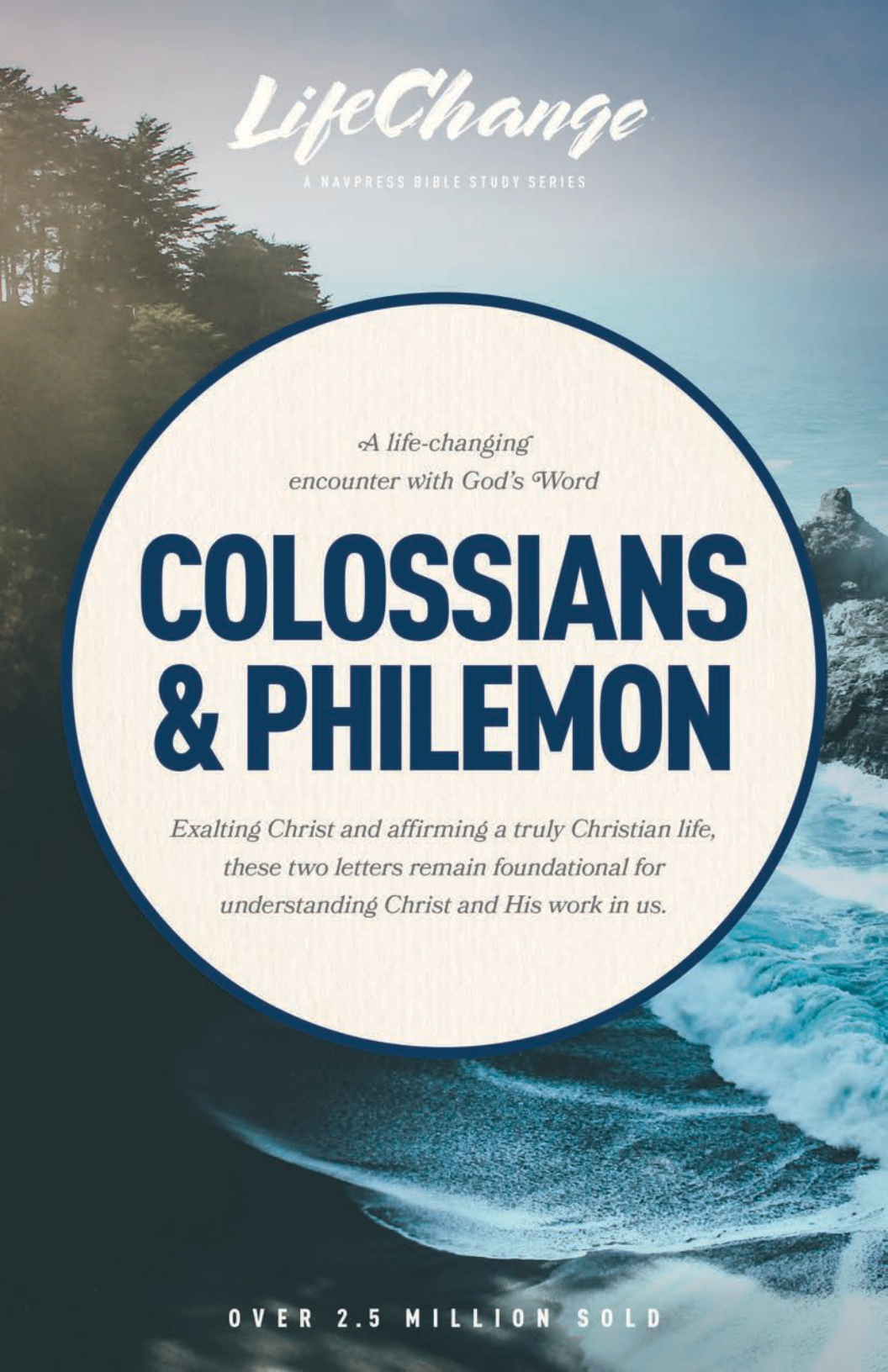




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SERIES EDITOR: KAREN LEE-THORP

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

Objectives

Most guides in the LIFECHANGE series of Bible studies cover one book of the Bible. Although the LIFECHANGE guides vary with the books they explore, they share some common goals:

1. To provide you with a firm foundation of understanding and a thirst to return to the book.
2. To teach you by example how to study a book of the Bible without structured guides.
3. To give you all the historical background, word definitions, and explanatory notes you need so that your only other reference is the Bible.
4. To help you grasp the message of the book as a whole.
5. To teach you how to let God's Word transform you into Christ's image.

