

COLOSSIANS

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THE COMPLETE CHRISTIAN



8 INTERACTIVE BIBLE STUDIES FOR
SMALL GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS



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matthiasmedia

The Complete Christian
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» HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF THESE STUDIES

1. What is an Interactive Bible Study?

Interactive Bible Studies are a bit like a guided tour of a famous city. They take you through a particular part of the Bible, helping you to know where to start, pointing out things along the way, suggesting avenues for further exploration, and making sure that you know how to get home. Like any good tour, the real purpose is to allow you to go exploring for yourself—to dive in, have a good look around, and discover for yourself the riches that God’s word has in store.

In other words, these studies aim to provide stimulation and input and point you in the right direction, while leaving you to do plenty of the exploration and discovery yourself.

We hope that these studies will stimulate lots of ‘interaction’—interaction with the Bible, with the things we’ve written, with your own current thoughts and attitudes, with other people as you discuss them, and with God as you talk to him about it all.

2. The format

Each study contains five main components:

- sections of text that introduce, inform, summarize and challenge
- a set of numbered study questions that help you examine the passage and think through its meaning
- sidebars that provide extra bits of background or optional extra study ideas, especially regarding other relevant parts of the Bible
- an ‘Implications’ section that helps you think about what this passage means for you and your life today
- suggestions for thanksgiving and prayer as you close.

3. How to use these studies on your own

- Before you begin, pray that God would open your eyes to what he is saying in the Bible, and give you the spiritual strength to do something about it.
- Work through the study, reading the text, answering the questions about the Bible passage, and exploring the sidebars as you have time.
- Resist the temptation to skip over the ‘Implications’ and ‘Give thanks and pray’ sections at the end. It is important that we not only hear and understand God’s word, but respond to it. These closing sections help us do that.
- Take what opportunities you can to talk to others about what you’ve learnt.

4. How to use these studies in a small group

- Much of the above applies to group study as well. The studies are suitable for structured Bible study or cell groups, as well as for more informal pairs and triplets. Get together with a friend or friends and work through them at your own pace; use them as the basis for regular Bible study with your spouse. You don’t need the formal structure of a ‘group’ to gain maximum benefit.

- For small groups, it is *very useful* if group members can work through the study themselves *before* the group meets. The group discussion can take place comfortably in an hour (depending on how sidetracked you get!) if all the members have done some work in advance.
- The role of the group leader is to direct the course of the discussion and to try to draw the threads together at the end. This will mean a little extra preparation—underlining the sections of text to emphasize and read out loud, working out which questions are worth concentrating on, and being sure of the main thrust of the study. Leaders will also probably want to work out approximately how long they'd like to spend on each part.
- If your group members usually don't work through the study in advance, it's extra important that the leader prepares which parts to concentrate on, and which parts to glide past more quickly. In particular, the leader will need to select which of the 'Implications' to focus on.
- We haven't included an 'answer guide' to the questions in the studies. This is a deliberate move. We want to give you a guided tour of the Bible, not a lecture. There is more than enough in the text we have written and the questions we have asked to point you in what we think is the right direction. The rest is up to you.

5. Bible translation

Previous editions of this Interactive Bible Study have assumed that most readers would be using the New International Version of the Bible. However, since the release of the English Standard Version in 2001, many have switched to the ESV for study purposes. So with this new edition of *The Complete Christian*, we have decided to quote from and refer to the ESV text, which we recommend.

» STUDY 1

RECEIVING AND WALKING

[OVERVIEW]

A town like Colossae

IMAGINE, IF YOU CAN, A FERTILE valley with a river meandering through it, in what we would now call Turkey. On the shores of the river, at the junction of two important roads, is a town like many first-century towns. This is Colossae, just down the road from Laodicea and Hierapolis.

As you stroll through the streets and into the marketplace, you encounter a mix of people and religious beliefs. There are Jews and Greeks there, as well

as a variety of other races, cults and religious philosophies. Among the various subcultures is a group calling itself ‘Christian’.

These Christians were the original recipients of the letter that we call ‘Colossians’, and which we will examine in some depth in the next eight studies.

Let’s look briefly at how the Christian group at Colossae came into being, and why the apostle Paul is writing to them.

1. What was Paul's relationship with the Christians at Colossae before he wrote to them (2:1, 5)?

2. Who originally brought the gospel to the Colossians (1:6-8)?

3. What is Paul's description of:

- what the Colossians used to be like (1:21, 2:13)?

- what the Colossians are now like (1:3-8)?

