

# THE SITUATION AT COLOSSAE

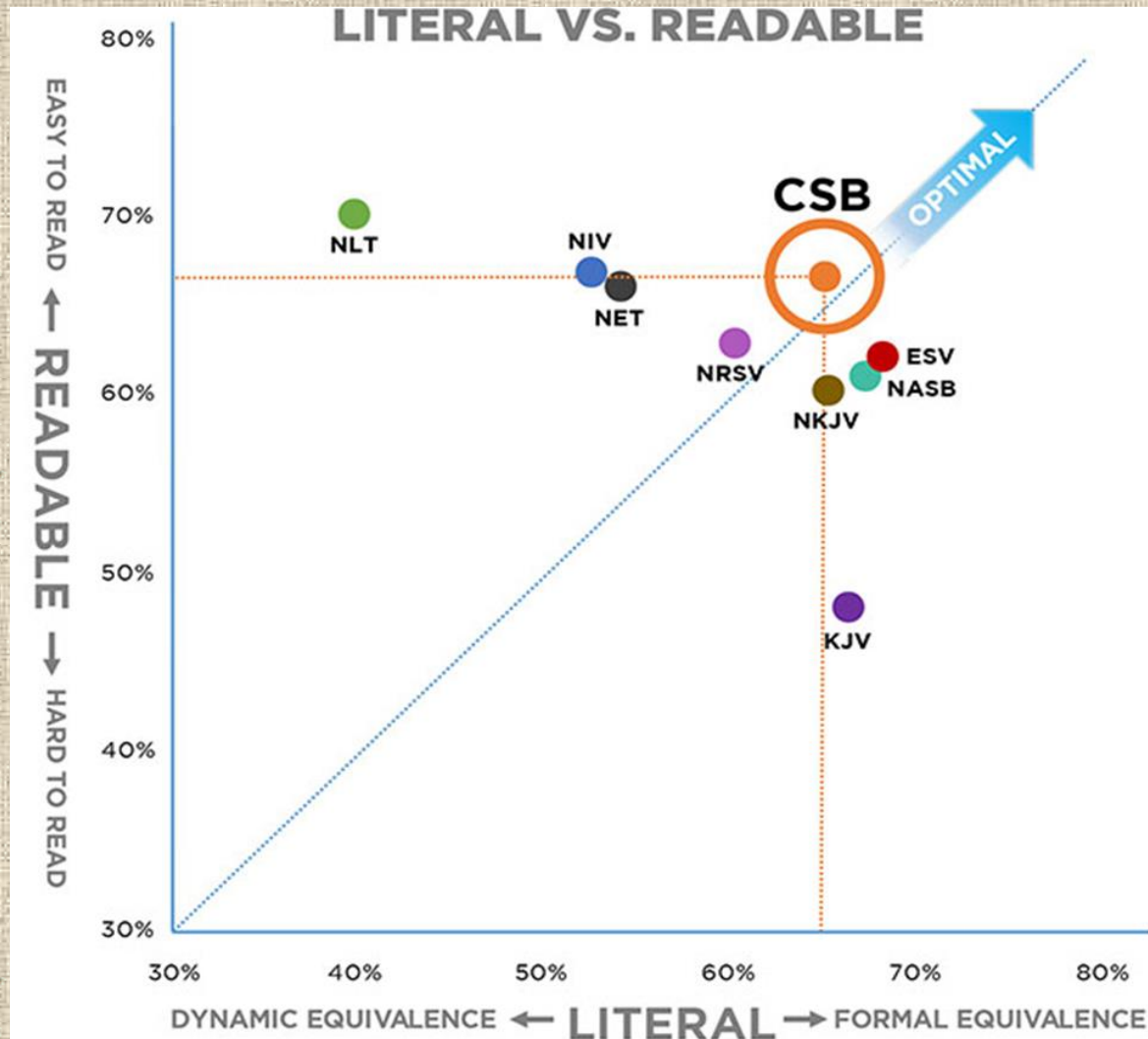


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**BACK TO OUR  
REGULARLY  
SCHEDULED EPISODE:  
THE SITUATION AT  
COLOSSAE**



Ancient Colossae was destroyed by an earthquake in either AD 61 or 64, depending on the ancient historian—not all that long after Paul wrote in the 50s. The city would not be rebuilt until the early second century at the earliest. Even *that* city would be destroyed and lie in ruins for centuries.

