

BE

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GOD INTENDS YOU TO BE

COMPLETE COMMENTARY

COLOSSIANS

Warren W. Wiersbe

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BE COMPLETE
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*Dedicated to some Florida friends
who have enriched and enlarged
my life and ministry:*

*Mrs. Jessie Byerly
Bill and Marge Caldwell
Joe and Melva Hanscom
Mrs. Antoinette McFadden*

C O N T E N T S

The Big Idea: An Introduction to <i>Be Complete</i> by Ken Baugh	9
A Word from the Author.....	13
1. From Paul, with Love (Colossians 1:1–2)	17
2. Miracles at Colossae (Colossians 1:3–8)	29
3. A Prisoner’s Prayer (Colossians 1:9–12)	43
4. Crown Him Lord of All! (Colossians 1:13–20).....	57
5. One Man’s Ministry (Colossians 1:21—2:3)	71
6. Saints Alive—and Alert (Colossians 2:4–15)	85
7. Believer, Beware! (Colossians 2:16–23)	99
8. Heaven on Earth (Colossians 3:1–11)	113
9. All Dressed Up and Someplace to Go (Colossians 3:12–17).....	127
10. A Family Affair (Colossians 3:18—4:1).....	139
11. Talk Is Not Cheap! (Colossians 4:2–9)	151
12. Friends, Romans, Countrymen (Colossians 4:10–18)	163

THE BIG IDEA

An Introduction to *Be Complete*
by Ken Baugh

In the fall of 1992, Michael Plant, a popular American yachtsman, set sail from the United States for a solo trans-Atlantic crossing to France. His vessel was a state-of-the-art sailboat called the *Coyote*. The *Coyote* was second to none in its equipment; its hull was made of the finest materials, and its sophisticated electronics included an emergency guidance and tracking system that was linked directly to a satellite. Michael Plant had everything he needed—the expertise, experience, and the equipment—for a successful voyage to France. But eleven days into the voyage, radio contact with the *Coyote* was lost.

Initially the radio silence raised little alarm. Michael was known to be independent, and most people suspected that rough seas were consuming his time. Once the storms passed and the seas became calm again, everyone believed that Michael would radio in that all was well. But after a few more days passed with no word from him, a search party was launched.

It was true that Michael had encountered rough seas and a severe storm, but when the *Coyote* was built, an eight-thousand-pound weight was bolted to its keel, making it almost impossible to capsize. Yet when the boat was finally found, it was floating upside down and there was no trace of its captain. Nobody knows how or why, but the eight-thousand-pound weight somehow broke loose, rendering the boat unstable, and one large wave was all it took.

What a tragic irony. Millions of dollars in state-of-the-art equipment with the finest and most experienced sailor at the helm was all for nothing because of a simple problem that occurred below the surface—something all the satellites in the world couldn't fix. In a similar way, a person's faith can look legitimate on the outside—above the waterline—but if that very same faith is not bolted to the person and work of Jesus Christ, he will have no chance of completing the journey. Why? Because as the one and only God-man, Jesus alone is capable of taking the penalty for our sins and anchoring us to the Father through faith. Jesus Himself made this clear:

“I am *the way* and *the truth* and *the life*. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6 NIV)

Somehow, the Colossian believers began to drift in their understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ, and Paul needed to stop this drift and reestablish a proper Christology. A proper Christology includes two essential parts: (1) the *person* of Jesus Christ, which includes His character and nature; and (2) the *work* of Jesus Christ, which is all about redemption. Jesus intended to *redeem* those who are captive to sin by dying on the cross and paying the price for their freedom. All that is required to take part in this redemption is a belief that Jesus was the Son of God, meaning Jesus was God Himself. Any compromise on these two parts will result in an impotent faith that is unable to provide salvation and eternal life in heaven. And that is the big idea behind Paul's letter to the Colossians: It is the person and work of Jesus Christ alone that are able to offer salvation.

