16). Generally, they had experienced "godly sorrow" which caused them to repent (vv. 8–10). The incestuous man had been disciplined (2:5–9). However, some of them were defiant and impenitent, perhaps influenced by Judaizing teachers (3:1–3; 11:13, 22). This element made various false accusations against Paul in an effort to discredit him and his apostleship (1:12–18; 10:1, 10; 11:17ff; 8:20–21; 12:12).

From the foregoing comments we can observe at least three distinct purposes for this letter:

1. He wrote to commend the majority of the church for their positive and penitent response to his earlier letter. These commendations dominate the first seven chapters.
2. He wrote to remind them of their promise to participate in the contribution for the poor in Judea which he was collecting from churches throughout the Gentile world (1 Cor. 16:1–2). This collection is the entire subject of chapters 8 and 9.
3. He wrote to reprimand and warn the rebellious element in the church and to defend himself against their attacks, which material consumes chapters 10–13.

### ***Key Features***

Perhaps the most unique feature of 2 Corinthians is the degree to which it is autobiographical. Paul, because of the necessity of defending himself against false accusers, was forced to relate details of his life and experiences in preaching the cross that he would not have done otherwise. The long list of the things Paul suffered for Christ (11:22–33) reveals several things not recorded elsewhere (e.g., his five beatings by the Jews with whips, three beatings with rods, three shipwrecks, and particularly the details of his escape from Damascus).

He gives us the only record of the vision/revelation in which he was caught up into Heaven and of the existence of some physical malady (12:1–10).

The two chapters on the collection for the poor in Judea (8–9) give us our greatest body of New Testament material on the subject of the giving of our money as it pertains to the church. Another key feature of 2 Corinthians is Paul's frequent use of irony and sarcasm in addressing those in Corinth who were trying to destroy him (e.g., 10:2, 12; 11:7–8, 19–21; 12:13, 15–16).

### ***Brief Outline***

1. Paul's commendation of the Corinthians for their penitence (1–7)
2. Paul's reminder to the Corinthians of their giving promises and responsibilities (8–9)
3. Paul's rugged response and warnings to the Corinthians who had not repented (10–13)

### ***Summary of the Letter by Chapters***

Chapter 1: Paul introduces his letter and gives a preliminary response to some of his attackers.

Chapter 2: Paul expresses the sorrow he experienced in writing his previous letter, urges them to forgive the penitent fornicator of 1 Corinthians 5, indicates his anxiety over not meeting Titus in Troas and of his consequent trek to Macedonia.

Chapter 3: Paul reveals that his enemies in Corinth were Judaizers who gained credibility in Corinth by letters of commendation.

Chapter 4: Paul asserts that he and his fellow-workers had endured much for the Lord's sake, but that all of it was little and light compared to the eternal glory awaiting them.

Chapter 5: Paul states the correct attitude toward suffering, death, and judgment and outlines the scheme of redemption.

Chapter 6: Paul answers the attacks of his opponents by enumerating his labors and trials and challenged them to separate themselves from evil men and their influences.

Chapter 7: Paul appeals for deserved love and acceptance, further recounts his travels, rejoices at the report of them by Titus, and commends them for their repentance.

Chapters 8–9: Paul reminds them of their promised participation in the contribution for the poor in Judea and states several principles that should govern Christian giving.

Chapters 10–11: Paul addresses the rebellious faction which was under the influence of the false teachers, employing strong sarcasm and irony to expose their ungodly work.

Chapter 12: Paul describes the occasion of his being caught up into Heaven, not as an opportunity for boasting, but for their benefit; he warns them of severe measures if they have not repented when he next visits them.

Chapter 13: Paul continues his threats to deal sharply with them when he comes, but closes with a note of tenderness.