# A Glimpse of the Ruins of *Ancient Colossae*



A spiral-bound notebook with a light beige, textured cover. The metal spiral binding is on the left side. The title is centered on the cover in a black serif font.

# How to Interpret One of Paul's Letters

We must always interpret a passage *in context*. Otherwise ... a passage can mean whatever we *want*.

Biblical interpretation is never what something means to *me*. Words are malleable things and can mean just about anything.

**Lewis Carroll, author of *Alice in Wonderland* in his *Through the Looking Glass*:**

“‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.’

‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you can make words mean so many different things.’

‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master — that’s all.’”

# Interpreting the Bible Properly

The cardinal sin in interpreting the Bible: Not to interpret *in context* using the “*inside-out*” rule.

Start with words and their possible meanings, then expand outward to phrases, to clauses, to verses, paragraphs, chapters, individual books, then authors, collections of books (e.g., Torah), and finally the Bible as whole.

Then outside the Bible: culture and ancient parallels

One of the most important of these stages is to interpret the passage within the context of the biblical book!

Harmonizing passages and identifying doctrine go at the *end* of the process.

# A Pauline Letter in Context: Interpreting Colossians on *Its Own* Terms

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A letter to one of Paul's congregations.

One end of a two-way conversation: We have to reconstruct what is going on on *their* end.

That reconstructive work is inevitably imperfect and incomplete, but *we need to know* what it is that Paul is addressing with his end of the conversation.

What is the situation that is motivating the letter and around which all of it revolves?

*What is it that makes this letter tick?*

# Taking Our Seats with the Colossians Hearing that Letter Being Read for the First Time

Ultimately, we want to try to understand *enough* of the situation and circumstances so that we can imagine ourselves taking our seats with the original recipients of the letter whom Paul was addressing.

Paul wrote first *for them* and for us *through* them.

God intends for us to overhear a letter written for the *Colossians* in their time and in their situation.

So who is sitting around us?

What was it that motivated Paul to write?

How is he responding to that situation?

In short, what do we know?

A spiral-bound notebook with a light beige, textured cover. The metal spiral binding is on the left side. The text "Who Were the Colossians?" is printed in the center in a black serif font.

Who Were the Colossians?

# What Do We Know?

Colossians 1:21: “*Once you were alienated and hostile in your minds, expressed in your evil actions.*”

We think of *everyone* as sinners—and they are—but this is language that the Jews liked to use when they talked about gentiles!

The non-Jews, or “gentiles” were always thought to be out committing wicked deeds.

Compare this to 1 Thessalonians 4:3b-5: “Keep away from sexual immorality, that each of you knows how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not with *lustful passions, like the Gentiles*, who don’t know God.” Were the Colossians gentiles?

# The Colossian Were *Gentiles* (*Not Jews*)

Not surprising, then, only a few verses from 1:21:

Colossians 1:27: “God wanted to make known among *the Gentiles* the glorious wealth of this mystery, which is Christ in *you*, the hope of glory.” (“You” are gentiles!)

Colossians 2:13: “And when you were dead in trespasses and in the *uncircumcision of your flesh*, he made *you* alive with him and forgave us all our trespasses.”

“You” are *not* circumcised.

# The Colossians Were Prospering in the Faith

Colossians 1:4-6: “For we have heard of *your faith in Christ Jesus* and of the *love you have* for all the saints, because of the hope reserved for you in heaven. You have already heard about this hope in the word of the truth, the gospel that has come to you. It [the gospel] is *bearing fruit and growing all over the world*, just as it has among you since the day you heard it and came to truly appreciate God’s grace.”