Each lesson in this study is designed to take sixty to ninety minutes to complete on your own. The guide is based on the assumption that you are completing one lesson per week, but if time is limited you can do half a lesson per week or whatever amount allows you to be thorough.

Flexibility

LIFECHANGE guides are flexible, allowing you to adjust the quantity and depth of your study to meet your individual needs. The guide offers many optional questions in addition to the regular numbered questions. The optional questions, which appear in the margins of the study pages, include the following:

Optional Application. Nearly all application questions are optional; we hope you will do as many as you can without overcommitting yourself.

For Thought and Discussion. Beginning Bible students should be able to handle these, but even advanced students need to think about them. These questions frequently deal with ethical issues and other biblical principles.

They often offer cross-references to spark thought, but the references do not give obvious answers. They are good for group discussions.

For Further Study. These include: (a) cross-references that shed light on a topic the book discusses, and (b) questions that delve deeper into the passage. You can omit them to shorten a lesson without missing a major point of the passage.

If you are meeting in a group, decide together which optional questions to prepare for each lesson, and how much of the lesson you will cover at the next meeting. Normally, the group leader should make this decision, but you might let each member choose his or her own application questions.

As you grow in your walk with God, you will find the LIFECHANGE guide growing with you—a helpful reference on a topic, a continuing challenge for application, a source of questions for many levels of growth.

Overview and details

The study begins with an overview of Colossians. The key to interpretation is context—what is the whole passage or book *about*?—and the key to context is purpose—what is the author’s *aim* for the whole work? In lesson 1 you will lay the foundation for your study of Colossians by asking yourself, *Why did the author (and God) write the book? What did they want to accomplish? What is the book about?*

In lessons 2 through 9, you will analyze successive passages of Colossians in detail. Thinking about how a paragraph fits into the overall goal of the book will help you to see its purpose. Its purpose will help you see its meaning. Frequently reviewing a chart or outline of the book will enable you to make these connections.

In lesson 10, you will review Colossians, returning to the big picture to see whether your view of it has changed after closer study. Review will also strengthen your grasp of major issues and give you an idea of how you have grown from your study.

Lesson 11 covers Philemon, a short letter Paul wrote to a Christian in Colosse.

Kinds of questions

Bible study on your own—without a structured guide—follows a progression. First you observe: What does the passage *say*? Then you interpret: What does the passage *mean*? Lastly you apply: How does this truth *affect* my life?

Some of the “how” and “why” questions will take some creative thinking, even prayer, to answer. Some are opinion questions without clear-cut right answers; these will lend themselves to discussions and side studies.

Don’t let your study become an exercise in knowledge alone. Treat the passage as God’s Word, and stay in dialogue with Him as you study. Pray, “Lord, what do You want me to see here?” “Father, why is this true?” “Lord, how does this apply to my life?”

It is important that you write down your answers. The act of writing clarifies your thinking and helps you to remember.

Study aids

A list of reference materials, including a few notes of explanation to help you make good use of them, begins on page 135. This guide is designed to include enough background to let you interpret with just your Bible and the guide. Still, if you want more information on a subject or want to study a book on your own, try the references listed.

Scripture versions

Unless otherwise indicated, the Bible quotations in this guide are from the New International Version of the Bible. Other versions cited are the Revised Standard Version (RSV), the New American Standard Bible (NASB), the New English Bible (NEB), the New King James Version (NKJV), and the King James Version (KJV).

Use any translation you like for study, preferably more than one. A paraphrase such as *The Living Bible* is not accurate enough for study, but it can be helpful for comparison or devotional reading.

Memorizing and meditating

A psalmist wrote, “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you” (Psalm 119:11). If you write down a verse or passage that challenges or encourages you and reflect on it often for a week or more, you will find it beginning to affect your motives and actions. We forget quickly what we read once; we remember what we ponder.