Recently I have discovered many people say that Jesus is their Savior, believing that He was the Son of God and even that He died on the cross for them, yet they do not believe that He was God Himself. Is this just an issue of semantics, or does it really matter what one believes about the person of Christ? I believe the apostle Paul would say that it matters a great deal what

one believes about Jesus' nature. If Jesus was not divine, if He were not God in human flesh, then he never could have been an appropriate sacrifice for sin. Only God Himself has the power to release people from their bondage to sin. And as you read and study Paul's letter to the Colossians you quickly realize how important a proper understanding of both the person and work of Christ is to one's salvation, for in this letter we find some of the boldest statements in all of Scripture about Jesus' identity as God. For example:

He [Jesus] is the *image* of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him *all things were created*: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; *all things were created by him and for him*. He is before all things, and *in him all things hold together*. (Col. 1:15–17 NIV)

A couple things jump out here that we must take note of, because they are central to Paul's Christology. First, we should note that Jesus is "*the image of the invisible God*." Simply put, if you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus—He is the visible image of God (see also John 14:9).

Paul goes on to say: "For in Christ *all the fullness of the Deity* lives in *bodily form*" (Col. 2:9 NIV). Jesus is an exact reproduction of God (see also Heb. 1:3); there is no difference in essence, character, or nature.

Second, we must clarify the word *firstborn*. Some people use this word to prove that Jesus could not have been God because it says that He was "born"; as such, Jesus is a created being and not equal to God in character and nature. However, "firstborn" does not mean that Jesus was created, but rather that Jesus is *first in rank*. It's a phrase that typifies one who is deserving of the highest honor. "Firstborn" was also used as a title to represent the coming Messiah according to Psalm 89:27. Again this creates for us an image of Jesus as God—who else is deserving of the highest honor but God Himself?

Finally, we should note that “*all things*” were created by Jesus—not some, not most, but *all* things. Jesus is preeminent and supreme over everything that He created (see also John 1:3). Who else but God could be described in such a way?

Apparently, there were some in Colossae who were teaching a false Christology, and in undermining the true nature of Jesus Christ, these people were causing confusion as to the real way of salvation. Your Christology, that is, your understanding of the person and work of Christ, is critical to salvation. Thankfully Paul recognized the problem in Colossae and moved quickly to correct it, leaving us a lasting legacy of truth in the process. So read on my friend, apply yourself to the study of God’s Word throughout this commentary, and make sure that your faith is firmly bolted to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Dr. Wiersbe’s commentaries have been a source of guidance and strength to me over the many years that I have been a pastor. His unique style is not overly academic, yet theologically sound. He presents the deep truths of Scripture in a way that everyone can understand and apply. Whether you’re a Bible scholar or a brand-new believer in Christ, you will benefit, as I have, from Warren’s insights. With your Bible in one hand and Dr. Wiersbe’s commentary in the other, you will be able to accurately unpack the deep truths of God’s Word and learn how to apply them to your life.

Drink deeply, my friend, of the truths of God’s Word, for in them you will find Jesus Christ, and there is freedom, peace, assurance, and joy.

—Ken Baugh
Pastor of Coast Hills Community Church
Aliso Viejo, California

A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR

I began this study of Colossians with much fear and trembling, for it is one of the most profound letters Paul ever wrote. Now that I have completed these chapters, I realize even more the depths of spiritual truth found in Colossians.

The message of this letter is greatly needed today. I hear too many voices telling me that I need something more than Jesus Christ—some exciting experience, some new doctrine, some addition to my Christian experience. But Paul affirms that what I need is *appropriation of what I already have in Christ*. “And ye are complete in Him.”

I also hear voices that want to judge me and rob me of the glorious liberty I have in Christ. How encouraging to hear Paul say: “Let no man beguile you, let no man spoil you, let no man judge you.” The fullness of Christ is all that I need, and all man-made regulations and disciplines cannot replace the riches I have in God’s Son.

These few chapters cannot begin to mine all of the treasures that are in this letter. But if these simple studies introduce you to your fullness in Christ, and encourage you to appropriate those treasures, then I will be grateful to the Lord. I have a feeling that we would have revival in our churches if all true believers dared to live what Colossians teaches.