4. What is Paul's situation as he writes this letter (4:3, 18; cf. Phlm 23)?

WE'RE NOT CERTAIN EXACTLY WHEN the Colossian church came into existence. It may well have been during Paul's lengthy stay in Ephesus (which was not all that far from Colossae). In Acts 19, we read that as a result of Paul's teaching in the lecture hall of Tyranus, "all the resi-

dents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks" (v. 10). Whatever their past history, Paul is rejoicing in their faith in the gospel, and the fruit of that faith. And he is concerned for their welfare—concerned enough to write to them from his imprisonment.

Why is Paul writing?

Many people have assumed that Paul was writing to combat a dangerous heresy in Colossae. In chapter 2 of the letter, he certainly gets stuck into somebody or something (as we will see in study 5). However, we need to bear the following things in mind:

- The only information we have about the ‘heresy’ is that contained in the letter itself. By reading between the lines and taking note of how Paul refutes the heretics, biblical scholars have attempted to reconstruct what the heresy was like.
- No-one seems able to agree on exactly what sort of heresy was involved. There has been a bewildering array of suggestions, and perhaps the only thing we can be certain about is that we can’t be certain. We don’t even know for sure if there was a clearly defined ‘heresy’.
- We also need to note that the letter to the Colossians was meant for a wider audience. In 4:16, Paul urges the Colossians to show their letter to the neighbouring Laodiceans, and in turn to read the Laodicean letter (which we no longer have).
- As every pastor knows, there are always distractions and heresies to lead Christians astray. It is a feature of our sinful world, and it should not surprise us. The Colossian church was by no means unique in having to deal with people or teachings that sought to distract from Christ.

- Finally, we should remember that the Scriptures were also written down for *our* instruction. God has inspired Paul’s letter to the Colossians so that it speaks to his people in every age, whether they have detailed knowledge of the Colossian ‘heresy’ or not.

In other words, there may have been a ‘Colossian heresy’; it would certainly fit the facts. However, we don’t need to worry too much about it. We certainly don’t need to know any more about it than Paul actually reveals in his letter. Paul’s letter is general enough to be read in other churches (like the Laodicean church) and general enough to apply to us.

Indeed, the striking thing about the false teaching Paul is refuting in chapter 2 is that it is so similar to the kinds of false teaching that abound today. As we look at chapter 2 in more detail later on, we’ll see just how much it has to teach 21st-century Christians.

There is much to challenge us in this short but very important New Testament letter, and to get to the heart of that challenge, we are going to leap headfirst into the middle.

The challenge

It may seem rather strange to start studying a letter in the middle, but in Colossians 2:6-7 we find a sentence that virtually summarizes the whole letter:

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.

These two verses are the hinge around which the letter turns. They summarize all that comes before, and outline what is to follow.

In this first study, we will work through these two verses step by step, and in so doing we'll gain a feel for the message of the whole letter. (In the following studies, we'll go back to the beginning and work through the whole letter.)

“Therefore”

The opening word in these two verses prepares the readers for some sort of conclusion. “Okay,” says Paul, “given what I have just been saying, this is what I want you to do”. What has Paul just been saying?

He has just been reminding the Colossians of his ministry to the Gentiles, of which they are part (1:24-2:5). He has been a servant of the gospel that they have received, and has labored and struggled (with God's strength) to proclaim Christ with the final aim of presenting “everyone mature in Christ” (1:28).

Even though he has not met the Colossians personally, he is struggling for them too (2:1). His purpose is that they may know Christ better, and he rejoices in the news that their faith in Christ is orderly and firm.

“as you received”

So then, says Paul, in light of all that I have been saying, I want you to continue in Christ, *as you received him*.

5. What does it mean that the Colossians had “received” Christ? Can you see any clues earlier in the letter? (See especially 1:3-8, 23.)

Translation note

The word that is translated ‘received’ is a special sort of word, meaning to have a tradition or body of teaching passed on to you. It's the same word Paul uses in 1 Corinthians when he writes: “Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you *received*, in which you stand” (15:1).

6. What do you think is the significance of the little word “as” in verse 6?

“Christ Jesus the Lord”

JESUS WAS A FIRST-CENTURY JEW who was raised in Nazareth, conducted a public ministry throughout Galilee and Judea, and was crucified in around 30 AD—that is, around 25 years before Paul wrote this letter to the Colossians. Paul calls Jesus the “Christ”. The word ‘Christ’ is a title taken from the Old Testament. It means ‘anointed one’ (the Hebrew word is ‘messiah’), and des-

cribes the ruler or king of Israel. For hundreds of years before the time of Jesus, Israel had not had a king of its own. The Old Testament prophets looked forward to a time when God would send a great king to liberate Israel from her oppressors and establish a worldwide kingdom. Paul is saying that Jesus, crucified (and risen) only 25 years ago, is that ‘Christ’.

