

# The Complete Christian

**Colossians**



**8 INTERACTIVE BIBLE STUDIES FOR  
SMALL GROUPS & INDIVIDUALS**

# The Complete Christian

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**Colossians**

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*The Complete Christian*  
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ISBN 1 876326 68 9

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Cover design and typesetting by Lankshear Design Pty Ltd.

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# *How to make the most of these studies*

## **1. What is an Interactive Bible Study?**

These ‘interactive’ Bible studies are a bit like a guided tour of a famous city. The studies will take you through Paul’s letter to the Colossians, pointing out things along the way, filling in background details, and suggesting avenues for further exploration. But there is also time for you to do some sight-seeing of your own—to wander off, have a good look for yourself, and form your own conclusions.

In other words, we have designed these studies to fall half-way between a sermon and a set of unadorned Bible study questions. We want to provide stimulation and input and point you in the right direction, while leaving you to do a lot of the exploration and discovery yourself.

We hope that these studies will stimulate lots of ‘interaction’—interaction with the Bible, with the things we’ve written, with your own current thoughts and attitudes, with other people as you discuss them, and with God as you talk to him about it all.

## **2. The format**

Each study contains sections of text to introduce, summarize, suggest and provoke. We’ve left plenty of room in the margins for you to jot comments and questions as you read. Interspersed throughout the text are two types of ‘interaction’, each with their own symbol:



### **Investigate**

Questions to help you investigate key parts of the Bible.



### **Think it through**

Questions to help you think through the implications of your discoveries and write down your own thoughts and reactions.

When you come to one of these symbols, you'll know that it's time to do some work of your own.

## **3. Suggestions for individual study**

- Before you begin, pray that God would open your eyes to what he is saying in Colossians and give you the spiritual strength to do something about it. You may be spurred to pray again at the end of the study.
- Work through the study, following the directions as you go. Write in the spaces provided.
- Resist the temptation to skip over the *Think it through* sections. It is important to think about the sections of text (rather than just accepting them as true) and to ponder the implications for your life. Writing these things down is a very valuable way to get your thoughts working.
- Take what opportunities you can to talk to others about what you've learnt.

## **4. Suggestions for group study**

- Much of the above applies to group study as well. The studies are suitable for structured Bible study or cell groups, as well as for more informal pairs and threesomes. Get together with a

friend/s and work through them at your own pace. You don't need the formal structure of a 'group' to gain maximum benefit.

- It is *vital* that group members work through the study themselves *before* the group meets. The group discussion can take place comfortably in an hour (depending on how side-tracked you get!), but only if all the members have done the work and are familiar with the material.
- Spend most of the group time discussing the 'interactive' sections—*Investigate* and *Think it through*. Reading all the text together will take too long and should be unnecessary if the group members have done their preparation. You may wish to underline and read aloud particular paragraphs or sections of text that you think are important.
- The role of the group leader is to direct the course of the discussion and to try to draw the threads together at the end. This will mean a little extra preparation—underlining important sections of text to emphasize, working out which questions are worth concentrating on, and being sure of the main thrust of the study. Leaders will also probably want to work out approximately how long they'd like to spend on each part.
- We haven't included an 'answer guide' to the questions in the studies. This is a deliberate move. We want to give you a guided tour, not a lecture. There is more than enough in the text we have written and the questions we have asked to point you in what we think is the right direction. The rest is up to you. (If you *would* like some additional input, there is a series of tapes available that expound the relevant passages. For details, see the pages inside the back cover.)

## 5. Bible Translation

Previous editions of this Interactive Bible Study have assumed that most readers would be using the New International Version of the Bible. However, since the release of the English Standard Version in 2001, many have switched to the ESV for study purposes. So with this new edition of *The Complete Christian*, we have decided to quote from and refer to the ESV text, which we recommend.

# 1

## *Receiving & continuing*

### **1. A town like Colossae**

Imagine, if you can, a fertile valley with a river meandering through it, in what we would now call Turkey. On the shores of the river, at the junction of two important roads, is a town like many first-century towns. This is Colossae, just down the road from Laodicea and Hierapolis.

As you stroll through the streets and into the market-place, you encounter a mix of races and religious beliefs—there are Jews there, and Greek mystery religions, and a variety of other cults and religious philosophies. And among the various sub-cultures is a group calling itself ‘Christian’.