When you find a significant verse or passage, you might copy it onto a card to keep with you. Set aside five minutes during each day just to think about what the passage might mean in your life. Recite it over to yourself, exploring its meaning. Then, return to your passage as often as you can during your day, for a brief review. You will soon find it coming to mind spontaneously.

For group study

A group of four to ten people allows the richest discussions, but you can adapt this guide for other sized groups. It will suit a wide range of group types, such as home Bible studies, growth groups, youth groups, and businessmen’s studies. Both new and experienced Bible students, and new and mature Christians, will benefit from the guide. You can omit or leave for later years any questions you find too easy or too hard.

The guide is intended to lead a group through one lesson per week. However, feel free to split lessons if you want to discuss them more thoroughly. Or, omit some questions in a lesson if preparation or discussion time is limited. You can always return to this guide for personal study later. You will be able to discuss only a few questions at length, so choose some for discussion and others for background. Make time at each discussion for members to ask about anything they didn't understand.

Each lesson in the guide ends with a section called "For the group." These sections give advice on how to focus a discussion, how you might apply the lesson in your group, how you might shorten a lesson, and so on. The group leader should read each "For the group" at least a week ahead so that he or she can tell the group how to prepare for the next lesson.

Each member should prepare for a meeting by writing answers for all of the background and discussion questions to be covered. If the group decides not to take an hour per week for private preparation, then expect to take at least two meetings per lesson to work through the questions. Application will be very difficult, however, without private thought and prayer.

Two reasons for studying in a group are accountability and support. When each member commits in front of the rest to seek growth in an area of life, you can pray with one another, listen jointly for God's guidance, help one another to resist temptation, assure each other that the other's growth matters to you, use the group to practice spiritual principles, and so on. Pray about one another's commitments and needs at most meetings. Spend the first few minutes of each meeting sharing any results from applications prompted by previous lessons. Then discuss new applications toward the end of the meeting. Follow such sharing with prayer for these and other needs.

If you write down each other's applications and prayer requests, you are more likely to remember to pray for them during the week, ask about them at the next meeting, and notice answered prayers. You might want to get a notebook for prayer requests and discussion notes.

Notes taken during discussion will help you to remember, follow up on ideas, stay on the subject, and clarify a total view of an issue. But don't let note-taking keep you from participating. Some groups choose one member at each meeting to take notes. Then someone copies the notes and distributes them at the next meeting. Rotating these tasks can help include people. Some groups have someone take notes on a large pad of paper or erasable marker board so that everyone can see what has been recorded.

Pages 138–139 list some good sources of counsel for leading group studies.

PAUL AND COLOSSE

Historical Background

Map of the Roman Empire



Although Paul wrote to the church at Colosse from house arrest in Rome the power of Christ was not chained. Throughout his refutation of heresy, Paul points out that Christ is the image of God, the sustainer, the source. Even if some new, attractive teaching seems substantial, it is hollow and deceptive next to the fullness of Christ. By demonstrating the supremacy of Christ, Paul hopes to refocus the attention of the Colossians “on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God” (3:1).

Saul the Pharisee

Some knowledge of Paul’s background helps us understand his views on the issues being debated in Colosse. He was born in the first decade AD in

Timeline of Paul's Ministry

(All dates are approximate, based on F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, page 475.)

Public ministry of Jesus	AD 28–30
Conversion of Paul (Acts 9:1-19)	33
Paul visits Jerusalem to see Peter (Galatians 1:18)	35
Paul in Cilicia and Syria (Galatians 1:21; Acts 9:30)	35–46
Paul visits Jerusalem to clarify the mission to the Gentiles (Galatians 2:1-10)	46
Paul and Barnabas in Cyprus and Galatia (Acts 13–14)	47–48
<i>Letter to the Galatians</i>	48?
Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15)	49
Paul and Silas travel from Antioch to Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Achaia (Acts 16–17)	49–50
<i>Letters to the Thessalonians</i>	50
Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:1-18)	50–52
Paul visits Jerusalem	52
Paul in Ephesus (Acts 19)	52–55
<i>Letters to the Corinthians</i>	55–56
Paul travels to Macedonia, Dalmatia, and Achaia (Acts 20)	55–57
<i>Letter to the Romans</i>	early 57
Paul to Jerusalem (Acts 21:1–23:22)	May 57
Paul imprisoned in Caesarea (Acts 23:23–26:32)	57–59
Paul sent to house arrest in Rome (Acts 27:1–28:31)	59–62
<i>Letters to Philippians, Colossians, Ephesians, Philemon</i>	60?–62
<i>Letters to Timothy and Titus</i>	?
Paul executed in Rome	65?

