

4  DAYS THROUGH THE BOOK

COLOSSIANS

ONE JESUS, ONE PEOPLE

STUDY GUIDE | 6 SESSIONS

JAY Y. KIM

WITH KEVIN AND SHERRY HARNEY

 Harper *Christian*
Resources

40 Days Through the Book: Colossians

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Requests for information should be addressed to: HarperChristian Resources, 3900 Sparks Dr. SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49546

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The themes of this study are drawn from the video study of the same name by Jay Y. Kim. All other resources, including the session introductions, small group discussion questions, prayer direction, and the 40 Days learning and reflection exercises and have been written by Kevin and Sherry Harney in collaboration with Jay Y. Kim.

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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

SCOPE AND SEQUENCE

Welcome to the *40 Days Through the Book* study on Colossians! During the course of the next six weeks, you and your fellow group members will embark on an in-depth exploration of Paul's message to this church in Colossae. During this study, you will learn when he wrote the book, approximately when it was written, and the background and context in which it was written. But, more importantly, through the teaching by Jay Y. Kim, you will explore the key themes that Paul relates in the book—and how his teachings apply to you today.

SESSION OUTLINE

The *40 Days Through the Book* video and study guide are designed to be experienced both in group settings (such as a Bible study, Sunday school class, or small group gatherings) as well as in your individual study time. Each session begins with an introductory reading and question. You will then watch the

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video message. (Play the DVD or refer to the instructions on the inside front cover on how to access the sessions at any time through streaming.) An outline has been provided in the guide for you to take notes and gather your reflections as you watch the video. Next, if you are doing this study with a group, you will engage in a time of directed discussion, review the memory verses for the week, and close with a time of prayer. (Note that if your group is larger, you may wish to watch the videos together and then break into smaller groups of four to six people, to ensure that everyone has time to participate in discussions.)

40-DAY JOURNEY

What is truly unique about this study, and all of the other studies in the *40 Days Through the Book* series, are the daily learning resources that will lead you into a deeper engagement with the text. Each week, you will be given a set of daily readings, with accompanying reflection questions, to help you explore the material that you covered during your group time.

The first day's reading will focus on the key verse to memorize for the week. In the other weekly readings, you will be invited to read a passage from Colossians, reflect on the text, and then respond with some guided journal questions. On the final day, you will review the key verse again and recite it from memory. As you work through the six weeks' worth of material in this section, you will read (and, in some cases, reread) the entire book of Colossians.

Now, you may be wondering why you will be doing this over the course of *forty* days. Certainly, there is nothing special

about that number. But there is something biblical about it. In the Bible, the number forty typically designates a time of *testing*. Noah was in the ark for forty days. Moses lived forty years in Egypt and another forty years in the desert before he led God's people. He spent forty days on Mount Sinai receiving God's laws and sent spies, for forty days, to investigate the land of Canaan. Later, God sent the prophet Jonah to warn ancient Nineveh, for forty days, that its destruction would come because of the people's sins.

Even more critically, in the New Testament we read that Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness, fasting and praying. It marked a critical transition point in his ministry—the place where he set about to fulfill the mission that God had intended. During this time Jesus was tested relentlessly by the enemy . . . and prevailed. When he returned to Galilee, he was a different person than the man who had entered into the wilderness forty days before. The same will be true for you as you commit to this forty-day journey through Colossians.

GROUP FACILITATION

If you are doing this study with a group, everyone should have a copy of this study guide. Not only will this help you engage when your group is meeting, but it will also allow you to fully enter into the *40 Days* learning experience. Keep in mind the video, questions, and activities are simply tools to help you engage with the session. The real power and life-transformation will come as you dig into the Scriptures and seek to live out the truths you learn along the way.

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Finally, you will need to appoint a leader or facilitator for the group who is responsible for starting the video teaching and for keeping track of time during discussions and activities. Leaders may also read questions aloud and monitor discussions, prompting participants to respond and ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to participate. For more thorough instructions on this role, see the Leader's Guide included at the back of this guide.