### ***Key Passages***

1. Chapter 3:3–18 is a key passage which teaches that the authority of Moses (and the law he administered) passed away and was replaced by Christ and His law. Beware of the teaching of liberals to the effect that Paul was drawing a distinction between keeping the “spirit” of the law as opposed to the “letter” (i.e., specifics, details) of it (v. 6) and that as long as we observe the “spirit” of the law we can ignore its actual requirements. His contrast is between the Law of Moses (the “letter” that “killeth”) and the Law of Christ—the Gospel (the “spirit” that “giveth life”).
2. Highlight chapter 4:13: If we really believe something we will not be able to be quiet about it—the Truth, for example!
3. In chapter 5:7 an often-misunderstood statement is found: Faith and sight are not equal to faith and knowledge (which are never contrasted with each other in Scripture), as is often alleged. Rather, faith is a kind/source of knowledge, which comes from evidence or testimony, and Biblical faith is knowledge which comes from inspired testimony (Rom. 10:17). Sight is another form of knowledge, based upon what we perceive through our senses. We cannot rely on our senses to guide us, but we must rely on faith which is based on God’s Word.
4. Highlight 5:10–11 as key verses on the subject of Final Judgment.
5. Chapter 7:9–10 is an important passage on the nature of true repentance and its proper antecedents.
6. Chapters 8–9 are almost a “handbook” on Christian giving.
7. Paul’s use of irony and sarcasm in such passages as 10:2, 12; 11:7–8, 19–21; 12:13, 15–16 is instructive. Such literary devices are powerful (and legitimate) means of exposing error and preaching the Truth.

### ***Contemporary Characters***

One could list scores of first century personalities who were contemporary with Paul.

The following are perhaps of greatest interest:

1. Timothy (Paul’s closest, most trusted, and dearest companion and co-worker) was with him in Macedonia as he anxiously awaited word from the Corinthians and as he wrote this letter (1:1).
2. Titus (another of Paul’s close and trusted co-workers) brought him news from Corinth and likely took 2 Corinthians back to them (2:13; 7:6; 8:16–24).
3. Felix was the governor of Judea (Acts 23:25–24:27), having been so appointed in A.D. 52 according to Josephus.
4. Nero was the Roman emperor, having become such in A.D. 54.

## **Galatians**

### ***Authorship***

Paul is the claimed (1:1–2) and the historically accepted and attested human author. There is no hint of any suspicion of its authorship or authenticity from ancient times. Of course, the usual cadre of modernists and skeptics chant their mantra of denial of this fact. Paul received his message (including Galatians) “...through revelation of Jesus Christ,” not from any man or men (1:11–12, 16–17).

### ***Date, Division of Scripture, and Period of Its Writing***

Although some conservative scholars date Galatians as early as A.D. 48–49, most date it in the period from 53–57, sometime during Paul’s third great preaching trip. Galatians is one of Paul’s fourteen (if he wrote Hebrews) epistles in the New Testament.

### ***To Whom Paul Wrote It***

All of Paul’s epistles are specifically addressed either to some individual or congregations. He wrote several letters to a single congregation in various cities (e.g., the churches in Rome, Corinth, Thessalonica, et al.), but this letter is addressed to the churches (however many there were) of the Roman province of Galatia (1:2). While the borders of first century Roman provinces in Asia Minor (especially those involving Galatia) are not always clearly definable, it seems likely that these congregations were established on the first evangelistic trip Paul and Barnabas made, departing from Antioch of Syria (Acts 13–14). They would therefore have included at least the churches in Lystra, Iconium, and Derbe.

The Galatians are so named from their ancestry (the Gauls, another name for the French). They migrated to Asia Minor in the third century B.C. from central Europe. They were known for their fickleness and inconstancy. These natural traits may have contributed to their being led away “so quickly,” ASV) from the Truth when false teachers came among them.

### ***Why Paul Wrote It***

Paul had one overriding aim in writing Galatians: He sought to salvage those brethren from the doctrinal errors (“another gospel,” ASV) that had almost entirely captivated them. The principal error was the teaching of Judaizers that they must submit to the Law of Moses (especially circumcision) to be saved (3:1, 19, 23–25; 4:9–11, 21–31; 5:1–4; 6:12–13, 15).

There is also a clearly-discernible secondary purpose: Paul needed to defend himself. As in Corinth, the false teachers in Galatia sought to gain credibility for themselves by destroying Paul’s influence. He was accused of being a “man-pleaser” (1:10). He was apparently also accused of being a secondary apostle and of teaching a second-hand message (vv. 11–24; 2:6–8).

## **Key Features**

There is very little commendation of the Galatians in this letter. Paul identifies himself, makes a very brief introductory statement, and then immediately and vigorously launches into his words of reproof and correction. This indicates the degree of concern Paul had about their spiritual condition.

The very first theme of the letter is a striking emphasis upon the necessity of maintaining the purity of the one Gospel (1:6–9). The theme of liberty or freedom in Christ runs throughout the letter, in contrast to the “yoke of bondage” (the Law of Moses), which the Judaizers sought to bind upon the Galatians (2:4; 3:23; 4:4–5, 21–31; 5:1, 13). However, Paul warns that liberty does not mean license (5:13).