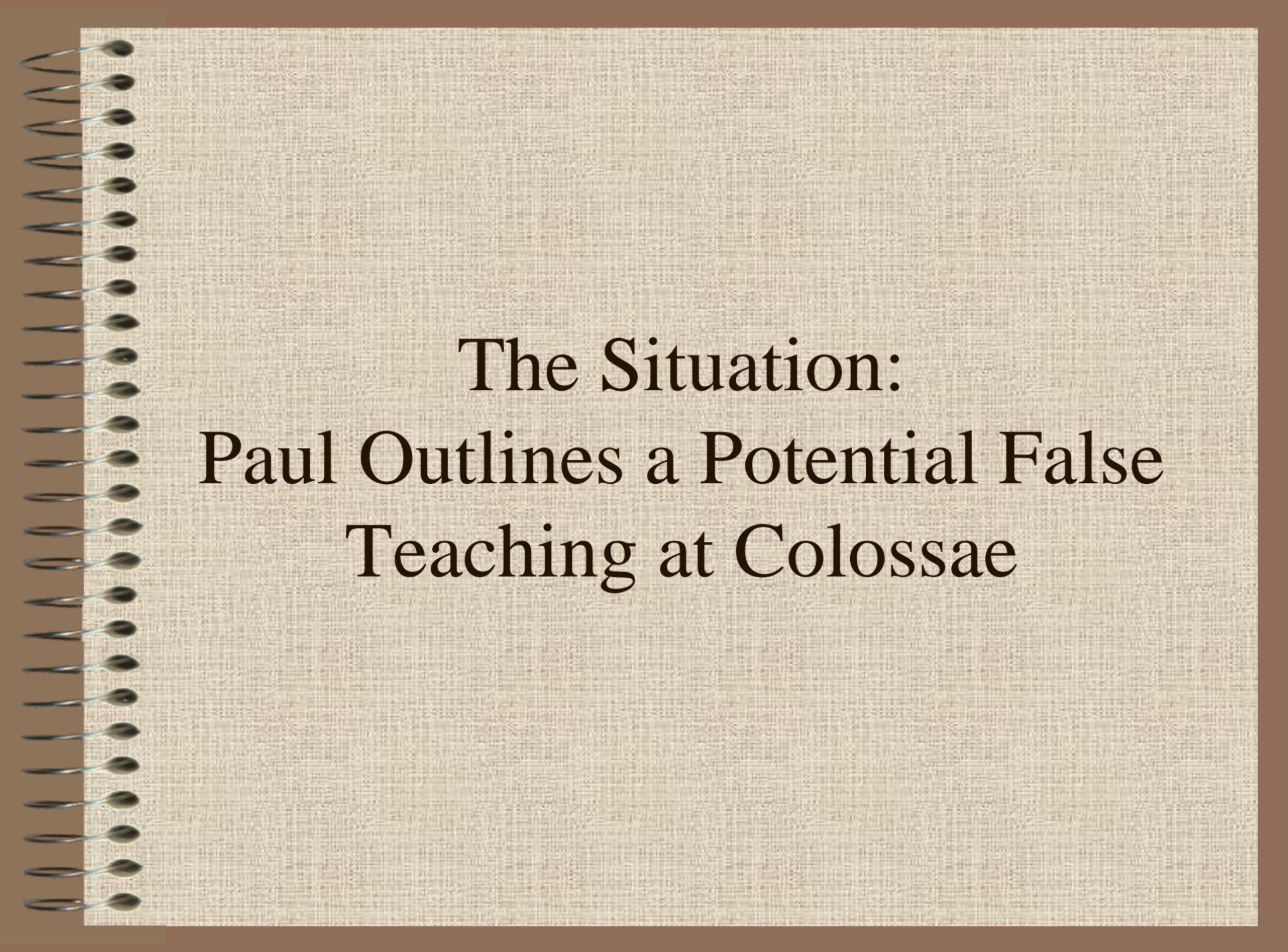
(Note: growing *all over the world*: the gentiles again!)

Colossians 2:5: “For I may be absent in body, but I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see *how well ordered you are* and the *strength of your faith in Christ*.”

# Epaphras Brought News!

Colossians 1:7-8: “*You learned this from Epaphras, our dearly loved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, and he has told us of your love in the Spirit.*”

Colossians 4:12-13: “Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always *wrestling for you in his prayers*, so that you can stand mature and fully assured in everything God wills. For I testify about him that *he works hard for you*, for those in Laodicea, and for those in Hierapolis.” (A great co-worker and servant!)

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The Situation:  
Paul Outlines a Potential False  
Teaching at Colossae

# Despite All the Positives at Colossae – Paul Offers a Warning!

Colossians 2:4: “I am saying this so that *no one will deceive you with arguments that sound reasonable.*” Then in 2:8: “Be careful that no one takes you captive through ***philosophy and empty deceit, based on human tradition, based on the elements of the world, rather than Christ.***”

Philosophy – a way of thinking, but empty deceit!

