

Lesson 21: Introduction to Colossae & Laodicea; History of the Phrygian Peoples

Edited notes on the region of Phrygia & its cities of Colossae & Laodicea from Wikipedia.com

Region of Phrygia: Phrygia was an independent kingdom in the west central part of what is now western Turkey, centered on the Sangarios River. After its conquest, it became a region of the great empires of the time. Stories of Greek mythology tell of several legendary Phrygian kings:

- Gordias, whose Gordian Knot was cut (!) by Alexander the Great in 333 BC (who chose not to try to untie it)
- Midas, who supposedly turned what he touched to gold
- Mygdon, who supposedly warred with the Amazons

According to Homer's Iliad, the Phrygians participated in the Trojan War as close allies of the Trojans, fighting against the Achaeans. Phrygian power reached its peak in the late 8th century BC under a very real king Midas, who dominated most of western and central Anatolia and rivaled Assyria and Urartu for power in eastern Anatolia. This later Midas was, however, also the last independent king of Phrygia before Cimmerians sacked the Phrygian capital, Gordium, around 695 BC. Phrygia then became subject to Lydia, and then successively to Persia, then to Alexander and his Hellenistic successors, Pergamon, the Roman Empire and the Byzantine Empire. Phrygians spoke their own language as well as Greek into the 6th century AD, and after the Turkish conquest of Byzantine Anatolia in the late Middle Ages, the name "Phrygia" passed out of usage.

Most of Phrygia is an arid region quite unlike the forested lands to the north and west of it. The climate is harsh with hot summers and cold winters. Olives will not easily grow, so the land was mostly used for livestock grazing, wool production, and barley production.

Colossae had dwindled in importance by the time of early Christianity but was notable for its syncretism- mixing its ancient pagan beliefs with Jewish and Gnostic teachings to include an angel cult (addressed by Paul in Colossians 2:18). The city was heavily damaged by an earthquake in 60 AD¹³ but remained a major city of the Roman province of Phrygia. It was totally destroyed in 1192/3 by the Muslims and most of its remaining population relocated to what is today called Honaz.

The 5th-century BC geographer Herodotus first mentions Colossae by name and as a "great city in Phrygia", which accommodated the Persian king Xerxes I¹⁴ who was enroute to wage war against the Greeks—showing the city had reached a certain level of wealth and size by this time. Xenophon referred to Colossae as "a populous city, wealthy and of



¹³ They rebuilt the city without the support of Rome (wise move- Roman support always had strings attached, as the Jews had learned in 63 BC when Pompey "helped" the Jews—and then took over). This is relatively early in Nero's reign, and is at about the same time that Paul was shipwrecked at Malta, while enroute to Rome to stand on trial before Nero.

¹⁴ This is the king of the Book of Esther called Ahasuerus, the Hebrew name given to Xerxes I. As noted earlier, this campaign, which he lost, was conducted most likely between chapters one and two of the Book of Esther.

considerable magnitude". It was famous for its wool trade. Strabo notes that the city drew great revenue from the flocks, and that the wool of Colossae gave its name to "color colossinus".

In 396 BC, Colossae was being ruled by the Persian Satrap Tissaphernes, who was assassinated by an agent of Cyrus the Younger¹⁵. Think about how far Colossae was from Persia and you get an idea of Persian power.

Although during the Hellenistic period (think Phillip of Macedon and his son Alexander) Colossae was still of some importance, by the 1st century it had dwindled greatly in size and significance. It was now a large town or small city, and like most of Phrygia, was known for being tolerant to a wide range of beliefs¹⁶. After the epistle was written, Colossae was later known for many practicing a fusion of religious influences (syncretism), which included Jewish, Gnostic, and pagan influences that were an angel-cult. This cult included veneration of the archangel Michael, who is said to have caused a curative spring to gush from a fissure in the earth¹⁷.