The only record we have of Peter’s visit to Antioch and of Paul’s rebuke of his fellow-apostle is in this letter (2:11ff). Apostles were not kept from making the wrong choices by the fact of their inspiration. Obviously, Peter was no pope (as the Roman Catholic Church claims) and had no more authority than any other apostle.

The “gate” through which one enters into and “puts on” Christ is clearly set forth as baptism (3:27). This passage alone is sufficient to destroy every claim of salvation/remission of sins before one is Scripturally baptized.

The running argument of the epistle is that since the coming of Christ men have been free from the Law of Moses, which served as a temporary measure till Christ came with the saving Gospel. It is nothing short of amazing that millions of people who claim to believe the Bible continue to believe that men today are still under at least parts of the Old Testament.

Paul makes a stunning and devastating argument in 5:3: One cannot take the Law of Moses piecemeal—if one places himself under any part of it, he obligates himself to keep it all.

The Calvinistic doctrine that denies that one who is truly among the elect can ever be lost (i.e., “perseverance of the saints,” “once saved, always saved,” “impossibility of apostasy”) is blown away by Paul’s statement in 5:4.

One of the “trademarks” of Galatians is the powerful contrast between the ugly “works of the flesh” and the lovely “fruit of the Spirit” (5:19–24).

## **Brief Outline**

1. Paul establishes his apostolic authority (1–2).
2. Paul refutes the errors of the Judaizers (3–4).
3. Paul urges purity and faithfulness of life (5–6).

### ***Summary of the Letter by Chapters***

Chapter 1: Neither men (even apostles) nor angels had/have the right to alter the one Gospel, which Paul had received by revelation of Christ.

Chapter 2: Paul was made an apostle by the Lord, rather than by men, and his authority was equal to Peter's. However, he did not glory in his authority, realizing that he must live a crucified life.

Chapter 3: Paul declares the meaning of the "seed promise" God made to Abraham—it referred to the Christ. The promised blessing through the Seed refers to salvation in Christ for all men who will obey Him.

Chapter 4: God sent forth the Christ at the time he determined to be right, and through Him men can be adopted into God's family. The progression from the temporary measure of the Mosaic Law to the glorious Gospel of Christ is forcefully taught and illustrated in the allegory of Sarah and Isaac contrasted with Hagar and Ishmael.

Chapter 5: After Paul boldly exposes the fallacy of subjecting themselves to the Law, he challenges them to avoid all evil and instead adopt the beautiful traits of righteousness.

Chapter 6: Paul exhorts them to help one another, all the while remembering and shouldering their own responsibilities. Our glorying should be in the cross, for which we should be willing to suffer ("bear the marks of Jesus").

### ***Key Passages***

1. Galatians 1:8–9 should be highlighted, yea memorized: Men who pervert the Gospel of Christ are under the anathema of God.
2. Galatians 2:21 is a pungent exposure of those who would seek God through the Law of Moses: If we can be saved through the Law, Christ died in vain, needlessly.
3. Galatians 3:16 defines Who the Seed of Abraham was through whom God promised to bless all men.
4. Galatians 4:19 declares the aim God has for His children—that "Christ be formed" in us.
5. Galatians 5:6 states God's great plan for our salvation. It is not by "faith only" nor by "works only," but by "faith working through love."
6. Galatians 6:7 contains God's great and unimpeachable principle: "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap."

### ***Contemporary Characters***

Since Galatians and 2 Corinthians were written at about the same time, the characters that were mentioned in connection with 2 Corinthians also apply to Galatians. Additionally, Barnabas, James (likely the Lord's half-brother), and the apostles, Peter (Cephas) and John are mentioned, all of whom were Paul's contemporaries (2:7–9, 11–14).

## **Ephesians**



## ***Authorship***

The letter to Ephesus begins with the claim that the apostle Paul is its human author (1:1). Because I believe in the authenticity of the Biblical records—due to their verbal inspiration—I have no doubt concerning Paul’s authorship. However, there is much testimony to Paul’s authorship from very early uninspired writers, including Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian, all of whom lived between A.D. 120–220. Again, the only ones who question the Pauline authorship are those who are predisposed to question and destroy every ingredient of the Scriptures that contributes to their claim of inspiration.

