

INVITATION TO COLOSSIANS

Around AD 58 the apostle Paul left his base in Ephesus and traveled to Jerusalem. He went there to deliver the collection for the poor that the followers of Jesus in Macedonia and Achaia had taken. Afterward he planned to bring the good news about Jesus into the western part of the Roman Empire. But his presence in Jerusalem sparked a city-wide riot by those who misunderstood and opposed his work. He was taken into custody by Roman officials, who held him for interrogation (see pp. 1557–1559). Paul had several hearings and trials, but his case was repeatedly delayed. After two years, he invoked his rights as a Roman citizen and asked to have Caesar hear his case in person. So he was taken to Rome, where he spent at least two more years awaiting trial. But while he was a prisoner he was able to continue his work of guiding the young communities of Jesus-followers throughout the empire by instructing and encouraging them through letters and messengers. Paul had worked with a man named Epaphras when he was in Ephesus. Epaphras was originally from the city of Colossae, about a hundred miles to the east. Paul sent him to bring the good news about Jesus to his city and two nearby cities, Laodicea and Hierapolis. Epaphras was later arrested and brought to Rome as a prisoner himself. He told Paul what was happening in these cities. Even though Paul hadn't ever met the followers of Jesus there, they knew who he was and respected his leadership. So Paul wrote two letters, which we know as Colossians and Ephesians, to teach and encourage them. Epaphras told Paul that the community of believers in Colossae was strong and growing, but that it was also threatened by some of the same influences Paul had needed to correct elsewhere. The Colossians were mostly Gentiles, but like the Galatians they were being pressured to be circumcised,

keep kosher and observe the Sabbath and other Jewish holy days. Some of them, like the Corinthians, were priding themselves on having visions and getting secret spiritual knowledge. Many apparently also thought that harsh treatment of the body would somehow liberate their spirits. Paul recognized that in all these ways they were trying to add something to the complete salvation they'd already received when they believed in Jesus. So he wrote them a letter whose basic message is, "When you've got Messiah Jesus, you've got it all!" Paul begins this letter by laying the foundation he needs to make this point. Since the Colossians don't know him personally, Paul introduces himself as a co-worker of their friend Epaphras. He explains that they're always in his prayers and says how grateful he is for their faith. He then reminds them of the message they've believed, particularly stressing that the Son of God has made everything, that he rules over everything and that he's reconciling everything to God. From a Roman prison cell Paul writes that the Son is the firstborn over all creation, and all things, including thrones or powers or rulers or authorities, were created through him and for him. The true power in the world is not on Caesar's throne, but is found in the Messiah's cross. Paul explains that his own struggles and exertions are for their sake and for the sake of others like them, to bring them to spiritual maturity. He then challenges the Colossians to live their faith to the fullest. This means not trying to add anything to what Jesus has already done for them, but rather recognizing that they already have everything they need in Jesus himself. Paul encourages them to see themselves as people who've entered into a new kind of life, in which their personal character and community relationships will be transformed. He also stresses the watchful, prayerful attitude the community should have as it seeks to bring the message about Jesus to others. In closing, Paul introduces Tychicus,

who's carrying this letter to the believers in Colossae. He also describes his other messenger, the former runaway slave Onesimus (see p. 1665), as a faithful and dear brother, hoping the community will welcome him back as a fellow believer. He sends greetings from their friend Epaphras, and alerts the church that another of his co-workers, Mark, may be coming to them soon. He exhorts their leader, Archippus, to persevere in his duties. In this way Paul, even in his imprisonment, continues to direct the work of bringing the good news about Jesus to the Gentiles. He proclaims the empowering and liberating truth for the nations that Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.