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AUTHOR, DATE, AND LOCATION

Some of the apostle Paul's letters were written to believers who lived in cultural centers like Rome, Thessalonica, and Ephesus. The letter to the Colossians was different. It was sent to the southeast region of what is now known as Turkey. This was *not* a major trade center. It was *not* a hub of culture. The Colossian Christians lived in a place of moderate importance. It was a town much like where most people live around the world today. Jews and Gentiles lived side by side. There was ethnic and religious diversity. Judaism, Christianity, local religions and emperor worship each offered their own unique sets of values and beliefs. Sometime between 60 and 62 AD, the apostle Paul wrote to these early Christians who found themselves floundering amidst the muddled mishmash of religious syncretism. The simple message of the gospel of Jesus had become contaminated with injections of cultural beliefs and false religions. Paul wrote to remind them there is just one Jesus and one Church.

THE BIG PICTURE

In the first century, polytheism was the norm. There were many religions and countless expressions of faith. Temples built for a vast variety of gods dotted the landscape of almost every city and small town. One time, when the apostle Paul was in the city of Athens, he noticed all the places of worship. There was even an altar with the inscription, “TO AN UNKNOWN GOD” (Acts 17:23). These people were so attentive to the pantheon of false gods that they made a place for any god they had missed or forgotten. Paul used this as a chance to point them to Jesus, Emmanuel, the one true God who came to live among us.

The book of Colossians, made up of just four short chapters, is massive when it comes to powerful teaching on the person of Jesus. Colossians 1:15–20 is one of the most concise and pointed declarations of the uniqueness of Jesus and divinity of our Lord in all the Bible. There is just one Jesus and when we know who he is, we have clear direction for our beliefs and life. If we water down the person of Jesus or add false religious or cultural beliefs, he is no longer the one Jesus. Paul was writing to correct the heretical teaching that was swirling around the church in Colossae.

Another massive challenge that existed in the first century was division among people. Like at all times in history, and in every part of the world, people can be divided because of ethnicity, gender, social class, religion, and a massive list of other things. The apostle Paul is addressing this problem among the Colossian believers. The world might be divided over these things, but Christians should not be. When Jesus is at the

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center of our hearts, lives, homes, churches, and community life, we are made one. Believers can say with bold confidence, “We are one people,” even when we have diverse backgrounds and differing views.

Paul’s central message to the Colossian believers is that we worship one Jesus and are part of one people (the Church). He goes on to expound this reality by presenting clear beliefs and theology in the first two chapters. It is right thinking that moves us toward Jesus and each other. In chapters three and four Paul turns our attention to right living that grows out of our beliefs. When we live according to the teachings and ways of Jesus, the world will see that we worship one Jesus as a unified people of God.

EPIC THEMES

There are many themes in Colossians that are worthy of our focus. Some of these include:

- **There is power in prayer.** Believers pray for each other with thankful hearts. We show our unity as we ask God to help other Christians know God, live for him, bear fruit, live in power, and walk in joy (see Colossians 1:1–14).
- **There is one Jesus, and he is the true center.** The world might bow and worship idols, emperors, and false gods, but Jesus alone is Lord and worthy of praise (see Colossians 1:15–23).

- **Jesus sets us free from the bondage of legalism and human traditions.** The world and religious traditionalism can lead to bondage and emptiness. Jesus comes to give us roots and strengthen us so that we are not lured into false religion (see Colossians 1:21–2:15).
- **Reality is not found in religion but in a relationship with Jesus and his people.** There is a tendency to grasp for straws and shadows. Jesus is real, solid, and the rock on which we build our faith and life. Christians find their reality in Jesus alone and reject cheap imitations (see Colossians 2:16–23).
- **There is a battle we all face.** The enticements of sin invite us all to wander from Jesus and embrace the glittery and attractive things of the world. The resurrection of Jesus and his presence with us should move us from the things of the world and right into the arms of our Savior, over and over again (see Colossians 3:1–11).
- **God offers new “clothes.”** When we come to faith in Jesus, we are called to put off our old ways, attitudes, actions . . . the clothes of the past. At the same time, we are moved to dress ourselves in the things of Jesus . . . a whole new lifestyle that fits who we are as children of God (see Colossians 3:12–4:1).
- **We share the mystery of Christ.** When we learn there is one Jesus and stand united as one people, we are moved

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to proclaim this life-transforming mystery of the gospel to all who will listen (see Colossians 4:2–18).

The world has always been divided. Conflict seems to be hard-wired into the broken hearts and minds of sinful human beings. In Christ we find unity in the one Jesus who rules and reigns over our hearts, the Church, and the world. As Christians live in unity as one people, we set an example for the world. Peace is possible. Conflict does not have to go on endlessly. God’s people can love each other even when we face the same things that seem to divide people in our world. What an opportunity to show the world that unity is possible for those who know, love, and follow Jesus!



