

*THE MESSAGE OF*  

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**C**  
**COLOSSIANS**  
**& P**  
**PHILEMON**  

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**DAVID K. BERNARD**  

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# The Message of Colossians and Philemon

By David K. Bernard

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Reprint History: 1998, 2007, 2010

Cover Design by Tim Agnew

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Printed in United States of America

Printed by



**WORD AFLAME PRESS**  
8855 Dunn Road, Hazelwood, MO 63042  
[www.pentecostalpublishing.com](http://www.pentecostalpublishing.com)

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## Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bernard, David K., 1956-

The message of Colossians and Philemon / David K. Bernard.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-932581-70-6

1. Bible. N.T. Colossians—Commentaries, 2. Bible. N.T.

Philemon—Commentaries. I. Title.

BS 2715.3.B47 1990

227'.7077—dc20

90-37051  
CIP

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# Contents

<b>The Epistle to the Colossians</b> . . . . .	9
(The lordship of Jesus)	
<b>Introduction to Colossians</b> . . . . .	11
<b>I. Prologue (1:1-14)</b> . . . . .	27
A. Greetings (1:1-2) . . . . .	27
B. Thanksgiving for the Colossians (1:3-8) . . . . .	29
C. Prayer for the Colossians (1:9-14) . . . . .	33
<b>II. Doctrine of Jesus Christ (1:15-23)</b> . . . . .	41
(The nature of the lordship of Jesus)	
A. Preeminence of Jesus (1:15-20) . . . . .	41
B. Reconciliation through Jesus (1:21-23) . . . . .	56
<b>III. Paul as a Minister of Jesus (1:24-2:5)</b> . . . . .	63
(Proclaiming the lordship of Jesus)	
A. Sacrificial labor (1:24-29) . . . . .	63
B. Personal concern (2:1-5) . . . . .	69
<b>IV. False Philosophy Versus True Faith (2:6-3:4)</b> . . . . .	75
(The lordship of Jesus versus the false teaching at Colosse)	
A. The sole sufficiency of Jesus (2:6-15) . . . . .	75
B. Freedom in Jesus (2:16-19) . . . . .	93
C. Results of death with Jesus (2:20-23) . . . . .	100
D. Results of resurrection with Jesus (3:1-4) . . . . .	106

<b>V. Practical Christian Living (3:5-4:6)</b> . . . . .	113
(The lordship of Jesus in practical life)	
A. Putting off the old man (3:5-11) . . . . .	113
B. Putting on the new man (3:12-17) . . . . .	120
C. Social relations (3:18-4:1) . . . . .	127
D. Prayer and witnessing (4:2-6) . . . . .	135
<b>VI. Epilogue (4:7-18)</b> . . . . .	139
A. Bearers of the letter (4:7-9) . . . . .	139
B. Greetings from Paul's companions (4:10-14) . . .	141
C. Closing messages and benediction (4:15-18) . . .	145
<b>The Epistle to Philemon</b> . . . . .	149
(Brotherhood under the lordship of Jesus)	
<b>Introduction to Philemon</b> . . . . .	151
<b>I. Prologue (1-7)</b> . . . . .	163
A. Greeting (1-3) . . . . .	163
B. Thanksgiving for Philemon (4-7) . . . . .	165
<b>II. Plea for Onesimus (8-21)</b> . . . . .	169
A. Preparation for the request (8-11) . . . . .	169
B. The request expressed (12-16) . . . . .	171
C. The request reinforced (17-21) . . . . .	177
<b>III. Epilogue (22-25)</b> . . . . .	183
<b>Bibliography</b> . . . . .	185
<b>Tables</b>	
1. The Full Deity of Jesus Stated in Colossians . . . . .	23
2. Parallel Passages in Colossians and Ephesians . . .	25
3. Parallel Passages in Philemon and Colossians . . .	161

# I.

## Prologue (Colossians 1:1–14)

### *Personal introduction*

The Epistle to the Colossians begins with a salutation, thanksgiving, and prayer. This format is typical of Paul's letters.

### **A. Greetings (1:1-2)**

*(1) Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timotheus our brother; (2) to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ which are at Colosse: Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

This salutation is patterned after a standard letter in New Testament times. Such a letter began with the writer's name, the reader's name, and a statement of greeting or concern for welfare.

*Verse 1.* Paul identified himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ. An apostle is literally someone who is sent, or a messenger. Although Paul did not claim to be one of the Twelve (I Corinthians 15:5), by using this title he claimed an authority and ministry like theirs. By contrast, he did not identify Timothy or Epaphras as apostles, although he recognized them as co-workers.

Paul was an apostle by divine calling. No mere mortal could give him this ministry; he received it from God Himself (Galatians 1:1, 15-16).

## *The Message of Colossians*

Although other associates were with Paul at the time (Colossians 4:10-14), only Timothy was included in the salutation, because he was Paul's permanent co-worker. While the greetings are from both Paul and Timothy, the epistle itself is actually from Paul and is based on his apostolic authority. He used the first person plural ("we") throughout the introductory passage (verses 3, 4, 7, 8, 9), but he switched to the first person singular ("I") in Colossians 1:23 and used it to the end, where he personally signed the letter (Colossians 4:18).

The title of "brother" here and in verse 2 reveals the close family relationship that Christians enjoy; it was apparently a standard title in the early church. The Greek text simply identifies Timothy as "the brother."

*Verse 2.* Paul wrote to the church at Colosse. He described the Christians there as "faithful," which can mean loyal, believing, or both. He also called them "saints," which literally means separated, sanctified ones or holy ones. The New Testament uses this term for all believers; all believers are to be separated from sin and dedicated to God.

Paul's Christian greeting was "grace and peace," which was an adaptation of secular forms. The typical Greek greeting was *charein* (rejoice, hail)—Paul substituted *charis* (grace)—and the typical Hebrew greeting was *shalom* (peace).

Both grace (the unmerited favor of God) and peace (harmony with God and the resulting tranquility of soul) come from God our Father through the Lord Jesus Christ, that is, by the mediation of the man Jesus (I Timothy 2:5). This statement is not a trinitarian reference; if it were, why does it omit the Holy Spirit? Rather, this greeting

emphasizes the necessity of not only acknowledging God as Creator and Father (which the Jews and many pagans did) but also acknowledging God's revelation in Christ. It emphasizes that God's provision of salvation comes only through Jesus Christ. Interestingly, the critical text, which most trinitarian scholars use today, omits "and the Lord Jesus Christ."

### **B. Thanksgiving for the Colossians (1:3-8)**

*(3) We give thanks to God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, (4) since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of the love which ye have to all the saints, (5) for the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, whereof ye heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel; (6) which is come unto you, as it is in all the world; and bringeth forth fruit, as it doth also in you, since the day ye heard of it, and knew the grace of God in truth: (7) as ye also learned of Epaphras our dear fellowservant, who is for you a faithful minister of Christ; (8) who also declared unto us your love in the Spirit.*

Verse 3. After the initial greeting, Paul described his continual thanksgiving for the Colossian believers as he prayed for them. Not only did this gesture demonstrate courtesy, but it also illustrated an important truth about prayer: prayer should always be offered in the context of thanksgiving and not just as a series of petitions. We can actually view verses 3-14 as the description of a prayer with the following form: thanksgiving, petition, thanksgiving, praise. Thanksgiving brackets the petition and is offered continually with prayer. (See also verse 12.)

Paul prayed continually for the Colossians. Prayer