7. What is Jesus Lord of (1:13-20)?

8. “The message of Christianity is a person, not an idea.” Do you agree? Why? Why not?

“so walk in him”

9. In what way were the Colossians to continue their Christian lives?

10. How do you think this might relate to the false teaching that the Colossians were facing?

“rooted”

11. The image here is of the Colossians being like a tree whose roots are bedded down in Christ. How does this help us understand the way we continue to walk 'in Christ'?

“built up”

12. The second image is of a building. How (or where) is our 'building' meant to grow?

“established in the faith”

13. Here, “the faith” is the body of teaching or knowledge that the Colossians had received. In what way were they to be established?

“abounding in thanksgiving”

14. The ongoing Christian life is to be characterized by thankfulness, and lots of it. How is this different from human nature?

Summary

15. To tie it all together, try to rewrite Colossians 2:6-7 in your own words. Don't use any of the words in the verses, except 'Jesus'.

Heresy?

WE DO NOT KNOW FOR SURE WHAT the Colossian heresy was, or indeed if there was one. But we do know our own world only too well. We know that temptations to turn aside from Jesus are all around us, and they come in numerous forms.

There are those who tell us that it is

juvenile or inconsistent to follow Jesus Christ as the Lord of the world. There are many learned scholars, theologians and ministers who do not regard Jesus as anything more than a peculiarly gifted man. For them, he is not the divine ruler of the world, and he certainly did not rise from the dead.

Many of our friends and workmates have the same basic attitudes to Jesus, even if they're not presented in such a sophisticated, religious form. They think that Jesus was a good man, even a great man, but they do not allow him to run their lives.

The steady drip of these attitudes can affect us. Even if we have “received Christ Jesus the Lord” like the Colossians, we can easily find ourselves no longer treating him as the Lord—no longer obeying him, and no longer allowing his values and wishes to shape our lives.

We might call this whole problem the ‘gospel minus’—that is, *subtracting* Jesus’ lordship from our belief and life.

There is another common way for us to be distracted from continuing in Christ—we might call it the ‘gospel plus’. This consists of *adding* other lords and masters to our lives, thus diminishing the status of Jesus. These other lords can be many and varied. For some

people, it’s the church. They make the church’s decisions and rules an essential element of the Christian life. “Yes, it’s fine to have Jesus as your Lord,” they say, “but you must also do what the church/elder/priest tells you”.

Other people add the worship of Mary to the gospel, or certain kinds of good works (like how to keep the Sabbath), or they require a second blessing of the Holy Spirit. All these are examples of the ‘gospel plus’—of adding something to the simple New Testament gospel of “Christ Jesus the Lord”.

Receiving and walking

Paul’s message to the Colossians was clear. Just as they had accepted Jesus as their Lord, so they were to walk in him—not adding something to him, or wandering off down some other path, or moving on to some higher experience, but growing in the spot where they had been planted: in Christ, the Lord and Master of the universe.

» Implications

(Choose one or more of the following to think about further or to discuss in your group.)

- Have you received Christ properly—as Lord? If not, take some time to think/talk about why.

-
- What things tempt you to 'move on' from Jesus?

» **Give thanks and pray**

- Thank God for revealing himself to us in the Bible.
- Pray that you would be excited about studying Colossians and humbled by the privilege it is to freely read and study the very words of God.
- Pray that as you look closely at Colossians, you will have a renewed understanding of what it means to 'walk in Jesus'. Ask God to open your eyes to any areas in which Christ Jesus is not truly Lord of your life at the moment.



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THE COMPLETE CHRISTIAN



What is the normal Christian life? What should Christians expect to experience? Is it simply a case of 'trust and obey', or is that simplistic and inadequate?

Like almost every age before it, the early part of the 21st century has been marked by controversy over these questions and a resulting confusion amongst many Christians about whether they are the 'genuine article'. What does it mean to be fully and genuinely a Christian?

The apostle Paul's short letter to the Colossians offers simple but marvellous answers to these questions. For new Christians who want to be sure that they're on the right track, or for longer-serving Christians seeking discernment about the range of alternatives on offer, **The Complete Christian** sheds bright light from God's word.

Ideal for small groups or individuals.