Laodicea on the Lycus was an ancient city in Asia Minor, now western Turkey, on the river Lycus, also in Phrygia. It in the Hellenistic regions of Caria and Lydia and is situated near the modern city of Denizli. Laodicea is situated on the long spur of a hill between the narrow valleys of the small rivers Asopus and Caprus, which discharge their waters into the Lycus. It lay on a major trade route and in its neighborhood were many important ancient cities; it was 10 miles west of Colossae and 99 miles east of Ephesus. The town was originally called Diospolis, "City of Zeus", and afterwards Rhodas.

Laodicea was founded on the site of the older town by Antiochus II Theos, king of the Seleucid Empire, in 261-253 BC in honor of his wife Laodice; it soon became quite wealthy. In 220 BC, Achaeus declared himself king of the region but was defeated by Antiochus the Great¹⁸ in 213 BC. Antiochus transported 2,000 Jewish families to Phrygia from Babylonia¹⁹. Many of Laodicea's inhabitants were Jews from this time, and Cicero records that Flaccus later confiscated the considerable sum of 20 pounds²⁰ of gold which was being sent by the Jews of the city annually to Jerusalem for the Temple.

After the Battle of Magnesia in 188 BC when the Romans defeated the Seleucids, the Treaty of Apamea was signed which gave control of the whole of western Asia Minor to the Kingdom of Pergamon. With the death of its last king, its territory was ceded to Rome in 133 BC, and it received from Rome the title of free city. It suffered greatly during the Mithridatic Wars but quickly recovered under the dominion of Rome. Towards the end of the Roman Republic and under the first emperors, Laodicea benefitted from its advantageous position on a trade route and became one of the most important and flourishing commercial cities of Asia Minor

¹⁵ He had chosen the wrong side in a power struggle. 80 years earlier was the time of Esther. It's important to realize just how large the Persian empire had become before it fell at the hands of Alexander the Great on October 31, 331 BC.

¹⁶ As noted in a previous footnote, the Romans were mostly tolerant—provided that those they ruled acknowledged that Caesar was deity, and that his deity was greater than all other local religions- including Christianity and Judaism.

¹⁷ According to Brill's *Encyclopedia of the Ancient World*, page 579. The worship of angels was similar to a previous cult that worshipped Zeus and local gods. Theodoret of Cyrrhus told about this cult surviving in Phrygia into the 4th century.

¹⁸ Antiochus III, a Seleucid Empire King who ruled from 222-187 BC. The Seleucid Empire was one of the Greek sub-empires that arose, as Daniel had prophesied, after the death of Alexander the Great. The Hellenistic (Greek) world eventually settled into four stable power blocks: the Ptolemaic Kingdom of Egypt, the Seleucid Empire in the east, the Kingdom of Pergamon, and Macedon.

¹⁹ This is an important point. Many people think that Jewish transportation only occurred at the fall of Jerusalem. One can only imagine the disruption and difficulty this would have created.

²⁰ As of April 2023, one ounce of gold is trading at over \$2000; they were sending \$640,000 in 2023 dollars.

(greatly surpassing Colossae in size), in which large money transactions and an extensive trade in black wool²¹ were carried out. Strabo (64 BC - 24 AD) attributes the celebrity of the city to the fertility of the soil and the wealth of some of its inhabitants, among whom may have been Hiero of Laodicea, who adorned the city with many beautiful buildings and bequeathed to it more than 2000 talents at his death.

The wealth of its inhabitants engendered a taste for the arts of the Greeks, as is manifest from its ruins, and that it contributed to the advancement of science and literature is attested by the existence of a great medical school that was particularly famous for its eye powder. Its wealthy citizens embellished Laodicea with beautiful monuments. As a status of its wealth, the city minted its own coins²², the inscriptions of which show the worship of Zeus, Apollo, and Roman emperors.

Like Colossae, the area often suffered from earthquakes, especially from the great shock that occurred in the reign of Nero (60 AD) in which the town was virtually destroyed. But the inhabitants declined imperial assistance to rebuild the city (a very wise move) and restored it from their own wealth.

The city was eventually destroyed during the invasions of the Turks and Mongols, who took everything of value and sold many of its inhabitants into slavery.