“Elements of the world”?

Earth-air-fire-water; divinized as *powers in the universe* (vs. Christ)? (Keep that in mind.)

# They Were Emphasizing Supernatural Powers and Forces

Colossians 2:18: “Let no one condemn you by delighting in ascetic practices and the *worship of angels, claiming access to a visionary realm*. Such people are inflated by empty notions of their unspiritual mind.”

Colossians 2:15: “He disarmed the *rulers and authorities* and disgraced them publicly; he triumphed over them in him.”

- 1. Angelic mediators and ruling powers**
- 2. Heavenly visions**

### 3. The Final Judgment

Colossians 2:14: “He [God] *erased the certificate of debt, with its obligations, that was against us and opposed to us*, and has taken it away by nailing it to the cross.”

So ... cosmic realities with angels and demons and powers, worlds above and below, and this age giving way to an age to come with its final judgment!

## 4. *Jewish Teaching!*

Colossians 2:16: “Therefore, don’t let anyone judge you in regard to *food and drink or in the matter of a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day.*”

Sabbath: Exodus 23:12; 35:1-3; Leviticus 23:3

New Moons: Exodus 12:1-2; Number 10:10; 28:11; Nehemiah 10:31; 1 Samuel 20:5

Sabbath! Kosher foods! Jewish calendar!

## 5. An “Ascetic” Teaching

Colossians 2:18: “Let no one condemn you by delighting in *ascetic practices* and the worship of angels, claiming *access to a visionary realm*.”

Ascetic practices – denying oneself bodily pleasures as one strives to render oneself more *worthy* of visionary experiences!

Colossians 2:21: “*Don’t handle, don’t taste, don’t touch*.”

Notice how *world-denying* this is!