## ***Date, Division of Scripture, and Period of Its Writing***

The Ephesian letter was likely written between A.D. 60–61 from Rome where Paul was in prison (Acts 28:16–31). To the Ephesians, he refers to himself as a prisoner (Eph. 3:1; 4:1).

The Ephesian letter is not only another one of Paul’s thirteen or fourteen “special letters” in the New Testament, but it also belongs to an even more select subdivision of his writings. It is one of four letters which are commonly called the “prison epistles” (along with Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon), because he wrote them from the same imprisonment.

## ***To Whom Paul Wrote It***

The letter is addressed “to the saints that are at Ephesus” (1:1). This city was one of the three great business centers of the eastern Mediterranean area. One of its great attractions was the temple which housed the image of the goddess, Diana. Closely related to the worship of Diana was the practice of mystical and magical arts, both of which were affected by Paul’s preaching of the Gospel (Acts 19:17–20; 23–41).

We have no record in Scripture concerning when or under what circumstances the Ephesian church was established. Jews from the province of Asia (of which Ephesus was the leading city) were present on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:9). It is possible that some of these obeyed the Gospel and established the church when they returned home. Paul (with Priscilla and Aquila) arrived there from Corinth as he concluded his second evangelistic trip (18:18–19). He reasoned with the Jews in their synagogue, but soon left (leaving Priscilla and Aquila behind), promising to return (vv. 19–21). If not before, the church in Ephesus most certainly began with the arrival of these three saints.

Apollos, whose teaching concerning baptism was defective, arrived after Paul left, and Priscilla and Aquila corrected him (vv. 24–26). Apollos went to Achaia (i.e., Corinth [19:1; 1 Cor. 1:12; 3:4–6, 22; 4:6; 16:12]) before Paul returned (Acts 18: 27–28). Apollos had apparently taught and improperly baptized about 12 men with John’s baptism, whom Paul, upon returning

to Ephesus and learning of the defective baptisms, immediately further taught and baptized them Scripturally (19:1–7). He taught three months in the synagogue, and when opposed there, moved to the school of Tyrannus, where he taught two years, thereby spreading the Gospel throughout the area (vv. 8–10). Thus, a strong, and perhaps large church was developed by Paul’s efforts. By the time he came back to the area, the church had elders (20:17). Paul warned the Ephesian elders to be watchful for false teachers (vv. 28–31). At some point he sent Timothy to Ephesus to oppose these evil men and to deal with the problems they were causing (1 Tim. 1:3–7). By the end of the first century the Ephesian church was still behaving in some commendable ways, but she had left “her first love” and was warned by the Lord to repent or be disowned by Him (Rev. 2:1–7).

### ***Why Paul Wrote It***

Unlike Paul’s combative and corrective letters (e.g., 1 Cor., Gal., Col., et al.), Ephesians was apparently written primarily to establish and confirm the saints there in the great fundamentals of the faith.

### ***Key Features***

Paul’s letter to Ephesus is sublime in its declarations of the eternal plan of God for man’s redemption, but it is no less a rich collection of practical exhortations for Christian living. The richness of thought in Ephesians is seen in its rich vocabulary characterized by forty-two words not found elsewhere in Paul’s letters.

Ephesians and Colossians are sometimes called “twin epistles” because they contain so many close similarities. Of the 155 verses in Ephesians, half of them (78) are found in Colossians in some degree of sameness. Some phrases and passages are practically identical (e.g., Eph. 5:5—Col. 3:5; Eph. 5:19—Col. 3:16; Eph. 5:22—Col. 3:18; et al.). They were obviously written about the same time and by the same author, but with different purposes, as previously indicated.

The entire letter centers around the church, the spiritual “body of Christ” as God’s institution for accomplishing His eternal purpose. Paul refers to the church as the “body” nine times (more than once per chapter). The little word, *in*, occurring about 120 times, may be the **biggest** word in Ephesians. Since men glorify God **in** Christ, only as they are **in** His church (Eph. 3:21), the union between the Christian, Christ, and His church is frequently expressed by use of this preposition (“**in** the Beloved”—1 time, “**in** him [Christ]”—4 times, “**in** whom [Christ]”—8 times, “**in** Christ”—13 times, et al.).

### **Brief Outline**

1. The church, as it represents God's eternal purpose in Christ (1–3).
2. The church, as it applies God's eternal purpose to daily living (4–6).

### **Summary of the Letter by Chapters**

Chapter 1: Paul sublimely states God's great plan for man's redemption and prays for the Ephesians.

