

New Testament History and Literature, Lecture 22: Philippians and Colossians

Author: Dr. Dave Mathewson | Session 22

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Keywords

Philippians, Colossians, Christ hymn, High Christology, Paul's imprisonment, Ecclesiastical unity, Mystical Judaism, Exaltation

Abstract

This lecture examines Paul's epistles to the Philippians and Colossians within their distinct historical and theological contexts. For Philippians, Dr. Mathewson addresses Paul's imprisonment as an impetus for gospel advancement, his gratitude for financial support, and the call to ecclesiastical unity modeled by the humble Christ hymn of Philippians 2. Shifting to Colossians, the lecture explores Paul's defense against a mystical or ascetic form of Judaism that threatened congregational faith in Colossae. Through the exalted Christ hymn of Colossians 1, Paul asserts the absolute supremacy and preeminence of Jesus over both the original creation and the new creation.

Outline

I. Introduction to Lecture 22

- A. Opening remarks and prayer
- B. Orientation to early church epistles

II. The Letter to the Philippians

- A. Historical and Geographical Background of Philippi
 - 1. Location in northern Greece (ancient Macedonia)
 - 2. Named after Philip, father of Alexander the Great
- B. Paul's Circumstances and Purpose of Writing
 - 1. Paul's imprisonment as a catalyst for gospel advancement rather than defeat
 - 2. Expressing gratitude for the Philippians' financial support of his ministry
 - 3. Addressing internal congregational issues and calling for church unity
- C. Major Themes in Philippians
 - 1. Debated central themes: joy, suffering, gospel participation, correct thinking, and unity
 - 2. Mathewson's thesis: Philippians contains multiple interwoven themes rather than a single unifying concept
- D. Detailed Analysis of the Christological Hymn (Philippians 2:5–11)

1. Structural form: the U-shaped movement from pre-existence to humiliation and cross-death, leading to upward exaltation
2. High Christology and Old Testament background (Isaiah 45:23 applied to Jesus)
3. Functional purpose: serving as an ethical model for humility and church unity (Philippians 2:1–4)

III. The Letter to the Colossians

A. Historical and Geographical Background of Colossae

1. Location in southwestern Asia Minor (modern Turkey), inland from Ephesus
2. Insignificant city destroyed by an earthquake around 60 AD
3. A church not personally planted or visited face-to-face by Paul (Colossians 2:1)

B. Literary Relationship between Colossians and Ephesians

1. Shared vocabulary and structural overlap (similar to the Synoptic problem)
2. Same core apostolic material adapted for specific versus general audiences

C. The Deviant Teaching / False Teaching in Colossae

1. Hints in text (Colossians 2:4, 2:8, 2:16, 2:18, 2:20) warning against philosophy, human tradition, and elemental spirits
2. Rejection of syncretism/Gnosticism theories in favor of an apocalyptic/Essene/Qumran-style mystical Judaism
3. Characteristics of the false teaching: festival/Sabbath observance, asceticism ('do not handle, do not taste'), and worship of/with angels

D. Purpose and Theological Defense in Colossians

1. Reassuring believers of the complete sufficiency and preeminence of Christ
2. Highlighting Christ's triumph over sin beyond useless human regulations

E. Detailed Analysis of the Christological Hymn (Colossians 1:15–20)

1. Division 1: Jesus as Lord and primary agent over the first creation (Colossians 1:15–17)
2. Division 2: Jesus as Lord and head over the new creation/reconciliation through the cross (Colossians 1:18–20)
3. Wisdom motifs, 'firstborn' terminology (Psalm 89), and Christ's ultimate preeminence

IV. Conclusion and Summary

- A. Practical application of high Christology to real congregational situations
- B. Summary of Christ's supreme role over creation, salvation, and Christian conduct