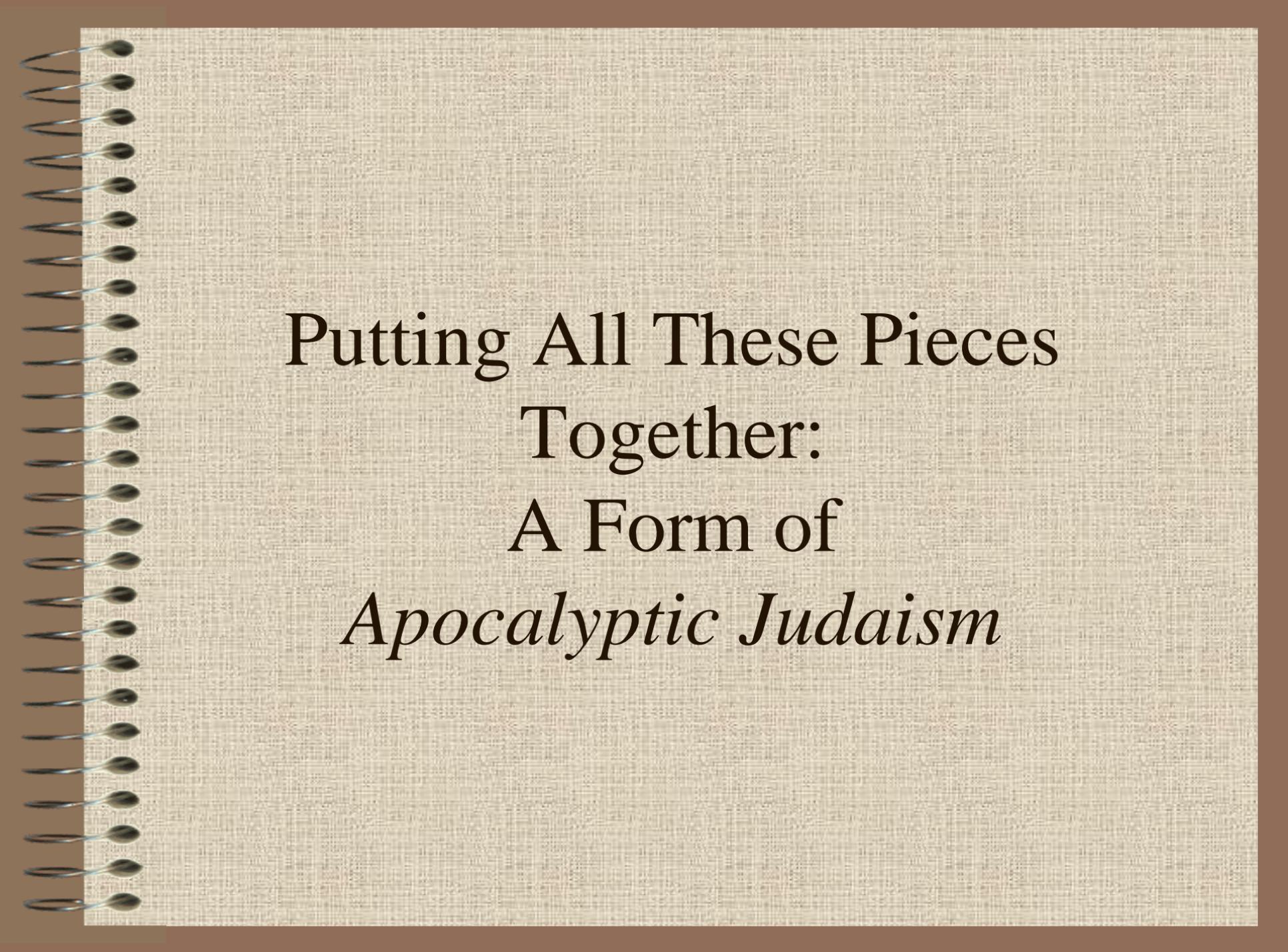
# More “Ascetic” Teaching

Colossians 2:23: “Although these have a reputation for wisdom by promoting self-made religion, *false humility*, and *severe treatment of the body*, they are not of any value in *curbing self-indulgence*.”

Colossians 2:11: “You were also circumcised in him with a circumcision not done with hands, *by putting off the body of flesh*, in the circumcision of Christ.”

Colossians 3:5-7: “Therefore, put to death what belongs to your earthly nature: *sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desire, and greed, which is idolatry.* Because of these, God’s wrath is coming upon the disobedient, and ***you once walked in these things*** when you were living in them.”

*The false philosophy was not really helping with sinful overindulgence.*

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Putting All These Pieces  
Together:  
A Form of  
*Apocalyptic Judaism*

# What Is “Apocalyptic” Judaism?

A Cool Word, But What Does It Mean?

Jewish apocalypses: 1 Enoch, 2 Baruch, 4 Ezra, Apocalypse of Abraham, among others

In all of them, a supernatural figure like an angel shows up in the presence of an individual.

Then the angel takes that person on a visionary journey, and there are two types.

You either get to see the various epochs of time all laid out (the past, the present, the end of time; think Revelation or the second half of the Book of Daniel—*temporal* apocalypses in the Bible!)

*Or* you get to see the various levels of heaven; cf. Paul in 2 Cor. 12:2-4: “I know a man in Christ who was caught up to the third heaven .... Whether he was in the body or out of the body.... And heard inexpressible words....”

That second one is a *spatial* apocalypse (unlike the *temporal* ones we have in the Bible).

Star Trek!

or

Dr. Who!



You might see in a level of heaven places where angels or people are being punished or rewarded.

In the *Testament of Abraham*, an apocalypse, we have a comic depiction of a perfectly righteous Abraham whom the angel Michael takes on a journey to see the world.

Abraham sees sinners and righteous people on the earth.

Michael then lets him see Abel, Enoch, and the angels judging souls on God's behalf, whether good (heaven-bound) or evil (punishment-bound).

# The Five Elements of the Colossian Situation Revisited

So ... we have here a popular *Jewish* genre of literature and thought (4) with:

Supernatural angels and heavenly powers (1)

Heavenly visions (2)

Denying yourself fleshly pleasures to be more ready for them – asceticism (5)

Cosmic realities (the entire earth, and even the heavens)

Judgment of souls (3)

Starting to sound a lot like Colossians, isn't it?

A form of **apocalyptic Judaism!**

At the same time, Paul does not identify false teachers at Colossae (not like he does in Galatians).

It's a *potential* false teaching in the Colossians' midst: "so that no one will deceive you with arguments that sound reasonable" (2:4).

Apparently, he has heard from Epaphras enough to address a potential threat.