Colossae and Laodicea in the New Testament

The Apostle Paul and his associates (most of whom are unnamed) spent two years planting a church in Ephesus, and in Acts 19:10 we learn that, radiating from that center, “all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord.” Whether Paul himself fanned out in missionary activity throughout the province or whether his associates or some of the new converts did so, a church was planted in Colossae and at Laodicea. It is likely that Epaphras founded the Colossian church (Colossians 1:7), and from 1:21 we assume that the church was composed mainly of Gentiles, in spite of a large (and wealthy) Jewish population.

Philemon (the slave holder of Onesimus, who was front and center of the book of Philemon) was a citizen of Colossae and an apparent wealthy and noteworthy member in that church.

In the letter to the Colossians, we are told how slaves (or for that matter, any servant, or employee) are to do their work for their masters and how masters are to treat their slaves and servants. The short personal letter to Philemon extends our understanding of Paul’s command given in Colossians 4:1.

The letters to the Colossians and to Philemon are believed to have been written by Paul from prison somewhere around 62 AD. Nero was the emperor and Paul had yet to stand before him for the first time (during which he was acquitted). Later, of course, Paul was brought back before Nero, and was executed.

Christ had some strong words to say to the Laodiceans (the close neighbors of the Colossians) in Revelation chapter 3. By the time of the writing, Christ called them “lukewarm”. He commanded them to get serious about their faith, and to buy from him spiritual gold (a reference to their physical riches) and white garments (a reference to their local black wool). He also commanded them to buy from Him eye salve—which is a direct reference to a Phrygian eye salve powder mentioned by Galen, from the local medical community.

²¹ Take note of the black wool. In Revelation 3:18, Jesus warns the lukewarm church at Laodicea to buy from Him “white garments”.

²² Any ancient city that could mint its own coins was certainly very wealthy.

Questions about the Churches in Laodicea and Colossae

Read the previous three pages as well as Revelation 3:14-22 and answer the following questions:

1. These cities were in the ancient region of Phrygia, in what is today ancient Turkey. How would these people have been different than those in Ephesus and those east of them in Galatia?
2. How would these language differences cause challenges in the growth of the early church?
3. Who were some of the noteworthy ancient kings and visitors to Phrygia in the distant past?
4. Describe a few things from Colossae's ancient past that you found particularly interesting.
5. What was the source of Colossae's trade? What was its reputation where "religious tolerance" was concerned, and can you see where that could cause a problem for the early church?
6. Let's turn to Colossae's larger neighbor, Laodicea. What strikes you about how this city differs from its neighbor?
7. What do we know about the Jewish population of Laodicea and the wealth of the city?
8. What was the relationship between Rome and Laodicea?
9. Laodicea was known for its appreciation of the arts as well as its medical school(s). What does this tell you about the city?
10. Why, do you suppose, did Laodicea turn down Roman offer of help when severely damaged by an earthquake? What does that tell you about the city?
11. Turn to Revelation 3:14-22. What would cause a church and its members to be lukewarm? What would cause a church and its members to claim to be rich?
12. Explain Christ's admonition about their buying gold from Him and in buying eye salve from Him; what's implied by this?

Lesson 22: Colossians Chapter 1

The letter to the Ephesians focuses on the church (the “body”) while this book focuses on our Head- Christ Jesus. The first two chapters are doctrinal while the second two are practical. The overall message is that “Christ is preeminent- first in EVERYTHING- and our lives should reflect that priority.” Paul writes the book to the church at Colossae (probably about 62 AD, while awaiting his first trial before Nero) and directs that it also be read in nearby Laodicea. This would make these churches probably about 10-11 years old.

Read Colossians 1 in its entirety and then answer the following questions:

Colossians 1:1-2

1. Why do you suppose that Paul says the letter is from both he and Timothy?
2. I don't believe his salutation in verse 2 is a stock phrase. Why “grace”, and why “peace”?

Colossians 1:3-8

3. In verses 3-4, Paul says he had heard of their faith and love. Why would an apostle who had never visited this church and probably knew most of its members second hand pray for them?
4. In verses 4-6 he speaks of the “hope which is laid up for you in heaven” the “truth of the gospel” and the “fruit” that these things are bringing forth. In practical terms, how does this happen to people as they grow in the faith?
5. Epaphras had both taught and reported what?

