

GLORIOUS RICHES

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Colossians 1:19–2:5

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. (Col. 2:2–3)

Daily Bible Readings

M	May 27	Isa. 43:8–13	God's Witnesses
T	May 28	Ps. 113	Praise the Lord!
W	May 29	Gal. 3:19–29	God's Children in Christ through Faith
Th	May 30	Prov. 10:19–25	The Lord's Blessing Makes Rich
F	May 31	Matt. 6:19–24	Your Treasure Is with Your Heart
Sa	June 1	Matt. 6:25–34	Seek First God's Kingdom

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

Colossians 1 is a good place to start this new study series. In the verses immediately preceding the background Scripture (Col. 1:19–2:5), the author begins at the very beginning, with a discussion of the universe: Jesus Christ is the “firstborn of all creation, for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created” (Col. 1:15–16). Consideration of cosmic origins, important to the first readers, is also crucial to us as we vigorously explore our solar system, the Milky Way galaxy, and the first light created over 4 billion years ago.

The exact circumstances of this letter are not entirely clear. Although the first verse attributes authorship to the apostle Paul, scholars disagree about its authenticity. The issue is complicated by the letter's similarity to Ephesians, an epistle whose authorship is also questioned. The style of writing in both epistles is dissimilar to that found in genuine letters like Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians; and many of the theological concepts and philosophical concerns (2:8–9) are unique. In 1:1, Timothy appears to be the co-author; 1:7 may indicate that Epaphras founded the church. For our purposes we will refer to the writer as Paul, keeping in mind questions about authorship.

Dear God, give us wisdom as we explore the origins of our existence and faith. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

Colossians 1:24–2:3

1:24 I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. ²⁵I became its minister according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, ²⁶the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. ²⁷To them God chose to make known how great among the gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. ²⁸It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. ²⁹For this I toil and strive with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me.

2:1 For I want you to know how greatly I strive for you and for those in Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face. ²I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ, ³in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.


COLOSSAE AND PHILOSOPHY

In order to understand Colossians it is necessary to know who the readers of the letter are and what their situation is. In chapter 1, Paul praises the recipients profusely for their strong faith and work that has been reported by Epaphras (1:7–8). In chapter 2, however, he moves to deep concerns about misunderstandings about who Jesus Christ really is (2:1–7), the danger of accepting “philosophy and empty deceit” (2:8), matters of food and rituals (2:18–19), and ethical issues about the nature of the family and the proper treatment of slaves (3:18–4:1). As he puts it in 2:1, “I want you to know how greatly I strive for you and for those in Laodicea.”

Colossae and Laodicea, along with Ephesus, were three cities in the Roman territory of Asia Minor (in southern Turkey today). Although a considerable amount is known about the city of Ephesus and the Temple of Artemis and large theater there (see Acts 19; 20:17–38), very little archaeological work has been done in the area of Colossae since an earthquake destroyed much of the city around 64 CE, and excavations are currently ongoing.

Since 2012, work has been progressing in Laodicea, a city that is of interest because of its condemnation in Revelation 3:14–16.

Even a casual reading of Colossians indicates that the church members there must have been rather intellectually sophisticated. They were interested in issues involving the creation of the cosmos, the elemental spirits of the universe, rulers, dominions, authorities in the heavens, and elements of Greek and Roman philosophy. It appears that they were influenced by an early form of thinking called *gnosticism* (which developed systematically later) because vocabulary used by Paul was popular in these philosophical systems, for example, “wisdom” (1:9, *sophia* in Greek), “knowledge” (*epignōsis*), and the fullness (*plērōma*) of divinity (2:9). Paul may be suggesting that they did not understand this philosophy well enough to distinguish it from the truth of Christian theology.

 **What aspects of current intellectual thinking today do you think are obscuring what it really means to believe in Jesus Christ?**

COSMIC SEARCH

When I was a doctoral student at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, I went to talk to the principal, Dr. Matthew Black. When I arrived, his secretary said that he was not there. “Where is he?” I asked. “He is in B.C.” While Dr. Black may have been physically at his desk, in reality his mind was occupied with events in the time before Christ’s birth, she replied. I must admit that, as much as I enjoy studying biblical texts, these days my thinking seems to be heading in another direction, in exploring the universe.

As human beings, questions about our origin and the nature of the universe in which we live tantalize and mystify us. In Colossians, Paul deals with possible answers that are drawing the attention of his readers. For them, it made sense to accept some interpretations of the cosmos that were intellectually available but incompatible with the truth about Jesus Christ.