—Warren W. Wiersbe

A SUGGESTED OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF COLOSSIANS

Theme: Jesus Christ is preeminent

Theme verse: Colossians 1:18

- I. Doctrine: Christ's Preeminence Declared (Colossians 1)
 - A. In the gospel message (Colossians 1:1–12)
 - B. In redemption (Colossians 1:13–14)
 - C. In creation (Colossians 1:15–17)
 - D. In the church (Colossians 1:18–23)
 - E. In Paul's ministry (Colossians 1:24–29)
- II. Danger: Christ's Preeminence Defended (Colossians 2)
 - A. Beware of empty philosophies (Colossians 2:1–10)
 - B. Beware of religious legalism (Colossians 2:11–17)
 - C. Beware of man-made disciplines (Colossians 2:18–23)
- III. Duty: Christ's Preeminence Demonstrated (Colossians 3–4)
 - A. In person purity (Colossians 3:1–11)
 - B. In Christian fellowship (Colossians 3:12–17)
 - C. In the home (Colossians 3:18–21)
 - D. In daily work (Colossians 3:22—4:1)
 - E. In Christian witness (Colossians 4:2–6)
 - F. In Christian service (Colossians 4:7–18)

FROM PAUL, WITH LOVE

(Colossians 1:1–2)

Do the heavenly bodies have any influence over our lives? The millions of people who consult their horoscopes each day would say, “Yes!” In the United States, there are about 1,450 daily newspapers, and 1,100 of them carry astrological data!

Is there any relationship between diet and spiritual living?

Does God speak to us immediately, in our minds, or only through His Word, the Bible?

Do the Eastern religions have something to offer the evangelical Christian?

These questions sound very contemporary. Yet they are the very issues Paul dealt with in his magnificent epistle to the Colossians. We need this important letter today just as they needed it back in AD 60 when Paul wrote it.

THE CITY

Colossae was one of three cities located about one hundred miles inland from Ephesus. The other two cities were Laodicea and Hierapolis (Col. 4:13, 16). This area was a meeting point of East and West because an important trade route passed through there. At one time, all three cities were

growing and prosperous, but gradually Colossae slipped into a second-rate position. It became what we would call a small town. Yet the church there was important enough to merit the attention of the apostle Paul.

All kinds of philosophies mingled in this cosmopolitan area, and religious hucksters abounded. There was a large Jewish colony in Colossae, and there was also a constant influx of new ideas and doctrines from the East. It was fertile ground for religious speculations and heresies!

THE CHURCH

Colossae probably would never have been mentioned in the New Testament had it not been for the church there. The city is never named in the book of Acts because Paul did not start the Colossian church, nor did he ever visit it. Paul had *heard* of their faith (Col. 1:4, 9), but he had never seen these believers personally (Col. 2:1). Here was a church of unknown people, in a small town, receiving an inspired letter from the great apostle Paul!

How did the Colossian church begin? It was the outgrowth of Paul's three-year ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19; 20:17–38). So effective was the witness of the church at Ephesus that “all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19:10). This would include people in Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis.

When we examine the persons involved in the prison correspondence of Paul (see Eph., Phil., Col., Philem., and 2 Tim.), we can just about put the story together of how the Colossian church was founded. During Paul's ministry in Ephesus, at least two men from Colossae were brought to faith in Jesus Christ—Epaphras and Philemon (see Philem. 19). Epaphras apparently was one of the key founders of the church in Colossae, for he shared the gospel with his friends there (Col. 1:7). He also had a ministry in the cities of Hierapolis and Laodicea (Col. 4:12–13).

Philemon had a church meeting in his home (Philem. 2). It is likely that Apphia and Archippus, mentioned in this verse, were respectively the wife and son of Philemon, and that Archippus was the pastor of the church (Col. 4:17).

There is a good lesson for us here: God does not always need an apostle or a “full-time Christian worker” to get a ministry established. Nor does He need elaborate buildings and extensive organizations. Here were two laymen who were used of God to start ministries in at least three cities. It is God’s plan that Christians in large urban areas like Ephesus reach out into smaller towns and share the gospel. Is *your* church helping to evangelize “small-town” mission fields?