This group of Christians were the original addressees of the letter that we call ‘Colossians’ and which we are about to study in some depth.

Let’s look briefly at how they came into being and at why the apostle Paul is writing to them.

#### **Investigate**

1. What was Paul’s relationship with the Christians at Colossae before he wrote to them (see 2:1, 5)?





2. Who originally brought the gospel to the Colossians (see 1:6-8)?

3. What is Paul's description of:

- what the Colossians used to be like (1:21; 2:13)?
- what they are now like (1:3-8)?

4. What is Paul's situation as he writes (4:3, 18; cf. Phlm 23)?

We're not certain exactly when the Colossian church came into existence. It may well have been during Paul's lengthy stay in Ephesus (which was not all that far away). In Acts 19, we read that as a result of Paul's teaching in the lecture hall of Tyrannus, "all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 19:10). Whatever their past history, Paul is delighted with their faith in the gospel, and the fruit of that faith. And he is concerned for their welfare; concerned enough to write to them from his imprisonment.

## 2. The heresy?

Many people have assumed that Paul was writing to combat a dangerous heresy in Colossae. In chapter 2 of the letter, he certainly gets stuck into somebody or something. However, we need to bear the following things in mind:

- The only information we have about the ‘heresy’ is that contained in the letter itself. By reading between the lines and taking note of how Paul refutes the heretics, biblical scholars have attempted to reconstruct what the heresy was like.
- No-one seems able to agree on exactly what sort of heresy was involved. There has been a bewildering array of suggestions and perhaps the only thing we can be certain about is that we can’t be certain. We don’t even know for sure if there was a clearly defined ‘heresy’.
- We also need to note that the letter to the Colossians was meant for a wider audience. In 4:16, Paul urges the Colossians to show their letter to the neighbouring Laodiceans, and in turn to read the Laodicean letter (which we no longer have).
- As every pastor knows, there are always distractions and heresies to lead Christians astray. It is a feature of our sinful world, and it should not surprise us. The Colossian church was by no means unique in having to deal with people or teachings that sought to distract from Christ.
- Finally, we should remember that the Scriptures were written down for *our* instruction. God has inspired Paul’s letter to the Colossians so that it speaks to his people in every age, whether they have detailed knowledge of the Colossian ‘heresy’ or not.

In other words, there may have been a ‘Colossian heresy’; it would certainly fit the facts. However, we don’t need to worry too much about it. We certainly don’t need to know any more about it than Paul actually reveals in his letter. Paul’s letter is general enough to be read in other churches (like the Laodiceans’) and general enough to apply to us.

Indeed, the striking thing about the false teaching that Paul refutes in chapter 2 is that it is so similar to the kinds of false teach-

ing that abound today. As we look at chapter 2 in more detail later on, we'll see just how much it has to teach twentieth century Christians.

There is much to challenge us in this short but very important New Testament letter, and to get to the heart of that challenge, we are going to leap headfirst into the middle.

### 3. The challenge

It may seem rather strange to start studying a letter in the middle, but in Colossians 2:6-7 we find a sentence that virtually summarizes the whole letter:

Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

These two verses are the hinge around which the letter turns. They summarize all that comes before, and outline what is to follow.

In this first study, we will work through these verses almost word by word, and in doing so we'll gain a feel for the message of the whole letter. (In the studies that follow, we'll go back to the beginning and work through the whole letter.)



#### Investigate

##### **“Therefore”**

The opening two words of these verses prepare the readers for some sort of conclusion. “OK”, says Paul, “Given what I have just been saying, this is what I want you to do”. What has Paul just been saying?

He has just been reminding the Colossians of his ministry to the Gentiles, of which they are part (1:24-2:5). He has been a servant of the gospel that they have received, and has laboured and struggled (with God's strength) to proclaim Christ

with the final aim of presenting “everyone mature in Christ” (1:28).

Even though he has not met the Colossians personally he is struggling for them, too (2:1). His purpose is that they may know Christ better, and he is delighted to hear that their faith in Christ is orderly and firm.

### **“as you received”**

So then, says Paul, in light of all that I have been saying, I want you to continue in Christ, *as you received him*. The word translated ‘received’ is a special sort of word meaning to have a tradition or body of teaching passed on to you. It’s the same word Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 15:1 when he writes: “Now brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you *received* and on which you have taken your stand”.