Tarsus, a prosperous city on the trade route from Syria to Asia Minor. Tarsus was known for its schools of philosophy and liberal arts, and some scholars believe that Paul must have had some contact with these. Like most cities in the Roman Empire, Tarsus probably contained synagogues of Greek-speaking Jews who were often as devout as their Hebrew-speaking brethren.¹

However, Paul called himself “a Hebrew of Hebrews” (Philippians 3:5), which probably means that his parents spoke Hebrew and raised him in a strict Jewish home, isolated as much as possible from the pagan city around them.² They named their boy “Saul” after Israel’s first king, the most glorious member of the tribe of Benjamin, to which Saul’s parents traced their ancestry (see Philippians 3:5). It was a rare Jew outside Palestine who could trace a pure lineage back to the ancient days of Israel, and fellow Jews would have envied the pedigree. Furthermore, Saul’s family must have owned property and had some importance in the Gentile community as well, for Saul was born not only a citizen of Tarsus (see Acts 21:39) but also of Rome (see Acts 22:27-28).³

Saul’s parents had such aspirations that they sent their son to study Jewish law in Jerusalem under the foremost rabbi of the day, the Pharisee Gamaliel (see Acts 22:3; Galatians 1:14). The Pharisees (the Hebrew word means “the separated ones”) felt that God had set them apart to live by the *Torah* (the Law, or Teaching, of Moses). For them, this meant following the interpretations of the *Torah* laid down by generations of teachers. Some Pharisees held that a man was righteous if he had done more good than bad, but Saul apparently followed the stricter group who insisted that even the least implications of the Law must be kept.⁴

The Pharisees expected a *Messiah* (Hebrew for “Anointed One”; Greek: Christ) who would deliver them from oppression and rule with justice. However, Jesus of Nazareth had infuriated many Pharisees by interpreting the *Torah* differently and claiming a special relationship with God. Thus, when some Jews began to proclaim Jesus as Messiah and Lord (a term usually reserved for God), strict Pharisees opposed them vehemently.

Saul helped lead the fight against the proclaimers of Christ in Jerusalem (see Acts 7:58–8:3; Galatians 1:13). When some were driven out, Saul obtained permission to pursue them to Damascus. But on the way there, Jesus confronted Saul in a blinding encounter (see Acts 9:1-19), revealing to Saul that he was persecuting the very God he professed to worship. From then on, Saul’s understanding of God and the *Torah* began to change dramatically. He joined those Jews who were urging other Jews to believe in Jesus, and after some years God called him to proclaim Jesus as Savior to the Gentiles also. Saul took the Greek name “Paul” when he turned to work among Gentiles.

Paul the missionary

Paul spent ten years in the Roman provinces of Cilicia and Syria (see Galatians 1:21), probably preaching Jesus along with Greek-speaking Jewish Christians. Then a believer named Barnabas called him to Syrian Antioch, where by this time rapid conversions had made the church more Gentile than Jewish.⁵ After

a while, the church in Antioch commissioned Paul and Barnabas to evangelize the provinces of Cyprus and Galatia. The two men succeeded in founding churches in several cities. Indeed, the mission to the Gentiles was so successful that the apostles in Jerusalem invited Paul and Barnabas to a council to clarify exactly what God expected of Gentile believers (see Acts 15). Paul asserted that both Gentiles and Jews were reconciled to God by faith in Jesus, apart from keeping the *Torah*, but certain Jews felt that Gentiles must keep all the Jewish laws. The council confirmed Paul's view of the gospel but his opponents continued to preach against him. Twelve years later, Paul was still fighting those ideas as they were being put forth in Colosse.