Chapter 2: Paul reminds them that from being dead in sin, God, in His grace, had raised them to spiritual life (Jew and Gentile alike), reconciling them both unto God in the church through the cross.

Chapter 3: Paul declares the church to be God's demonstration of His eternal purpose in Christ, which provokes a moving prayer and a powerful statement of praise.

Chapter 4: Paul urges practical unity and spiritual growth and behavior based upon sound doctrine.

Chapter 5: Paul exhorts to a personal life of love and purity and emphasizes mutual responsibilities of husbands and wives based on the relationship of Christ to the church.

Chapter 6: Paul sets forth Christ's law on parent–child and servant–master relationships and warns the Ephesians to use the armor and weaponry the Lord provides for their spiritual battles.

### **Key Passages**

1. Tracing Paul's use of the word, *walk/walked* (8 times) in Ephesians makes an interesting study.
2. Paul's statement in 2:8–10 is a pivotal statement of God's gracious provision for man's salvation. How tragic that so many have perverted so as to eliminate man's necessary obedient response!
3. In 2:13–18 Paul provides a powerful picture of the relationship between the Christ, His blood/cross, His church, and man's reconciliation to God.
4. Chapter 3:9–11 forever refutes and destroys the dispensational and premillennial view of the church, namely that it was established as an emergency medium to substitute for the mythical earthly political millennial kingdom, which Christ will allegedly establish when He comes again. The church is according to God's **eternal purpose** and is the only kingdom He will ever have on earth.
5. The seven doctrinal "ones" of 4:4–6 are the great "planks" in any God-pleasing "platform" of unity among brethren.
6. The section in 4:17–5:18 is a "handbook" for our personal behavior and we should prayerfully read and apply its precepts frequently.
7. Ephesians 5:19 is a key passage indicating the kind of music in worship which pleases God—singing.

8. If all husbands and wives universally would carefully follow Paul's admonitions in 5:22–33 it would almost put the divorce industry out of business. It would help greatly even if none others but Christians followed them
9. If parents (especially fathers) and children would carefully read and heed Paul's orders in 6:1–4 it would solve most of the problems of juvenile crime and mischief so prominent nowadays.
10. The armor and weapon we need for the spiritual struggles we all face are clearly set forth in 6:10–17. Notice that they are not inherited nor does the Holy Spirit directly infuse us with these armaments. Rather, these are things we must "put on" (v. 11) and "take up" (v. 13) ourselves. Little wonder so many saints faint under pressure. They are too lazy to equip themselves for the fray!

### ***Contemporary Characters***

The characters contemporary with Paul at the time he wrote Ephesians were numerous, but we will notice those most closely associated with him in his Roman imprisonment. Paul mentions only Tychicus in Ephesians, and it is likely that he delivered the letter to Ephesus (6:21–22). This "beloved brother and faithful minister" is also mentioned as the bearer of the Colossian letter (Col. 4:7), which, as already noted, was certainly written very near the time of the Ephesian letter. Thus, those who were with Paul when he wrote Colossians (and several are named) would have also been with him when he wrote Ephesians. These included Onesimus (the slave belonging to Philemon [Phi. 10–16]), Aristarchus, Mark, Justus, Epaphras, Luke, and Demas (Col. 4:9–14). Nero was on the emperor's throne in Rome.

## **Philippians**

### ***Authorship***

The letter begins by identifying Paul as its author (1:1) and no reputable scholars have questioned this identity.

### ***Date, Division of Scripture, and Period of Its Writing***

Paul mentioned four times that he was "in bonds" when he wrote to the Philippians. This imprisonment is believed to have been the one in Rome (Acts 28:16–31), during which he also wrote letters to the Ephesians, the Colossians, and Philemon. Thus it is one of those four "special" letters of Paul which are commonly known as the "prison epistles." However, Paul describes some developments in Philippians that imply a later writing than its kindred letters. In Colossians 4:2–4 Paul requested prayers that God would open a door for him to speak the

Word. In Philippians 1:12–14 he reports such progress of the Gospel that he was known throughout the whole praetorian guard and that the brethren had been emboldened in their efforts. If we speculate that perhaps a year may have passed between the writing of Colossians and Philippians, Paul wrote it in about A.D. 61–62.