The Colossian assembly was predominantly Gentile in its membership. The sins that Paul named (Col. 3:5–9) were commonly associated with the Gentiles, and his statement about the mystery applied more to the Gentiles than to the Jews (Col. 1:25–29). The church was probably about five years old when Paul wrote this letter.

THE CRISIS

Why did Paul write this letter to the church in Colossae? Because a crisis had occurred that was about to destroy the ministry of the church. By comparing the prison letters, we can arrive at the following reconstruction of events.

Paul was at that time a prisoner in Rome (Acts 21:17—28:31). He met a runaway slave named Onesimus who belonged to Philemon, one of the leaders of the church in Colossae. Paul led Onesimus to Christ. He then wrote his letter to Philemon, asking his friend to forgive Onesimus and receive him back as a brother in Christ.

About the same time, Epaphras showed up in Rome because he needed Paul’s help. Some new doctrines were being taught in Colossae and were invading the church and creating problems. So Paul wrote this letter to the

Colossians in order to refute these heretical teachings and establish the truth of the gospel.

Epaphras remained with Paul in Rome (Col. 4:12–13). Onesimus and Tychicus carried Paul’s epistles to their destinations: Ephesians 6:21; Colossians 4:7–9; and Philemon. Epaphras was called Paul’s “fellow prisoner,” a title also given to Aristarchus (Col. 4:10; Philem. 23). This suggests that Epaphras *willingly* remained with Paul to assist him. Neither Aristarchus nor Epaphras was a prisoner because he broke the law and was arrested. They were Paul’s willing companions, sacrificing their own comfort to help him.

What was the heresy that threatened the peace and purity of the Colossian church? It was a combination of Eastern philosophy and Jewish legalism, with elements of what Bible scholars call gnosticism (nos-ti-cism). This term comes from the Greek word *gnosis* (know-sis), which means “to know.” (An *agnostic* is one who does not know.) The gnostics were the people who were “in the know” when it came to the deep things of God. They were the “spiritual aristocracy” in the church.

To begin with, this heresy promised people such a close union with God that they would achieve a “spiritual perfection.” Spiritual fullness could be theirs only if they entered into the teachings and ceremonies prescribed. There was also a “full knowledge,” a spiritual depth, that only the initiated could enjoy. This “wisdom” would release them from earthly things and put them in touch with heavenly things.

Of course, all of this teaching was but man-made philosophy based on traditions and not on divine truth (Col. 2:8). It grew out of the philosophical question *Why is there evil in this world if creation was made by a holy God?* As these philosophers speculated and pondered, they came to the false conclusion that matter was evil. Their next false conclusion was that a holy God could not come into contact with evil matter, so there had to be a

series of “emanations” from God to His creation. They believed in a powerful spirit world that used material things to attack mankind. They also held to a form of astrology, believing that angelic beings ruled heavenly bodies and influenced affairs on earth (see Col. 1:16; 2:10, 15).

Added to these Eastern speculations was a form of Jewish legalism. The teachers believed that the rite of circumcision was helpful in spiritual development (Col. 2:11). They taught that the Old Testament law, especially the dietary laws, was also useful in attaining spiritual perfection (Col. 2:14–17). Definite rules and regulations told them what was evil and what was good (Col. 2:21).

Since to them matter was evil, they had to find some way to control their own human natures in this pursuit of perfection. Two different practices resulted. One school of thought held that the only way to conquer evil matter was by means of rigid discipline and asceticism (Col. 2:23). The other view taught that it was permissible to engage in all kinds of sin, since matter was evil anyway! It appears that the first opinion was the predominant one in Colossae.

It is easy to see how this kind of teaching undermined the very foundations of the Christian faith. To begin with, these heretics attacked the person and work of Jesus Christ. To them, He was merely one of God’s many “emanations” and not the very Son of God come in the flesh. The Incarnation means God *with us* (Matt. 1:23), but these false teachers claimed that God was keeping His distance from us! When we trust the Son of God, there is no need for intermediary beings between us and heaven!