Paul spent the eight years following the council in Jerusalem planting more churches. He spent more than two of those years building a church in Ephesus, the queen city of the Roman province of Asia. Then he left the firmly grounded Ephesian believers to evangelize neighboring cities. Three of them were Colosse, Laodicea, and Hierapolis in the Lycus River valley, about a hundred miles east of Ephesus.

In AD 57 Paul brought a charitable gift from his Gentile converts to the poor believers in Jerusalem. There the Jewish leaders had him arrested as a blasphemer and a provoker of disorder. He was held pending trial for two years in Caesarea. Then he appealed for a hearing before the Emperor and was sent to Rome. After awaiting trial in Rome for another two years, he was finally released. Sometime during his imprisonment either in Caesarea or Rome, Paul received a visitor from the strife-torn church in Colosse who prompted him to write to the believers there.

The town and church of Colosse

Once spoken of as “a great city of Phrygia,”⁶ Colosse was, by Paul's time, a small cosmopolitan city in the province of Asia. Originally known for its wool industry, the town had declined considerably in importance and had been surpassed by Laodicea, ten miles to the west, and Hierapolis, twelve miles to the northwest (see Colossians 2:1; 4:13,15-16).⁷

The church at Colosse, composed mostly of Gentiles, was not planted by Paul himself, but most likely by Epaphras, one of his converts at Ephesus. Although Paul says that he had not been to the church, he had heard of their faith (see Colossians 1:4). Epaphras seems to have regarded the church as falling under Paul's missionary jurisdiction, which would have provided ample reason for him to personally seek out Paul's advice.⁸

Epaphras brought the gospel to Colosse, where it flourished until false teachers arrived. These men confused young believers by trying to mix ideas from pagan cults with the gospel. Unable to drive out these wolves alone, Epaphras appealed to Paul for help. Paul could not go to Colosse personally because he was in prison, but he could write a letter with all the authority and wisdom of an apostle to help the Colossian believers see the truth.

The occasion of this letter may have provided an excuse—though an important one—for Epaphras to visit Paul and to encourage him. Even as he sought assistance to deal with the convincing arguments and assumed

humility of the leaders of the false teachers, Epaphras brought good news of the progress of the gospel in the Lycus valley.⁹

The heresy

Because Paul only alludes to their doctrines, we may have a hard time figuring out precisely what the false teachers were saying.¹⁰ However, we can make some educated guesses from what Paul criticizes and encourages. Some of the false doctrines were:¹¹

1. *Ceremonialism*. There were “strict rules about the kinds of permissible food and drink, religious festivals (see 2:16-17) and circumcision (see 2:11; 3:11).”

2. *Asceticism*. Rules that Paul summarizes as, “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!” (2:21) and “harsh treatment of the body” (2:23) were supposed to achieve purity.

3. *Angel worship*. See 2:18.

4. *Deprecation of Christ*. Paul stressed Christ’s supremacy (see 1:15-20; 2:2-3,9) against those who taught that Christ was on the level of a created angel.

5. *Secret knowledge*. Salvation required not just faith in Christ but knowledge of certain mysteries (see 2:3,18).

6. *Reliance on human wisdom and tradition*. See 2:4,8.

These elements seem to be drawn from “an extreme form of Judaism”¹² and from pagan ideas that later became a system called “Gnosticism” (from the Greek word *gnosis*, “knowledge”).

A bit of this, a bit of that

Mixing Greek and oriental ideas and practices was so popular in the first century that we have a word for it: *syncretism*.¹³ Everybody wanted to mix his or her own blend of Greek, Roman, Persian, Egyptian, and other doctrines to suit personal taste. Judaism had already absorbed many Greek ideas, and when Gentiles embraced Christianity, they naturally wanted to mix their former beliefs and customs with their new faith.

By the time the Colossian church was established, a pattern was beginning to emerge among the religious recipes being mixed throughout the Empire. We call this semi-standard recipe “Gnosticism,” although it was not standardized enough to be called that until the second century AD.

The Gnostics borrowed from at least four areas of tradition: the philosophy of Plato, oriental religion, Judaism, and Christianity. It was perhaps the “borrowing” from Christianity that was most disturbing to Paul, as those who brought such teaching were not just looking for listeners, but for converts.

