



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Class Notes

## Introducing the Epistles Colossians in Context

David Anguish

### *Introduction*

1. To prepare for a more detailed introduction to and examination of Colossians,<sup>1</sup> it helps to review basic principles for interpreting epistles, a different genre than other Bible books.
2. We'll begin by looking at some things that help show how to approach writings like Colossians and best interpret them.
  - a. A brief overview of epistles in the Greco-Roman world—generally and in the NT.
  - b. Some rules for interpreting epistles.

### *Epistles in the New Testament World*

3. Greco-Roman Epistles.
  - a. Writing letters, or epistles, was a common means of communication in the first century Greco-Roman world;<sup>2</sup> there were three basic types:
    - 1) Newsletter – covered vital events in a person's experience.
    - 2) Easy and friendly letter – much like the letters between close relatives or friends today.
    - 3) Serious and weighty letter – intended to deal with important subjects.
  - b. The letters *generally* were comprised of six components.<sup>3</sup>
    - 1) Name of the author.
    - 2) Acknowledgment of the recipients.
    - 3) Greeting – opening salutation.

<sup>1</sup> Colossians is comprised of four chapters, 95 verses, and 1,581 words (Greek text). Its length ranks twelfth among the 21 epistles, and eighth among the thirteen Pauline epistles where only 1-2 Thessalonians, 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon are shorter.

<sup>2</sup> Based on a study of papyrus discoveries, Adolf Deissmann (1866–1937) distinguished between *letters* and *epistles*. Letters, which he called “real letters,” were nonliterary, that is, not written for public consumption, but only for the person or persons to whom they were addressed. In contrast, an epistle was an artistic literary form that was intended for the public. Deissmann put all of Paul's letters and 2–3 John in the first category. Others since Deissmann's time have cautioned against his stark reduction while also noting that his delineation of categories has merit. For example, although it is possible to see them on a continuum, Romans and Philemon differ not only in content, but also in their degree of personableness (Fee and Stuart 2003, 56).

<sup>3</sup> The New Testament letters generally follow this structure, but some lack all, or in a few cases, most of the components (e.g., James lacks specific addressees and a final greeting and farewell; and 1 John has none of the formal elements) (cf. Fee and Stuart 2003, 57).

- 4) An expression of favor and prayer of thanksgiving for the recipients.
  - 5) Body – discussion of the topic of concern to the author.
  - 6) Personal greeting and farewell (sometimes in the NT this includes a prayer for the recipients).
- c. The process of writing generally involved the following.
- 1) Dictation of the letter to a secretary, called an *amanuensis*.
  - 2) A personal signature by the person who dictated the letter.
  - 3) Sending the letter by a personal messenger.
4. Letters in the New Testament.
- a. Types.
- 1) Personal letters – written to an individual (Philemon, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, 2–3 John).
  - 2) General (catholic) epistles – written to a wider audience; they contain little that is personal (Hebrews, James, 1–2 Peter, 1 John, Jude).<sup>4</sup>
  - 3) Epistles written to a specific place or region – written for more readers than a personal letter and addressed to the issues of a specific group (1–2 Thessalonians, Galatians, Romans, Colossians, Ephesians).
  - 4) Epistles of reply – written to respond to communication from the recipients, or to address a concern of which the author was aware (1–2 Corinthians, Philippians).
- b. Value of the NT letters.
- 1) Doctrinal and ethical value.
    - a) Show what the early church believed and did.
    - b) Instruct believers more completely about the faith.
    - c) Show what God expects of his people (includes corrections of the recipients' failures).
  - 2) Historical value.
    - a) What were the circumstances surrounding the people in the first century churches?
    - b) What were the people in the first century churches like?
    - c) What problems and joys did they experience?

### *Pointers for Effective Study of the Epistles*

5. Careful application of some basic interpretation strategies can make our Bible study more effective.
- a. It is important to keep in mind some significant differences between the Bible and contemporary writings. Foremost among these differences is that Bible writings are *ancient* writings from *different cultures*; so we need some awareness of history, culture, and means of expression.
  - b. We should also remember that the writings represent multiple genres, each of which is interpreted differently (e.g., narrative, poetry, apocalyptic, legal, proverbs, comparisons [parables, etc.], epistles).
  - c. Having acknowledged the differences, there are some basic rules are generally applicable to all genres..
    - 1) Context, *context*, **context!**
      - a) Historical.
      - b) Cultural.