### ***To Whom Paul Wrote It***

The church in Philippi was the first one established on European soil of which we have record. Paul and his companions established it in about A.D. 50 on his second great preaching trip that began from Antioch, and in response to the “Macedonian call” (Acts 16:9–50). Philippi was named for and by Philip of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great. It was the principal city of the Roman province of Macedonia. Moreover, it was actually a Roman colony, thus it was somewhat of a miniature of Rome with a large Roman population.

Paul visited the brethren there twice on his third preaching trip (Acts 20:1–6) and was perhaps in Philippi when he wrote his “letter of relief” to Corinth (2 Cor.). The church in Philippi had been “generous to a fault” with Paul from its beginning (1:3), supporting him when he left them and went to Thessalonica (4:16), and when he went on to Corinth (4:15; cf. Acts 18:5; 2 Cor. 11:9). They had given “beyond their power” toward the Judean contribution, in spite of affliction and poverty (2 Cor. 8:1–5). Finally, hearing that Paul was a prisoner in Rome, they sent support to him by the hands of Epaphroditus (Phi. 2:25, 30; 4:10, 14, 18). The spiritual maturity of the Philippian church is further reflected in the fact that it had “bishops and deacons” (1:1). Paul had a special affection for these brethren and he expressed it repeatedly in his letter to them (e.g., 1:3, 7–8; 2:12; 4:1).

### ***Why Paul Wrote It***

By reading the Philippian letter we may observe several purposes Paul had in mind:

1. To thank the Philippians for sending financial support to supply his needs in both the past and the present (1:5; 4:10, 14–16, 18)
2. To thank them for sending Epaphroditus, both to bear their contribution and to serve Paul’s needs however he could (2:25, 30; 4:18)
3. To tell them he also intended to send Timothy to them so that he might bring Paul firsthand news from Philippi (2:19–24)
4. To tell them that although Epaphroditus had almost died of some illness (concerning which they had heard and been anxious), he was now well and was being sent back to them, likely bearing this epistle (2:25–30)
5. To warn the church of the ever-present Judaizing teachers, referred to as “dogs” and “evil workers” (3:2–3)
6. To admonish two sisters, Euodia and Syntyche, to “be of the same mind in the Lord” (4:2)

7. To encourage and edify them generally

### ***Key Features***

This is the only New Testament letter that specifically includes elders and deacons in its address (1:1). The letter is distinctive in its almost total absence of rebuke and correction, the only exception being the mild admonition to Euodia and Syntyche (4:2). Philippians is a letter that expresses and encourages rejoicing; in its 104 verses, some form of the word “joy” is found 16 times. Paul gives one of only two or three hints in the New Testament of what sort of body resurrected saints will be given for eternity in Heaven (3:20–21).

### ***Brief Outline***

1. Paul’s personal messages to the Philippians (1–2).
2. Paul’s closing exhortations to the Philippians (3–4).

### ***Summary of the Letter by Chapters***

Chapter 1: Paul thanks them for their remembrance of him, reports on his work in bonds, and exhorts the Philippians to live worthily of the Gospel.

Chapter 2: Paul sets forth the humility of Christ as our example, urges the Philippians to work out their salvation, and tells them of his plans.

Chapter 3: Paul warns of Judaizing teachers, presents his own fleshly and spiritual credentials, and points them toward Heaven.

Chapter 4: Paul urges the Philippians to rejoice in the Lord, to think on wholesome things, and to rely upon strength from the Lord in times of want.

### ***Key Passages***

Unlike many moderns, Paul recognized the essentiality of defending the Gospel (1:16, ASV; 1:17, KJV). The description of the mind and humility of Christ as our model is unsurpassed in power, pathos, and sheer beauty (2:5–8). The necessity of obediently working in order to be saved is stated in 2:12. Paul does not hesitate to expose and identify as “dogs” and “evil workers” those who were seeking to trouble the church with their false doctrines (3:2–3; cf. Mat. 7:6, 15–20). The reliance upon God through prayer is the only avenue that leads to joy and peace that the Christian alone can have and that the world does not understand, much less possess (4:4–7). Philippians 4:8 should ever be the Christian’s guide to wholesome and pure thinking. Paul makes the important point that we are not born with the attitude of contentment; even he had to **learn** to be content (4:11). The great source of the Christian’s strength is not wealth, health, youth, favorable circumstances, or other such things; rather it is the Lord, who provides strength even in the absence of such things (4:13).

### ***Contemporary Characters***

Nero was on the imperial throne. Paul had several companions in Rome, including Timothy (1:1; 2:19–23), Epaphroditus (2:25–30; 4:18), and unnamed “saints...in Caesar’s household” (4:22). It is also likely that at least some of those named in the Colossian letter were still with Paul in Rome (Col. 4:7–14).

