

November 1, 2009

Colossians 1: Christ Above All

Purpose: To help us strengthen our faith through acknowledging the supremacy of Christ in creation and as head of the church

Key Bible reference: Colossians 1

Key Verse: Colossians 1.17

Biblical Interpretation

Ancient Colossae

The Letter to the Colossians [kuh-LOSH-uhns] was written to the Christians in Colossae [Kuh-LOS-ee] and was meant to be read by them and by other Christians in Asia Minor. At one time, Colossae, located in the Roman province of Asia on the banks of the Lycus [LYE-kuhs] River, was a very important city. Four hundred years before the birth of Jesus, the Greek historian Herodotus [hi-ROD-uh-tuhs] had called Colossae "a great city of Phrygia" [FRIJ-ee-uh], that is, of central Asia Minor. One hundred years later, the writer Xenophon [ZEN-uh-fon] described Colossae as "a popular city, wealthy and large." At the time of Herodotus, Colossae had two equally thriving sister cities close by: Laodicea [layod-i-SEE-uh], ten miles to the west, and Hierapolis [high-uh-RAP-uh-lis], fifteen miles northwest.

Ancient Colossae was wealthy because it held some of the best pasture land in the ancient world. In addition to its sheep and wool industry, Colossae was famous for cloth dying, producing a purple wool cloth known as "colossinus."

Laodicia

The city of Laodicea was the political center of the district. Laodicea also had a wool industry and produced a highly regarded black wool

cloth. In addition, Laodicea was known as the seat of a medical school that manufactured a famous eye ointment. These facts are alluded to in the letter to Laodicea, written by John of Patmos and recorded in the Book of Revelation (Revelation 1:11; 3:14-22).

Near the end of his letter to the Colossians, Paul sent greetings to the church at Laodicea and especially to Nympha and to her house church (Colossians 4:15). Paul also requested that this same letter to the Colossians be read in the church of the Laodiceans (Colossians 4:16). Evidently, there was an additional letter that has been lost (Colossians 4:16).

Hierapolis

The congregation at Hierapolis was situated in a great trading and spa town. All three cities were founded on an earthquake fault, and more than once they had to be rebuilt. The presence of hot springs gave the residents of Hierapolis some compensation for life in a region wracked by earthquakes. These hot springs, famous for their medicinal quality, came from the earthquake chasms. Thus Hierapolis became a popular spa town. Both Hierapolis and Laodicea were probably on the same pastoral circuit with Colossae.

This general area had become home for many Jews. This would have made these cities a hospitable environment for early Christian missions. A Christian named Epaphras [EP-

uhfrs] may have been the founder of all three churches; at the least he held pastoral functions in all three congregations. Paul testified that Epaphras, who was with the apostle when this letter was written, had worked hard for Laodicea, Hierapolis, and Colossae (Colossians 4:12-13). Paul reported that Epaphras was "always wrestling in his prayers on your behalf" (Colossians 4:12). He wrote that Epaphras was "a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit" (Colossians 1:7-8). Epaphras himself sent greetings through this letter from Paul (Colossians 4:12).

When Paul wrote the Letter to the Colossians, their town no longer had either the prominence of earlier years or the continued prosperity of its two neighbors. At one time it had been on the main east-west highway from Ephesus to the Euphrates River in the east. The road system was later redirected away from Colossae, and the city was no longer on the main trade route. By the time of Paul, Colossae had become a minor market town.

Around A.D. 60-61, a major earthquake occurred in the region. The three towns were severely damaged. Laodicea rebuilt without Roman money. In contrast, the decline of Colossae, which was the poorest of the three, may have been accelerated because of the earthquake. Colossae did not last past the Roman Empire, and even its location was lost for centuries. Archaeologists rediscovered the site in 1835, but it has not been excavated.