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<sup>4</sup> Note that Hebrews and 1 John take the form of tracts more than letters.

- c) Geographical.
  - d) Literary – both what *precedes* a statement and what *follows* it (often an issue in Paul; cf. Romans 5.1–5 [conclusion], 6–11 [premises]).
  - 2) Interpret according to the correct meaning of words.
  - 3) Understand the grammar, the form of and relationship between the words.
    - a) Note the adverb ἀναξίως (*anaxiōs*; “worthily” KJV; “worthy manner” ESV) 1 Corinthians 11.27, a reference to how they were to eat the Lord’s supper, not, as some have misunderstood, to whether they were *worthy* to eat it; cf. the context of 1 Cor 11.17–34).
  - 4) Interpret Scripture by Scripture.
6. When we interpret epistles, there are some specific rules to remember.
- a. Remember that you are reading someone else’s mail.
    - 1) Authors make statements that the original recipients had no trouble understanding; they knew the cultural-historical circumstances, what had previously been said *to* the author, etc. But we have no more than one half of the conversation.
    - 2) We need to acknowledge that caution is necessary, that we cannot always be certain about a passage’s meaning, and that we must sometimes be content with a “possible” or “probable” conclusion.
  - b. Remember that the epistles are *occasional writings* (Fee and Stuart 2003, 58): some circumstance or set of circumstances—on the part of either the recipients or the author—prompted the author to write that letter (e.g., 1 Corinthians; Jude).
    - 1) This is why it is important to pay attention to the historical and cultural contexts.
    - 2) But another important application of this principle remembers that *they were not intended to be formal theological statements that aimed to cover every possible aspect of the faith, or even a particular subject.*<sup>5</sup>
    - 3) The writers *apply* theological principles to specific situations—which are not always directly parallel to circumstances today to which they might apply.<sup>6</sup>
      - a) Sometimes, the circumstances closely parallel ours—e.g., stealing, lying, failure to control our anger, etc. (Eph 4.25ff.) are always wrong.
      - b) But often, the interpretation work we need to do involves understanding their situation, working “backward” to discern the principle behind the teaching, and then working “forward” to apply that principle to our circumstances (e.g., how do we apply the principle behind Paul’s admonishment of the Corinthians’ Lord’s supper abuses in a time and place when we do not observe the supper in the same way? Cf. 1 Cor 11.17–22; esp. v. 20.
  - c. In interpreting epistles, we need to *think paragraphs* (Fee and Stuart 2003, 64)—and in terms of logical connections (note the many times words like *therefore, because of this, for this reason, etc.*, appear).
    - 1) Like our letters, epistles are comprised of related thoughts.

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<sup>5</sup> As with other features, there are variations; e.g., Romans and Hebrews are closer to theological treatises than Philemon or 3 John.

<sup>6</sup> Fee and Stuart (2003, 58) use the phrase *task theology*.

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- a) Some flexibility is needed: often, the epistles have sub-sections that we need to appreciate before we dive into the individual thought units (e.g., Col 1.24–2.7; in three paragraphs: 1.24–29; 2.1–5; 2.6–7; Col 2.6–23; in four paragraphs: 2.6–7; 2.8–15; 2.16–19; 2.20–23).
  - 2) It is beneficial to study them in smaller units to unpack the details.
  - d. But at the same time, we need to keep the big picture in mind.
    - 1) Step one: make it a habit to read the entire letter through before beginning to interpret the individual paragraphs; if possible, read it from multiple translations.
      - a) That's typically how we're going to read a letter [email] from grandma, or the bank, etc.
      - b) As you read the NT letters, jot down observations about the author, readers, and themes.
    - 2) As you examine the individual paragraphs, periodically take a step back and remember the larger picture to see how the specific passages fits into the whole.

April 5, 2026

### Works Cited

Fee, Gordon D., and Douglas Stuart. 2003. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. 3rd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.