## **Colossians**

### ***Authorship***

Colossians bears the signature of Paul in both its opening and closing verses (1:1; 4:18). It has such ancient, thorough, and unbroken external testimony as being from Paul that it is folly to question or doubt Paul’s authorship; only the destructive and skeptical Bible critics question the matter. The quibbles they offer relate to imagined internal material, but such are easily explainable. There is most certainly nothing in the Colossian letter that necessitates our questioning that it came from the inspired pen of Paul.

### ***Date, Division of Scripture, and Period of Its Writing***

Colossians is one of Paul’s thirteen (fourteen, including Hebrews) “special letters” in the New Testament. When Paul wrote to the Colossian church he was a prisoner, a fact to which he refers three times. The general consensus of scholarship is that Colossians is one of Paul’s four “prison epistles” (along with Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon), written while he was in his first Roman imprisonment (Acts 28:16–31). The letter was likely written in about A.D. 60–61.

### ***To Whom Paul Wrote It***

There is no certain information concerning who first took the Gospel to Colossae, nor when. Some of his statements (e.g., 1:4, 7–9; 2:1) seem to indicate that Paul had never even been to Colossae, much less established the church there. It seems most likely that the church began in Colossae (and its neighboring cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis [2:1; 4:13, 15–16] in the Lycus River valley) during Paul’s three-year stay in Ephesus, about one hundred miles to the west (Acts 20:31). For two of these three years he taught daily in the school of Tyrannus so that “all they that dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks” (19:9–10; cf. 26). Paul comes near saying that Epaphras first preached the Gospel to them (Col. 1:6–7). This man was apparently a native of the city (4:12), and it is possible that he had heard, believed, and obeyed the Gospel under Paul while in some visit or visits to Ephesus, and then brought it back home and established the church. If this was the case, the church was established in the period spanned by A.D. 55–57, the time Paul was in Ephesus.

The original population of the region was from the ancient Phrygian Civilization, noted for its tendency toward wildly emotional religious mysticism and speculation. With the march of Alexander and his Greek culture and language through this area in the fourth century B. C. and with the arrival of Greek immigrants, there was a decided Greek flavor to the populace. Some of Paul's statements seem to indicate that the church was composed predominantly of Gentiles (1:27; 2:13). However, there was also a large colony of Jews in the area, and there are several indications in the letter that the church was at least familiar with certain Mosaic teachings and practices (2:11, 14, 16). The heresy Paul addressed had an unmistakable Jewish flavor. Perhaps he was listing the composition of the church in 3:11: "[In Christ] there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, bondman, freeman; but Christ is all, and in all."

### ***Why Paul Wrote It***

Paul's primary purpose for writing was to address and refute a heretical philosophy that had infiltrated the church, commonly referred to as the "Colossian Heresy." He had apparently learned of this destructive doctrine from Epaphras (1:8). Some think it likely that Epaphras went to Rome primarily to seek Paul's help with this problem which he did not know how to handle. The heresy had three main elements: (1) It was speculative and mystical (2:8), which fits in with the natural tendencies of the Phrygian heritage. Perhaps the denial of the Lord's Deity was a major feature of this false philosophy (v. 9). (2) It had a Jewish influence (2:11–16). (3) It had an ascetic element (2:20–23). The first and third of these elements were prominent parts of the Gnostic Heresy that became a major problem for the church in general in the second century. Thus in Colossae we have what appears to be a preview of that heresy.

It appears from many of Paul's statements that the heretics must also have attacked the supremacy, power, and authority of Christ (1:15–19; 2:2–3; 9–10, 15, 19). Other elements of the heresy included carelessness toward (or rejection of) God's moral laws (1:22; 3:5–9), the worship of angels (2:18), and intellectual snobbery and egotism (vv. 18, 23).

### ***Key Features***

Prayer is a prominent subject in Colossians (1:3, 9, 12; 2:7; 3:17; 4:2, 12). Paul wrote several things relating to repentance (2:11; 3:3, 5, 8–10, 12). The concept of Christians being new people in Christ is a significant theme (2:12; 3:1, 3, 10). Paul stressed the importance of knowledge (1:9–10; 2:1–3; 3:10). Some of the frequent, interesting, and key words in Colossians include: (1) *minister (diakonos)*, meaning "willing servant" (from which our English



word, *deacon*, is derived) (1:7, 23–25; 4:7, 17) (2) *church* and *body* (1:18, 24; 2:17; 3:15; 4:15), (3) *mystery* (1:25–27; 2:2; 4:3), and (4) *kingdom* (1:12–13; 4:11).