Among the teachings of the Gnostics were:

1. *The material world is essentially evil* or, at best, indifferent. If the material world is evil, then the body is evil. The body must be kept in place, then, by rigorously holding it in check.¹⁴ How does one do this? “Do not

handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" (2:21). Paul probably was quoting from the catchwords of the false teachers.¹⁵

2. *Between God and matter lie a host of fallen (evil) spiritual powers who now rule the world.* Jesus was the first of these rulers; He rules along side other spiritual powers, such as the constellations named in the signs of the Zodiac and the angels. Therefore, He is only one of many bridges to God.

3. *Some human beings possess a divine spark, an inner self that is different from the soul* (the Gnostics were these human beings, of course). This inner self is the true home of such people, which they may reach through a mystical knowledge, a true seeing and hearing.

4. *Redemption is ultimately dependent on the individual's self-understanding* and the resulting freedom it provides, rather than on God.¹⁶ Hence the emphasis on knowledge of secrets rather than on faith.

1. A. T. Robertson, "Paul, the Apostle," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956), 2276.
2. F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 41–43.
3. Bruce, 32–40.
4. Bruce, 50–52.
5. Bruce, 127–133.
6. Peter O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), xxvi.
7. O'Brien, xxvi.
8. Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1970), 545.
9. Guthrie, 546.
10. Guthrie, 546.
11. Kenneth Barker, ed., *The NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1985), 1811.
12. Barker, 1811.
13. Herbert M. Carson, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and Philemon* (London: Tyndale, 1960), 15–16.
14. H. Dermot McDonald, *Commentary on Colossians and Philemon* (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 13.
15. O'Brien, xxxii.
16. Allen C. Myers, ed., "Gnosticism," *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 421–423.

OVERVIEW OF COLOSSIANS

A biblical epistle is at once two seemingly contradictory things. It is a letter from a man to a group of people in a particular time and place, and it is a message from the Spirit of God to all Christians in every generation. Just as Christ was fully human and fully divine, so is the letter to the Colossians. In the first part of this overview and in other lessons, we will look at the book mainly from its human side in order to make observations and interpretations. When we get to application, we will focus on the letter's divineness. But before you begin to study, acknowledge the book's supernatural origin by asking the Holy Spirit to speak to you personally and transform you as you study.

This overview will probably take you more time than any other lesson of the study. If necessary, allow one week to read the "How to Use This Study" section, the historical background, and the whole letter to the Colossians. Then take a second week to answer the overview questions.

First impressions

Even though Paul had never been to the church at Colosse, some of its members had been converted through his evangelistic ministry. Among them was Epaphras, who led the church, and Philemon — the owner of the slave Onesimus — in whose house the church may have met. So it was

**Optional
Application:**

Consider how Paul's attitude toward the Colossians might have affected how willingly they received his instruction. How do you think your own attitudes toward others have affected how they responded to your correction? What might you learn from Paul's example?

not to total strangers that Paul wrote, but brothers and sisters whose salvation had been shaped by men and women he knew and trusted. People like Epaphras and Philemon were devoted to Paul and must have conveyed their attitudes to the rest of the church. Now there was confusion among the believers, and in Paul's letter they received authoritative instruction on the issues about which they had questions. They probably read through the letter quickly at first, just to discover Paul's attitude and tone, then went back later to dig out the details.

In the same way, read through the entire letter to the Colossians at one sitting. You may want to read it aloud, as it was read to the Colossians, imagining a cluster of listeners around you. Gather a general impression of Paul's themes and tone.

1. How would you describe the *tone* Paul conveys in this letter? What is his approach to the church at Colosse, their lifestyles, and problems?

2. Paul did not hesitate to repeat himself when he wanted to stress a point. What words and ideas are repeated in each of the following sets of verses?

1:15-18; 3:10 _____

1:18-19; 2:9-10,19; 3:11 _____

1:9-10,26-28; 2:2-3; 3:10,16; 4:3 _____

2:11; 3:5,10,12,14 _____

other _____

For Thought and Discussion: What clues do you find about Paul's circumstances when he wrote this letter? What clues do you discover regarding the situation at Colosse?