Colossians 1:9-18 “He is Preeminent- in everything!”

6. In verses 9-11, what does Paul report he is praying for specifically on their behalf?
7. How specific does God want us to be in our prayers? Support your answer with scripture.
8. Explain verse 12, which uses some interesting language.
9. Verses 13-14 speak of how God delivered us from Satan and delivered us to Christ. Perhaps explain the thought and how Paul reports that it was accomplished.
10. Verse 15 says two powerful things about Christ. What?

11. Verses 16-18 make powerful statements about who Jesus is and was. List some.
12. Find at least one other New Testament passage that teaches this same lesson.

Colossians 1:19-23 “Reconciled to Christ”

13. Verses 19-20 reinforce God’s appointment of Christ. What do you think it means “that in Him all the fullness should dwell”?
14. Verse 20 speaks of reconciliation; between who?
15. Verses 21-23 speak of how we are reconciled; what does it mean to you to be presented “holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight”?
16. What’s the reminder/warning of verse 23?

Colossians 1:24-29 “The mystery now revealed”

Verses 24 is a bit of a puzzle to your teacher. In context he “rejoices in his sufferings for them.” Is he referring to his imprisonment in Rome because he brought the gospel to Asia? Or is he saying, “I rejoice (in my sufferings) for you”? Perhaps the latter. When he says he “fill[s] up in my flesh what is lacking in he afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body” (the church), is he focused on “what is lacking in the (his) afflictions” because of his work for Christ? Some believe the “lack” is that he currently isn’t suffering the sort of affliction he suffered on his missionary journeys but that he plans for it to occur again. Does it matter in light of this teaching? No. The central message is that he rejoices for them!

17. In verses 25-26 he notes that he was given stewardship from God- to do what?
18. We have studied this mystery in earlier books. What does he call it here?
19. Verses 28-29 remind me of the opening words of Christ as he began his ministry: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Paul, like Christ, marries that warning to what?
20. To what end does Paul labor, and how?

Lesson 23: Colossians Chapter 2

Read Colossians chapter 2 in its entirety and answer the following questions:

Colossians 2:1-10 “Ignore Greek philosophy and empty words. Look to Christ!”

1. In verses 1-2, Paul speaks of “conflict”. What kind of conflict?
2. Paul speaks of those who he has never met. What does he want for them?
3. In verse 3 he speaks of treasures of wisdom and knowledge. How do we receive this?
4. In verses 4-5 he speaks of the Greek influence—philosophy, which he calls “empty words”. How can these teachings deceive us today, and what do we do about it?
5. In verses 6-7 he reminds them to walk in the same teachings of Jesus Christ they received, and like a well-watered tree to be rooted and “established” in the faith. Do any other books we’ve studied come to mind here? Why should we do so with thanksgiving? How does that help us?
6. In verses 8-10 he teaches that these philosophies cheat people, and again, he speaks of this doctrine deceiving people. What are they according to? How does that contrast with Christ?

Colossians 2:11-23 “Ignore Jewish legalism and the Old Law. Look to Christ!”

7. Paul switches gears, speaking of those who continue to try to spread the doctrine of keeping the Old Law. In verse 11 he speaks (as he did in Philippians) that to follow Christ is a new circumcision, and he explains what that new circumcision is in verse 12. What?
8. I Peter 3:21-22 speaks of the role of immersion. What does he call it in this passage?
9. With this passage in mind, Paul says in verse 12 that this new circumcision causes us to be raised with Him from the dead. Explain what he means.
10. Verses 13-14 speak of our death, our life and how Christ completely “wiped out the handwriting of requirements” (think about the ten commandments, written by God, and the hundreds of teachings that accompanied it). How did he wipe it out?

11. Verse 15 speaks of Christ disarming principalities and powers. Satan? Governmental leaders?

12. Verses 16-19 speak of “food and drink” (what Jews even today call “kosher”) as well as festivals, new moons (the Jewish calendar and sabbaths). What were these false teachers actually doing?

