



## Reading and Applying the Letter to the Colossians...

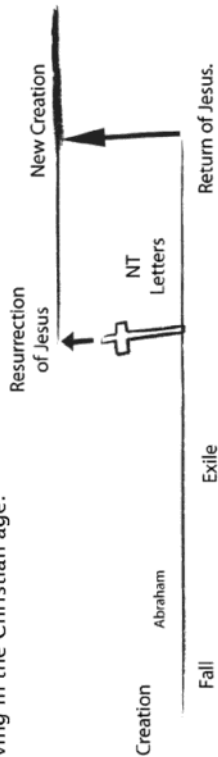
\* Read through the whole letter as a group.

### 1. Historical Context

Background information regarding the circumstances of the letter can be helpful in understanding what has been written and how it might relate to us. In small groups, read over a section from the information given (p3,4) and discuss how it might be helpful in understanding the letter.

### 2. Theological Context

Using the diagram below, summarise the 'Now, but not yet' idea of living in the Christian age.



\* Why is it important to read the NT letters in light of this truth?

### 3. Understanding and responding to the message of the letter

In small groups take a chapter each and discuss the following questions. Feedback to the whole group afterwards and then pray together...

\* What seems to be the key point(s) being made? Are there significant themes?

\* What does the author want his readers to understand...

1. About God?
  - What he's like? What he has done in Jesus? What are his plans, purposes, desires?
2. About themselves?
  - What has happened to them? What is true about them now? What will happen to them?
3. About himself?
  - His priorities, plans, desires in his ministry? What is held out to imitate?

\* What does the author want them to do?

## Background and Introduction to Colossians.

(P.T. O'Brian, from the IVP 'Dictionary of Paul and his letters'.)

### 2. The Church at Colossae.

The believers at Colossae, who are addressed as faithful brothers and sisters in Christ (Col 1:2), were not converted through the ministry of Paul himself. This Christian community had come into existence during a period of vigorous missionary and evangelistic activity associated with Paul's Ephesian ministry (c. a.d. 52-55) recorded in Acts 19. But the apostle himself during his missionary work in Asia Minor had not reached Colossae in the upper valley of the Lycus (cf. Col 2:1). His daily evangelistic "dialogues" held in the hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus were so effective that Luke can claim "all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 19:10). While the work was directed by Paul, he was assisted by several coworkers through whom a number of churches were planted in the province of Asia. Among these were the congregations of Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis, which, we infer, were the fruit of Epaphras's evangelistic efforts (Col 1:7; 4:12, 13). Epaphras, a native of Colossae (Col 4:12), who may have become a Christian during a visit to Ephesus, was "a faithful minister of Christ" and as Paul's representative (Col 1:7) he had taught the Colossians the truth of the gospel.

The many allusions to the non-Christian past of the readers suggest that most of them were Gentile converts. They had once been utterly out of harmony with God, enmeshed in idolatry and slavery to sin, being hostile to God in mind and godless in their actions (Col 1:21; cf 1:12, 27). They had been spiritually dead because of their sins and "the uncircumcision of ... [their] flesh"—a statement which indicates they were both heathen and godless (Col 2:13).

### 3. The Occasion of the Letter.

Epaphras had paid Paul a visit in Rome (see 6.2 below) and informed him of the progress of the gospel in the Lycus valley. While much of the report was encouraging (cf. Col 1:8; 2:5), one disquieting feature was the attractive, but false, teaching that had recently been introduced into the congregation and which, if it went unchecked, would subvert the gospel and bring the Colossians into spiritual bondage. Paul's letter then is written as a response to this urgent need. Perhaps Epaphras found it difficult to cope with the specious arguments and the feigned humility of those spreading this teaching, and so needed the greater wisdom of the apostle.