In His work on the cross, Jesus Christ settled the sin question (Col. 1:20) and completely defeated all satanic forces (Col. 2:15). He put an end to the legal demands of the law (Col. 2:14–17). In fact, Jesus Christ alone is the Preeminent One (Col. 1:18; 3:11)! All that the believer needs is Jesus!

Matter is not evil, and the human body is not evil. Each person is born with a fallen human nature that wants to control the body and use it for sin, but the body itself is not evil. If that were the case, Jesus Christ would never have come to earth in a human body. Nor would He have enjoyed the everyday blessings of life as He ministered on earth, such as attending wedding feasts and accepting invitations to dinner. Diets and disciplines can be good for one's health, but they have no power to develop true spirituality (Col. 2:20–23).

As for astrology and the influence of angels and heavenly bodies, Paul denounced this with vigor. On the cross, Jesus won a complete victory over all satanic powers (Col. 2:15). Christians do not need to turn to the rudiments of the world (Col. 2:8, 20). This word translated “rudiments” means “elemental beings” or “elementary principles.” In this case, it refers to the beings that (according to the gnostics) controlled the heavenly bodies that in turn controlled events on earth. Believers who consult horoscopes substitute superstition for revelation and deny the person and work of Christ.

This false teaching was a deceptive combination of many things: Jewish legalism, Eastern philosophy, pagan astrology, mysticism, asceticism, and even a touch of Christianity. There was something for everybody, and this was what made it so dangerous. The false teachers claimed that they were not *denying* the Christian faith, but only lifting it to a higher level. They offered fullness and freedom, a satisfying life that solved all the problems that people face.

Do we have any of this heresy today? Yes, we do; and it is just as deceptive and dangerous! When we make Jesus Christ and the Christian revelation only *part* of a total religious system or philosophy, we cease to give Him the preeminence. When we strive for “spiritual perfection” or “spiritual fullness” by means of formulas, disciplines, or rituals, we go backward instead of forward. Christian believers must beware of mixing their

Christian faith with such alluring things as yoga, Transcendental Meditation, Eastern mysticism, and the like. We must also beware of “deeper life” teachers who offer a system for victory and fullness that bypasses devotion to Jesus Christ. In all things, He must have the preeminence!

This heresy was in direct contrast to the teaching of Paul. It took a negative view of life: “God is far away, matter is evil, and demonic forces are constantly threatening us.” The Christian faith teaches that God is near us, that God made all things good (though they can be used for evil), and that Christ has delivered His people from the powers of darkness (Col. 1:13). This heresy turned the world into a frightful prison, while Jesus made it clear that the Father is at work in this world caring for His own. Finally, these false teachers tried to change people from the outside, by means of diets and disciplines. But true spiritual growth comes from within.

THE CORRESPONDENCE

With this background, we can now look at Paul’s letter to the Colossians and get an overview of what he wrote. We know that his epistle to the Ephesians was written and sent about the same time as his Colossian letter. Keeping this in mind, we can discover many parallels between these two letters. However, the emphasis in Ephesians is on the church, the body of Christ, but the emphasis in Colossians is on Christ, the Head of the body.

In this letter, Paul used the vocabulary of the false teachers, but he did not use their definitions. He used these words in their true Christian meaning. As we study Colossians, we will find words such as *fullness*, *perfect*, and *complete*, all of which were used by the gnostic heretics. Over thirty times Paul used the little word *all*. He also wrote about *wisdom*, which was a key term in the gnostic vocabulary; he had a great deal to say about angels and spirit powers too.

His main theme was *the preeminence of Jesus Christ* (Col. 1:18; 3:11).

There is no need for us to worry about angelic mediators or spiritual emanations. God has sent His Son to die for us! Every person who believes on Jesus Christ is saved and is a part of His body, the church, of which He is the Head (Col. 1:18). We are united to Christ in a wonderful living relationship!

Furthermore, nothing need be added to this relationship, because each believer is “complete in him” (Col. 2:10). All of God’s fullness dwells in Christ (Col. 2:9), and we share that fullness! “For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ” (Col. 2:9–10 NIV).