13. It is believed by scholars that angel worship (including worship of Michael the Archangel, who supposedly foretold that a spring was to appear out of the ground in Colossae) was active in this area in the first through fourth centuries. Paul’s warning?

14. Verse 19 speaks of a body (of Christ) that was nourished and knit together. How does this work?

15. Verses 20-22 discusses those who would impose strict regulations. What does Paul ultimately say about them in verse 23? Explain this in modern terms.

Lesson 24: Colossians Chapter 3

Read Lesson 3 in its entirety and then answer the following questions:

Colossians 3:1-11 “Remove carnality from your life. Remember who you are now.”

1. In verses 1-2, he reminds them to do what? How would we go about doing this today? (Hint: review Philippians 4:8-9)
2. In verses 3-4 he again speaks of how we die(in baptism); what happens to us later?
3. In verses 5-7, Paul reminds them to avoid five sins that the Gentile world faced daily. List them and discuss how this teaching applies today.
4. He warns that the wrath of God is coming. How and when?
5. In verses 8-9 he lists more sins they are to remove from their lives. Let’s briefly discuss these.
6. In verses 9-10 he contrasts the old man with the new. How so?
7. In verse 11 he speaks of the kingdom of God, where equality reigns. How?

Colossians 3:12-17

8. He’s said what to do away with. Now we’re reminded of our new selves. Verses 12-13 speak of both attributes and new ways to treat one another. What do these attributes ultimately teach us?
9. Verses 14-15 teach us three things that once learned, can transform us. What?
10. Verse 16 teaches what singing can do for each other. What?
11. Explain verse 17 in your own words.

Colossians 3:18-25 “Living and growing together”

12. Wives, do what?

13. Husbands, do what?

14. Children, do what?

15. Fathers, do not do what?

16. Bondservants, do what?

17. Verses 23-25 speak to all. What are we all do to, and why?

Lesson 25: Colossians Chapter 4; Philemon

Read Colossians Chapter 4 in its entirety and answer the following questions:

Colossians 4:1 (Carry over from chapter 3)

1. Why should masters be “just and fair”? What do you see as the application today?

Colossians 4:2-6

2. Read verses 2-4. Let’s speak again about prayer. Paul had previously told them what about his prayers for them and his requests for their prayers. What had he said, and where?
3. Verses 5-6 are commands towards Christian maturity. Explain in practical terms what is being taught.

Colossians 4:7-15

4. What do we already know about Tychicus from Acts 4 and other passages? What can we infer?
5. Who was Onesimus, and what does Paul call him?
6. Where else do we read about Aristarchus, whom Paul calls his “fellow prisoner”?
7. Who was Mark, the cousin of Barnabas?
8. Epaphras is mentioned in Colossians 1:7 and Philemon 23. Paul calls him a “bondservant of Christ”. (How is that a compliment?) What was he praying on their behalf? Describe his zeal.
9. Who was Luke? What is eventually said about Demas?

Colossians 4:16-18

10. What were they to do with the letter? It’s now 61 or 62 AD. Are there epistles being circulated and copied? (It is thought that the first gospel account was written by John Mark about four to six years from the date of this book.) What effect would that have on the early saints?
11. What did they say to Archippus, and what does Paul call him elsewhere in scripture?

Philemon

Philemon, one of the members in the church at Colossae, was the wealthy master (owner) of a runaway slave named Onesimus. After running away, Onesimus was converted to Christianity. Paul is sending him back—with a letter to his master. This letter is now a part of the New Testament (the book of Philemon), delivered to Philemon by this same Onesimus—who was voluntarily returning to slavery.

12. Read the short book of Philemon. Paul was never one to mince words when he observed or heard that others were in sin, nor was he given to flattery, but he has some nice things to say to and about Philemon. List a few things he said.

13. In verses 8-11, Paul appeals to Philemon and says some powerful things about Onesimus. Name a few things that Paul said about this newly converted slave.

14. Explain what Paul says in verses 12-14, perhaps in your own words.

15. What does Paul call Onesimus in verses 15-16?

16. What request does Paul make of Philemon in verses 17-20?

17. What does Paul remind Philemon of? Do we get any other indication of a close relationship?