Broad outline

If you are still vague about Paul's intentions after one reading, a broad outline of Colossians may help sharpen your perceptions.

3. Reread Colossians, preferably in a different translation without subheads. You may discover a turn of phrase or word that makes a confusing passage clearer.

This time, think of a short phrase or sentence that can serve as a title for each paragraph. You may want to include key words from the paragraph. Write your titles below.

(Be creative. There is no one right answer; the first title is given as an example. Your Bible's paragraph divisions may differ, so feel free to alter those given here.)

1:1-2 Greetings to the Faithful _____

1:3-8 _____

1:9-14 _____

1:15-23 _____

1:24–2:5 _____

2:6–15 _____

2:16–23 _____

3:1–4 _____

3:5–11 _____

3:12–17 _____

3:18–4:1 _____

4:2–6 _____

4:7–18 _____

Theme and purpose

We cannot completely reconstruct the reasons for Paul's letter to the Colossians, but the better we recreate the context, the better we will understand his message. Certainly, like other letter writers, he was responding to what he knew of his readers and their situation. He also wrote from his personal experiences, the track record he had established through his years in the faith and in ministry.

Our own purposes for studying Colossians are separated from those of the original readers by centuries of change, but how we understand and apply his words should be influenced by how the Holy Spirit intended them in the context of the first century.

Study Skill — Overview

For a panoramic view of a book of the Bible, use a wide-angle lens. What does it look like as a whole? Is there one main theme that you see? Where is the major turning point? When the book was written, what was happening socially? Religiously? Politically? Then switch to a close-up lens for the details. Finally, put the wide-angle back on and see the broad, sweeping view, this time with a better perspective on the details.¹

4. From your first readings of Colossians, what seem to be Paul's main reasons for writing this letter?

5. If you have not yet done so, read the historical background.

6. Have you come across questions you'd like answered as you go deeper into this study? While your thoughts are still fresh, you may want to record your questions here to serve as personal goals for your investigation of the letter.

For Thought and Discussion: If you had to file this letter for later reference, what would you write on the file folder label in addition to “Colossians”?

Study Skill — Application

James 1:22 and 2 Timothy 3:16-17 remind us of the primary reason we study God’s Word — to let it affect our lives so that we will become fully the people God desires. Therefore, the last step of Bible study should always be to ask yourself, “What is God saying to me? What difference should this passage make to my life? How should it make me want to think or act?” Application will require time, thought, prayer, and perhaps even discussion with another person.

At times you may find it most productive to concentrate on one specific application giving it careful thought and prayer. At other times you may want to list many implications a passage of Scripture has for your life, meditating on them all for several days before you choose one for concentrated prayer and action. Use whatever method helps you to take to heart and act on what the passage says.

7. The letter to the Colossians was written to a specific church at a specific point in history, but it is also God’s Word to us today. As you read through Colossians, did you find areas that might apply to you? If so, what are some of those areas?

8. Summarize what is to you the most significant first impression from your study so far.

For the group

This “For the group” section and the ones in later lessons are intended to suggest ways of structuring your discussions. Feel free to select and adapt what suits your group. The main goals of this lesson are to get to know Colossians as a whole and the people with whom you are going to study it.

Worship. Colossians is an excellent setting for focusing on worship together. Some passages sound like hymns the Colossians might have sung in their own worship (see 1:15-20; 2:9-15), and Paul urges the Colossians to sing “psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts” (3:16). Because the false teachers denigrated Christ, this letter encourages believers to glorify Him. Take some time to focus on Christ by singing a psalm, hymn, or spiritual song together. Even reading a psalm together, such as Psalms 24, 92, 96, 97, 98, 99, or 100, will help you center your hearts on God.

Warm-up. The beginning of a new study is a good time to lay a foundation for honest sharing of ideas, to get comfortable with each other, and to encourage a sense of common purpose. Talk about what each member hopes to get out of your group—out of your study of Colossians and out of any prayer, singing, sharing, outreach, or anything else you might do together. Why do you want to study the Bible? If you have someone write down each member’s hopes and expectations, then you can look back at these goals later to see if they are being met. Allow about ten minutes for this discussion.