Does 1:15 teach that Christ is the first Being God created? (The Jehovah’s Witness Cult so affirms in its denial of the Godhood or Deity of Christ; they identify Him with Michael, the archangel.) The key to this passage (and the refutation of the JW heresy) is the Greek word for “firstborn” (*prototokos*), which means first in importance or preeminence, not first in time. Verses 16–17 show this to be Paul’s point. Besides, it should be evident that no one could be both before all things and the first thing created as well.

As mentioned earlier in the survey material on Ephesians, the Ephesian and Colossian letters are often thought of as “twin epistles” because so many verses are so similar. While they have many themes, words, and even phrases in common, they are very different in mood or tone. Colossians is written with a certain abruptness, as Paul confronted and refuted a strange doctrinal system from a great distance in a church he had not established and likely had not even visited. Ephesians is much milder and calmer and is not combative in nature or tone.

### ***Brief Outline***

1. Paul introduces the letter and discusses doctrine (1).
2. Paul attacks the heresy in Colossae (2).
3. Paul sets forth practical exhortations for everyday living (3).
4. Paul sends personal greetings and instructions (4).

### ***Summary of the Letter by Chapters***

Chapter 1: Paul introduces himself and Timothy, commends the Colossians, and elaborates on the Deity of Christ.

Chapter 2: Paul expresses his concern for them and warns about various doctrines which were common to the heresy which had invaded the church in Colossae.

Chapter 3: Paul urges the upward look and the upward life and sets forth the mutual duties of husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and slaves.

Chapter 4: Paul solicits their prayers and gives his closing greetings and instructions.

### ***Key Passages***

Colossians 1:13 is strong proof that the kingdom of Christ is not something the world must await until the Lord comes again—the Colossians were in the kingdom in the first century! Much necessary information about Scriptural baptism is found in 2:12: (1) It is a burial (not sprinkling or pouring), (2) it is not a work of human merit wherein we trust in what we are doing for our salvation, but it is an act of faith in the work of God, Who raised Jesus from the dead, and (3) it and one’s coming forth from it are a figure of the burial and resurrection of the Christ.

Colossians 2:14–20; 2:9 constitutes the fullest and most dynamic description of the Deity and supremacy of Christ in all of Holy Writ. Paul’s warning about being spoiled through human philosophy and tradition is still necessary to hear (2:8). Colossians 2:14 is a pivotal passage teaching that the Old Testament has been done away, even specifying when. The Lord’s pattern for the only kind of music in worship He authorizes in the Christian age is found in 3:16—it is singing that teaches and admonishes (not playing, whistling, humming, or making other vocal sounds) and that is done to one another (congregational). Colossians 3:17 is a key verse on the subject of authority in religion—all that we do or say must be authorized by Christ (“in the name of the Lord”).

### ***Contemporary Characters***

Paul names many who are his companions as he writes the Colossian letter. These include Timothy (1:1), Epaphras (6–8; 4:12; cf. Phi. 23), Tychicus (Col. 4:7–8; cf. Acts 20:4; Eph. 6:21–22), Onesimus (Col. 4:9; cf. Phi. 10–16), Aristarchus (Col. 4:10; cf. Acts. 20:4; 27:2), Mark (Col. 4:10; cf. Acts 12:12, 25; 13:13; 15:37–38; 2 Tim. 4:11), Jesus/Justus (Col. 4:11), Luke (Col. 4:14; cf. Acts 16:6–10; 20:5–6; 21:15–16; 27:2, 11–16; Phi. 24; 2 Tim 4:11), Demas (Col. 4:14; cf. Phi. 24; 2 Tim. 4:10), and Archippus (Col. 4:17; cf. Phi. 2). Nero was on the throne in Rome.

**[Note:** I wrote this MS for the Fourth Annual Gulf Coast Lectures, hosted by the Portland Church of Christ, Portland, TX, May 4–7, 1996. I did not present it orally, but it was published separately from the written/oral lectures in a book titled, *A Bible Handbook—Authored by Preachers in the Churches of Christ*, ed. Jerry Moffitt (Portland, TX: Portland Church of Christ, 1996.)

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