While in an airport waiting for my plane to be called, I was approached by a young man who wanted to sell me a book. One look at the garish cover told me that the book was filled with Eastern myths and philosophies.

“I have a book here that meets all my needs,” I told the young man, and I reached into my briefcase and took out my Bible.

“Oh, we aren’t against the Bible!” he assured me. “It’s just that we have something more, and it makes our faith even better.”

“Nobody can give me more than Jesus Christ has already given me,” I replied. I turned to Colossians 2, but by that time the young man was hurrying down the corridor.

Sad to say, there are many Christians who actually believe that some person, religious system, or discipline can add something to their spiritual experience. But they already have everything they ever will need in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Paul did not begin by attacking the false teachers and their doctrines. He began by exalting Jesus Christ and showing His preeminence in five areas: the gospel message, redemption, creation, the church, and Paul’s own ministry. The people to whom Paul was writing had become Christians because of the gospel message brought to them by Epaphras. If this message was wrong, then they were not saved at all!

Once he had established the preeminence of Christ, then Paul attacked the heretics on their own ground. In Colossians 2, Paul exposed the false origin of their teachings and showed how their teachings contradicted everything Paul taught about Jesus Christ. The believer who masters this chapter is not likely to be led astray by some alluring and enticing “new and improved” brand of Christianity.

But Paul did not think his task completed when he had refuted the heretics, for he still had some important words for the church. In Colossians 3—4, Paul explained the greatest antidote to false teaching—*a godly life*. Those who say, “I don’t care what you believe, just so long as you live a good life” are not thinking logically. *What we believe determines how we behave*. If we believe that matter is evil, we will use our bodies one way, but if we believe that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, we will live accordingly.

Wrong doctrine always leads to wrong living. Right doctrine should lead to right living. In the two concluding chapters, Paul applied the preeminence of Christ to the daily affairs of life. If Christ is truly preeminent in our lives, then we will glorify Him by keeping pure, by enjoying fellowship with other saints, by loving each other at home and being faithful at work, and by seeking to witness for Christ and serve Him effectively. Unless doctrine leads to duty, it is of no use to us.

Many Bible scholars have concluded that Colossians is the most profound letter Paul ever wrote. This must not keep us from reading and studying this wonderful letter. But we must be cautioned against a superficial approach to these chapters. Unless we depend on the Spirit of God to teach us, we will miss the truths God wants us to learn.

The church today desperately needs the message of Colossians. We live in a day when religious toleration is interpreted to mean “one religion is just as good as another.” Some people try to take the best from various religious

systems and manufacture their own private religion. To many people, Jesus Christ is only *one* of several great religious teachers, with no more authority than they. He may be prominent, but He is definitely not preeminent.

This is an age of “syncretism.” People are trying to harmonize and unite many different schools of thought and come up with a superior religion. Our evangelical churches are in danger of diluting the faith in their loving attempt to understand the beliefs of others. Mysticism, legalism, Eastern religions, asceticism, and man-made philosophies are secretly creeping into churches. They are not denying Christ, but they are dethroning Him and robbing Him of His rightful place of preeminence.

As we study this exciting letter, we must heed Paul’s warnings: “Lest any man should beguile you” (Col. 2:4), “Lest any man spoil you” (Col. 2:8), “Let no man therefore judge you” (Col. 2:16).

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION OR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. If you were going to introduce yourself to an audience you'd never met, how would you describe yourself?
2. Read Colossians 1:1–2. What is significant about the way Paul described himself?
3. What do you know about Colossae and the church there?
4. What does Colossae have in common with most modern towns?
5. What is significant about the way Paul addressed the recipients of this letter?
6. Skim through the book of Colossians. Why did Paul write this letter?

7. The heresy that threatened the Colossian church was gnosticism, which taught that Christ was only one of many spiritual beings that existed between God and man. How did Paul refute this heresy?

8. What are some contemporary versions of gnosticism?

9. Read Colossians 1:18 and 3:11. What was Paul's main theme?

10. How can you reflect this theme in your daily walk?