

Study Notes – Colossians & James

The first passage in this month's Season of Fruitfulness study is from Paul's letter to the church at Colossae. Here are some background notes to aid further study.

Colossae was situated in SW Turkey (biblical Asia Minor) about 150 miles due East of Ephesus on a tributary to the Meander River. There were three biblical cities in close proximity: Hierapolis, Laodicea and Colossae. There was a major East-West trade route along the Meander which favoured Hierapolis and Laodicea, but bypassed Colossae leading to its decline. The area is quite volcanic and Colossae was decimated by an earthquake in the 60's AD, presumably soon after the letter was written. The population was a mixture of Jews and Greeks.

As far as we know, Paul never visited Colossae bypassing it on his third missionary journey (Acts 18:23) en route to Ephesus (which was a major metropolis and port). The church in Colossae was started by Epaphras (1:7), who was a co-worker and fellow prisoner (Phm 23) of Paul. It was headed by Archippus who was probably the son of Philemon who lived there.

The letter (or epistle) was written by Paul from prison in Rome about 62AD, at the same time as the letters to the Ephesians and Philemon. There was also a letter to the church in Laodicea, but that has been lost. The letters to Colossae and Laodicea were to be exchanged (4:16). The four letters were delivered by Paul's co-worker, Tychicus (4:7, Eph 6:21) and the returning converted slave Onesimus (Phm 10-12).

The main theme of the letter is to ensure their (and our) focus remains on Christ, not being side-tracked. Paul starts in chapter 1 by proclaiming who Jesus is and what He has done – that He must be pre-eminent (1:18). The Greeks loved wisdom and philosophy; the Jews loved legalism and lived by rules; others loved to indulge their fleshly lusts. Paul deals with each of these in chapters 2 and 3. The final part in chapters 3 and 4 deals with practical outworking of faith in Christ. I think of a compass whose needle always points north unless a magnet gets too close and pulls it out of line, resulting in the navigator getting side-tracked or lost.

It was important for the Colossians to avoid distractions and to remain focussed on Christ because of what was to happen in the near future. In 64AD Nero blamed the Christians for the fire in Rome and widespread persecution followed. Along with the earthquake, the Colossian Christians' lives were turned upside-down. We don't know what is ahead for us, so let us echo Paul's prayers in our study passage (1:9-12) for ourselves and each other, that we may be constantly focussed on Jesus and not easily get side-tracked.

The second passage of scripture is from James 5. James, a brother of Jesus, is a trusted leader of the early church in Jerusalem writing to the dispersed Jewish Christians of the first century, many of whom were facing pressure and persecution from both Jews and Romans. James simply speaks what he sees with no airs and graces – straight talking – he addresses the issues head on. These are his closing words to his readers – often the most important. If you're in any kind of trouble then pray about it. A message that is as relevant today as it was thousands of years ago. Do you consider your prayers to be "powerful and effective" (v16) – how do we get there? Ask God for revelation.