1. What does it mean that the Colossians had “received” Christ? Can you see any clues earlier in the letter? (See esp. 1:3-8, 23.)
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. What do you think is the significance of the little word “as” in verse 6?

### **“Christ Jesus the Lord”**

Jesus was a first-century Jew who was raised in Nazareth, conducted a public ministry throughout Galilee and Judea and was crucified in around 30 AD—that is, around twenty-five years before Paul wrote his letter to the Colossians. Paul calls this Jesus ‘Christ’. The word ‘Christ’ is a title taken from the Old Testament. It means ‘anointed one’ (the Hebrew word is ‘messiah’) and describes the ruler or king of Israel. For hundreds of years before the time of Jesus, Israel had not had a king of its own. The Old Testament prophets looked forward to a time when God would send a great king to liberate Israel from her oppressors and establish a worldwide kingdom. Paul is saying that this Jesus, crucified (and risen) only twenty-five years ago, is that ‘Christ’.

3. What is Jesus Lord of (see 1:13-20)?

4. “The message of Christianity is a person not an idea.” Do you agree? Why? Why not?

**“so walk in him”**

5. In what way were the Colossians to continue their Christian lives?

6. How do you think this might relate to the false teaching that the Colossians were facing?

**“rooted”**

7. The image here is of the Colossians being like a tree whose roots are bedded down in Christ. How does this help us understand the way we are to continue in Christ?

**“built up”**

8. The second image is of a building. How (or where) is our ‘building’ to grow?

**“established in the faith”**

9. Here, ‘the faith’ is the body of teaching or knowledge that the Colossians had received. In what way were they to be established?

**“abounding in thanksgiving”**

10. The ongoing Christian life is to be characterized by thankfulness, and lots of it. How is this different from human nature?

**Summary**

11. To tie it all together, try to re-write Colossians 2:6-7 in your own words (don’t use any of the words in the verses, except ‘Jesus’).

## 4. Today's message

### a. Heresy?

We do not know for sure what the Colossian heresy was, or indeed if there was one. But we do know our own world only too well. We know that temptations to turn aside from Christ Jesus the Lord are all around us, and they come in numerous forms.

There are those who tell us that it is juvenile or inconsistent to follow Jesus Christ as the Lord of the world. There are many learned scholars, theologians and ministers who do not regard Jesus as any more than a peculiarly gifted man. For them, he is not the divine ruler of the world, and he certainly did not rise from the dead.

Many of our friends and workmates have the same basic attitude to Jesus, even if not in such a sophisticated, religious sort of form. They think that Jesus was a good man, even a great man, but they do not allow him to run their lives.

The steady drip of these attitudes can affect us. Even if we have “received Christ Jesus as Lord” like the Colossians, we can easily find ourselves no longer treating him as the Lord—no longer obeying him, and no longer allowing his values and wishes to shape our lives.

We might call this whole problem the ‘gospel minus’—that is, *subtracting* Jesus’ lordship from our belief and life.

There is another common way for us to be distracted from continuing in Christ—we might call it the ‘gospel plus’. This consists of adding other lords and masters to our lives, thus diminishing the status of Jesus. These other lords can be many and varied. Some people add the church, making its decisions and rules an essential element of the Christian life. “Yes, it’s fine to have Jesus as your Lord”, they say, “but you must also do what the church/elder/priest tells you”.

In the same sort of way, people add the worship of Mary to the gospel, or they require some second blessing of the Holy Spirit, or they add certain kinds of good works (like how to keep the Sabbath). All these are examples of the ‘gospel plus’—of adding something to the simple New Testament gospel of ‘Christ Jesus as Lord’.

## **b. Receiving and continuing**

Paul's message to the Colossians was clear. Just as they had accepted Jesus as their Lord, so they were to continue in him—not adding something to him, or wandering off down some other path, or moving on to some higher experience, but growing in the spot where they had been planted: in Christ, the Lord and Master of the Universe.



### **Think it through**

1. Have you received Christ properly—as Lord?
2. Are you continuing?
3. Are you growing?
4. What things do you find distract you from Jesus?



5. What things tempt you to 'move on' from Jesus?