How to use this study. If the group has never used a LIFECHANGE study guide before, you might take a whole meeting to get acquainted, discuss your backgrounds and goals for the study, and go over the “How to Use This Study” section. Then you can take a second meeting to discuss the background and the overview questions. This will give you more time to read Colossians and prepare lesson 1 for discussion.

It is a good idea to clear up any confusion about how to do the study as soon as possible, so at the beginning of your second meeting, ask the group if anyone was confused about how to do lesson 1.

Optional

Application: Read 2 Timothy 2:9 and Hebrews 4:12. How do you think the nature of God’s Word helps you apply it to contemporary life? How might that perspective affect how you study the book of Colossians?

Reading. It is often helpful to refresh everyone's memory by reading the passage aloud before beginning to discuss your lesson. Reading the whole letter may take time, but the effort will be rewarded. Have a different person read each chapter, using the tone of voice he or she thinks Paul was trying to convey so that the letter sounds like the work of a living person. It should take perhaps fifteen minutes to read all of Colossians.

First impressions. Ask the group to share first impressions of Colossians—its style, mood, content, or whatever strikes the group. If members don't understand the question, you might ask them how Paul's letter is like and unlike letters they receive, or like and unlike a sermon, a graduation speech, or advice from a parent. The point of question 1 is to help the group see Colossians as a letter from a real person to real people for a specific occasion. Don't spend more than a few minutes on this question.

The setting of the letter is an important part of its context. The background may help you to understand the setting. Ask several group members to tell who Paul was, what is important to know about the Colossians, and what was going on in Paul's and the Colossians' lives when he wrote. By piecing together everyone's recollections of the background, you can probably recall the main points. Then, using the background and clues from the letter, see how much you can conclude about why Paul was writing and what was going on at the time.

To help the group get to know Paul as a real person, ask them to share what kind of person they think he was (based on the background and the letter). Application will require you to put yourselves in Paul's shoes, and it will be easier to identify with him if he seems real to you.

Looking for repeated words and ideas (question 2) should help the group see themes and main ideas in the letter. You might ask the group to name as many repeated phrases and ideas as possible, then move to question 4 on the letter's themes. You could share your titles (question 3) after that. Remember, there is no one right way to title a passage.

Questions. Give everyone a chance to share questions about the letter or the way you are studying it. It is good to clear up confusion about the book, the

group, or the study guide as early as possible. You may want to leave some questions about the book until later in your study; they may answer themselves. You may point out the list of references or encourage members to seek answers from their pastors or other knowledgeable Christians they respect.

Application. Question 7 ties in with the expectations and objectives you discussed at the beginning of your meeting. If some group members are unfamiliar with how to apply God's Word to their lives in specific ways, this is a chance to think of some sample applications together. (You could do this next week if you are running out of time.) Application is often the most difficult part of the study because many people have never been taught how to apply Scripture consciously, yet it is essential to the Christian life.

Wrap-up. The group leader should have read through lesson 2 and its "For the group" section. At this point, he or she might give a short summary of what members can expect in that lesson and in the coming meeting. This is a chance to whet everyone's appetite, assign any optional questions, omit any numbered questions, or forewarn members of any possible difficulties.

You might also encourage any members who found the overview especially hard. Some people are better at seeing the big picture or the whole of a book than others. Some are best at analyzing a particular verse or paragraph, while others are strongest at seeing how a passage applies to our lives. Urge members to give thanks for their own and others' strengths, and to give and request help when needed. The group is a place to learn from each other. Later lessons will draw on the gifts of close analyzers as well as overviews and applicators, practical as well as theoretical thinkers.

Worship. Many groups like to end with singing and/or prayer. This can include songs and prayers that respond to what you've learned in Colossians or prayers for specific needs of group members. Many people are shy about sharing personal needs or praying aloud in groups, especially before they know the other people well. If this is true of your group, then a song and/or some silent prayer, and a short closing prayer spoken by the leader might be

an appropriate end. You could share requests and pray in pairs, instead, if you prefer.

1. David L. Thompson, *Bible Study That Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Francis Asbury Press, 1982), 28.