In 2:8, for example, he writes that readers should be aware of being taken captive by “philosophy” (*philosophia* in Greek) or “the elemental principles of the world” (*stokeia tou kosmou* in Greek). These elemental spirits probably refer to fundamental principles that form the basis of existence. Plato writes of the “primary elements of which we and all else

are composed” (*Theatetetus* 201e).¹ In some philosophical systems, these elements took on mythological characteristics, like dominions, powers, rulers, and angels. It is also possible that the more practical concept of philosophy called *Stoicism* as a way of thought and life is also being considered here. The Roman philosopher Seneca (4 BCE–65 CE) wrote that philosophy “molds and constructs the soul; it orders our lives, guides our conduct, shows us what we should do and what we should leave undone. . . . Without it, no one can live fearlessly or in peace of mind” (Epistle XVI, 3, Loeb Classical Library). As an aside, we might note that belief in Stoicism is making an upsurge in thought in our own day.

In 1:15–23, Paul counters these explanations, arguing that Christ is the true foundation of the universe, “the firstborn of all creation” through whom “all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible.” Jesus is the true foundation of the cosmos, and in him all the fullness of life exists. In him is found all the “knowledge of God’s mystery” (2:2).

 In what ways, if at all, might new discoveries of the James Webb telescope (jwst.nasa.gov) help us understand what it means to believe that God was in Christ at the beginning?

1. See the appendix “The Elements of the Universe” in Eduard Lohse, *A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1971), 96–98.
2. Emily Levesque *The Last Stargazers: The Enduring Story of Astronomy’s Vanishing Explorers* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2022).

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

As we prepare to enter the second quarter of the twenty-first century, it is not difficult to see how our views of the cosmos differ from those that troubled the readers of Colossians. Today’s methods of exploring the universe are quite different, and we are able to search things visible and invisible in ways that were unimagined just a few years ago. This is true not only through our ability to parse the atom but with the exciting discoveries we are making through astronomy and new means of searching the universe. Linked radio telescopes like MeerKAT in South Africa, moreover, are able to visualize nebula and galaxies in new ways and see black holes billions of times bigger than our sun in a galaxy some 53 million light years away. As Emily Levesque concludes in her fascinating examination of telescopes and observatories, “Why do we study the universe? Why do we look at the sky and ask questions, build telescopes, travel to the very limits of our planet to answer them? Why do we stargaze? We don’t know exactly why, but we must.”²

As Christians, however, we do know why we want to continue this cosmic search. We want to know more about ourselves, made of stardust as we are; we want to know more about the universe (or universes) that God created and is creating and to understand what it could mean that Christ is not only at our beginning but the beginning of all things.

But there is more. As another of my professors at St. Andrews wrote (Robin McLachlan Wilson), this epistle has much to teach us about current issues. Obviously, advances in technology make the way we observe the world much different. Yet, as Professor Wilson wrote, many of the same problems plague us. There is still slavery in the world; the role of women in most societies is still limited; violent racism is a danger in most societies around the world. The question of our relationship to our own world and the nature of ecology is also a critical one that must be raised. Colossians reminds us that our faith is flexible enough to respond to new situations and ideas and that our Christian faith has more substance than is often allowed for.³



Considering the contemporary questions raised by Colossians, what are we to do?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes provide additional information about today's Scripture.

1. While Paul elsewhere speaks of believers participating in the suffering of Christ (Rom. 8:18; 2 Cor. 1:5–7), here he speaks of his own suffering as “completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions” (Col. 1:24). This has posed theological questions: Was not Christ’s suffering complete? How could Paul’s suffering complete it?
2. One plausible explanation is that the phrase “the afflictions of Christ” does not refer to Jesus’ suffering on the cross but is equivalent to the Jewish apocalyptic concept of “the woes of the Messiah,” according to which great suffering would attend the last days in anticipation of the coming of the Messiah (see Matt. 24:8; Mark 13:8). Paul sees his present suffering within this framework.
3. For Paul, suffering is never endured without hope. In this case, it is an element of his servanthood, through which

3. R. McLachlan Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 308–12.

Christ, “the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27), is revealed in those to whom he ministers.

4. Paul’s hope is universal. This is indicated in Colossians 1:28, where Paul uses the word *everyone* three times: “It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ.”
5. This hope is also communal. Paul indicates that his sufferings are “for the sake of his [Christ’s] body, that is, the church” (v. 24), and he encourages those for whom he struggles to be “united in love” (2:2).