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So How Does Paul Respond to  
the Potential False Teaching?

# Hidden Knowledge Revealed?

With those visions for the seer in apocalyptic Judaism comes *secret knowledge of hidden heavenly realities* and of *what is to come*.

*In Christ* we have already have all the knowledge we need! Note the motif in Colossians, e.g.:

Col. 1:9b-10: “We are asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding ... bearing fruit in every good work and growing in the knowledge of God.”

(Knowledge and works that prepare us to stand before the judgment seat!)

# Real Hidden Knowledge – Made Known!

1:27: “God wanted to make known among the Gentiles the glorious wealth of this mystery, which is *Christ in you*, the hope of glory.”

2:2b: “so that they may have all the riches of complete understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery – Christ.”

Col. 3:10: “You are being renewed in knowledge according to the image of your Creator.”

And it's a *cosmic in Christ* reality: “In Christ there is not Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all.”

“*In Christ*” – 31% of all Paul's prepositions in the undisputed letters, but 46% in Colossians – We have a new identity!

# Against Asceticism

In apocalyptic forms of Judaism, you treat your body harshly to render yourself more capable of heavenly revelation and visions.

You also prepare yourself for the heavenly judgment.

Paul's response? No value!

Colossians 2:23: : “Although these have a reputation for wisdom by promoting self-made religion, false humility, and severe treatment of the body, they are not of any value in curbing self-indulgence.”

# World-Affirming (*Not* World-Denying, Like the Ascetic)

Colossians 2:18: “Do no one condemn you by delighting in ascetic practices and *the worship of angels*, claiming access to a visionary realm. Such people are inflated by empty notions of their unspiritual mind.” [See also 3:14, 16]

Colossians 3:18-4:1: “Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands ... Husbands love your wives.... Children, obey your parents... Fathers, do not exasperate your children....”

The letter repeatedly affirms where we find ourselves in the world!

# A Jewish Teaching – But No Need for the Rituals of Moses' Law

Colossians 2:16: “Therefore, don’t let anyone judge you in regard to food or drink or in the matter of a festival, a new moon, or Sabbath day.”

Colossians 2:20-22: “If you died with Christ to the elements of the world, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations: ‘Don’t handle, don’t taste, don’t touch’? All these regulations refer to what is destined to be used up; they are human commands and doctrines.”

# No Need to Circumcise (No Power in It)

Colossians 2:11-13: “You were also circumcised in him with *a circumcision not done with hands, by putting off the body of flesh*, in the circumcision of Christ, when you were buried with him *in baptism*, in which you were also *raised with him through faith in the working of God*, who raised him from the dead. And when you were dead in trespasses and in the *uncircumcision of your flesh*, he *made you alive* with him and forgave us all our trespasses.”

# No Power in the Mosaic Law

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Colossians 2:17: “These are a shadow of what was to come; the substance is Christ.”

Colossians 2:14-15: “He [God] erased the certificate of debt, with its obligations, that was against us and opposed to us, and has taken it away by nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and disgraced them publicly; he triumphed over them in him.”

# Real Power? It's In Christ!

Colossians 1:13-14: “He has rescued us from the domain of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of the Son he loves. In him we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.”

Colossians 1:22: “But now he has reconciled you by his physical body through his death, to present you holy, faultless, and blameless before him.”

Colossians 2:12: “When you were buried with him in baptism, in which you *were* also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.”

You don't have to wait for the future! We enjoy power NOW!

Colossians 3:1: “So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.”

# Their Heavenly Visions and Reality Vs. The Cosmic Paul

Colossians 1:23: "...if indeed you remain grounded and steadfast in the faith and are not shifted away from the hope of the gospel that you heard. ***This gospel*** has been ***proclaimed in all creation under heaven,*** and ***I, Paul*** have become a servant of it."

Note the response to the supernatural realities boasted of in the false teaching by means of *a cosmic gospel* and *a cosmic Paul* with a *worldwide* mission!

# The Cosmic Pauline Ministry: One-Upping the False Philosophy

Colossians 1:5-7: “You have already heard about this hope in the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you. It is bearing fruit and growing *all over the world*, just as it has among you since the day you heard and came to truly appreciate God’s grace.”

Colossians 1:25-28: “I have become its [the gospel’s] servant according to God’s commission that was given to me for you, *to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for the ages and generations* but now revealed to his saints. God wanted to make known among the Gentiles the glorious wealth of *this mystery*, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. We proclaim him, warning and teaching *everyone* with *all* wisdom, so that we may present *everyone* mature in Christ.” Everyone! All!

# A Merely Human Message Unlike Paul's *True*, Supernatural Message

Colossians 2:22: “All these regulations refer to what is destined to perish by being used up; they are *human commands and doctrines*.”

Colossians 2:8: “Be careful that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit based on *human tradition*, based on the elements of the world, rather than Christ.”

# A *Cosmic Christ* In Response to Their False Cosmic Claims!

Colossians 1:20: "... and [God] through him [Christ] *to reconcile everything to himself, whether things on earth or things in heaven*, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross."

Colossians 2:12: "... when you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also *raised with him through faith in the working of God*, who raised him from the dead." *Already raised with Christ in Colossians!*

Colossians 3:1: "So if you *have been raised* with Christ, seek the things above, where *Christ is, seated at the right hand of God*."

Colossians 3:4: "When Christ, who is your life, appears, then *you will also appear with him in glory*."


# Who Needs Angels or Powers?

## The Cosmic Christ!

Colossians 1:16-17: “For *everything was created by him, in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and by him all things hold together.*”

Colossians 3:1: “Christ *is seated at the right hand of God.*”

The cosmic Christ in Colossians is very different from other Pauline letters, but notice how the emphasis matches *the situation Paul is addressing here!* What are (created) angels compared to Christ?!?

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Christ's death is a triumph not just over the forces of sin and death as in the undisputed letters of Paul but also over the principalities and powers of an unseen world.

Christ no longer stands just over the church but also over the *entire universe!* (cf. 1 Cor 15:28)

# A Very High View of Christ – More Than in Paul’s Other Letters

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Colossians 1:19: “For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him.”

Colossians 2:9: “For the entire fullness of God’s nature dwells bodily in Christ.”

Colossians 2:3: “In him [Christ] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”  
(Who needs false apocalyptic revelations?)

Colossians 2:15: “He disarmed the rulers and authorities and disgraced them publicly; he triumphed over them in him.”

# The False Teaching *Separates* One from the Cosmic Christ

Colossians 2:19: “He [the false teacher] doesn’t hold on to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and tendons, grows with growth from God.”

The false teaching—like all teachings contrary to God’s Word—are *separating the Colossians from Christ* (since all biblical teaching is centered on Christ).

A reminder that we are to confess *the entirety* of the Scriptures’ truths.

Paul expects no less from the church at Colossae nor we from ours!

# As For That Apocalyptic Judgment Scene at the End of Days?

Colossians 2:14: “He [God] *erased the certificate of debt*, with its obligations, that was against us and opposed to us, and has taken it away by nailing it to the cross.”

In response to their claims of visions of judgment; the *real* release (in Christ!)

# The Apocalyptic Shift

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In 1:12, God “*had delivered* us from the dominion of darkness.”

In 1:26 the mystery hidden for the ages “*has now been made manifest* to the saints.”

What we *now* enjoy in Christ—a cosmic victory!

# To Conclude:

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As you now begin this four-part Bible study of Colossians, as you study the trees you find along the way, never lose sight of where you are in the forest.

How does every paragraph or verse relate to the center, this situation at the heart of the letter—Paul's response to apocalyptic Jewish teaching?

This is a power-charged letter! Apocalyptic Jews were looking for a turning of the ages, but that is exactly what we enjoy *in Christ!*



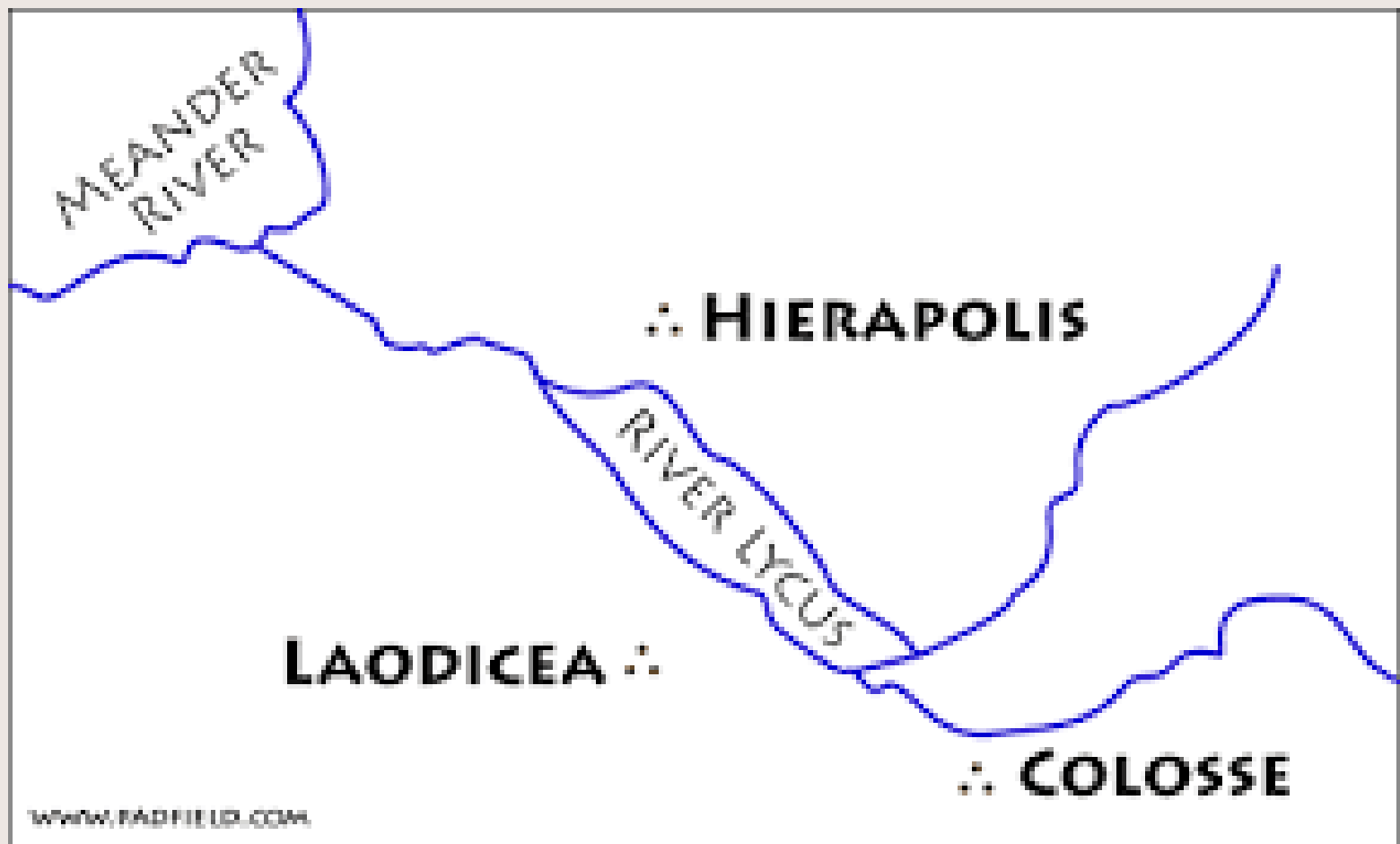
We have gotten our bird's eye  
view.

It's time to dive into the text with  
Part One of the study that is  
available on the Northern Illinois  
District website where you  
registered.

Thank you for listening, but now...

# Questions?







A

Colo

The Roman historian Tacitus (*Annals* 14, 27, 1): Laodicea was destroyed by an earthquake; Orosius (early fifth century): Laodicea, Hierapolis and Colossae were all destroyed by the same earthquake (*Adv. Paganos* 7,7).

Pliny's report on the Lycus valley from the seventies of the first century does not mention Colossae (*Hist. Nat.* 5, 105), but Laodicea was soon rebuilt (Tacitus, *Annals* 14, 27; Sib. 4, 107; indirectly Rev. 1:11; 3:14 from around 95 BCE).

Colossae would remain after the earthquake an insignificant village among the ruins. The city of Colossae is not attested on coins until the reign of the Roman emperor Antoninus Pius in 138-161.

Thus: why would a Pauline disciple send a letter in the master's name to this region after 61 CE. Perhaps evidence in favor of Pauline authorship.