SESSION ONE

THE TRUE CENTER

COLOSSIANS 1:1-29

There is a human tendency to place ourselves at the center of our own little universe. With piercingly beautiful words and Spirit-inspired clarity, the apostle Paul declares that there is only one center around which a faithful Christian can orbit and not have life spin out of control. Jesus, the divine One, is our center.

WELCOME

Big, bold, brash claims! We have all heard them. Muhamad Ali, the great boxer known for his success in the ring and his equally effective verbal jabs outside the ring declared things like, “I float like a butterfly and sting like a bee!” He also claimed to be, “The greatest of all time!”

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Decades later another sports story has been unfolding as people debate who is the best basketball player in history. Should the title go to Michael “Air” Jordan or LeBron “King” James? Who is the greatest basketball player to ever grace the courts of the NBA? Lots of people have claimed that LeBron James is the G.O.A.T! And lots of other people are equally sure that Michael Jordan is the **Greatest Of All Time!** The battle and debate rages on.

In the days of Jesus and the early Church, there was a procession of Roman emperors who claimed to be the divine center of the empire. One by one, they passed from this life and into history. Over time, it was clear that their claims were radically overstated and anyone who made these human leaders the center of their life had missed the mark.

More than 2,000 years ago, an itinerant rabbi with no home, no political influence, and no formal religious organization claimed to be “the way, the truth and the life” (John 14:6). On one occasion, this wandering teacher invoked the divine name of God when he spoke to Moses at the burning bush (see Exodus 3:14; John 8:58). The religious leaders of the day were so convinced that Jesus was claiming to be God, and the single way to eternal life with the Father, they had him nailed to a Roman cross. They delighted as his blood poured to the ground and his life was snuffed out after only thirty-three years walking on this earth. When Jesus declared he was the divine center of all things, he made the boldest claim in the history of the world.

For more than 2,000 years his followers have worshiped Jesus as their Lord and sought to place him at the center

of their lives, homes, churches, and even their culture. Two millennia after the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, more than 2.3 billion people practice some form of faith based on the teaching and life of this one man.

Though persecution of Christians continues and even grows in many parts of the world, Jesus is still Lord of all. Although secular philosophies blossom and thrive, Jesus is risen, alive, and invites every person to receive his grace and leadership.

The question is not, “Is Jesus the true center of all things?”
He is!

The real question is, “Will I let him be the center of my life today and every day?”

SHARE

Tell about a time on your journey with Jesus when he was at the center of your attention, heart, and life. How did this impact the way you lived, loved, and labored in that season?

WATCH

Watch the video segment for session one. (Play the DVD or see the instructions on the inside front cover on how to access the sessions through streaming.) As you watch, use the following outline to record any thoughts or concepts that stand out to you.

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What is at the center?

Who is at the center? (John 14:6)?

The context and setting of Colossians (Colossians 1:1–5)

Syncretism and false teaching in the Church. . . . then and now
(Colossians 1:5; Philippians 3:20)

The primary reason for the letter to the Colossian church . . .
course correction

The danger of *materialism*

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The seduction of *individualism*

The lure of *nationalism*

Who is at the center—me or Jesus? (Colossians 1:15–20)

Was Jesus . . .

Deceived?

Deluded?

Divine?

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The importance and role of the firstborn in the ancient world
(Colossians 1:15)

Opening our eyes to recognize the temptation of syncretism
and fixing our eyes on Jesus, the true center of it all!

DISCUSS

Take a few minutes with your group members to discuss what you just watched and explore these concepts in Scripture. Use the following questions to help guide your discussion.

- I. What impacted you the most as you watched Jay's teaching?

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2. The church in Colossae was facing the temptation to embrace syncretistic beliefs and practices. They were enticed to combine the current cultural and religious beliefs, values, and practices with their Christian faith. How are Christians today facing the temptation to fuse *one* of these “isms” with their faith in Jesus?
 - Materialism
 - Individualism
 - Nationalism
 - Some other “ism”

3. **Read Colossians 1:3–6.** The apostle Paul emphasizes “the true message of the gospel.” When you let any “ism,” belief system, or personal preference influence your faith in Jesus, things become murky and diluted, and your faith gets watered down. Describe a time you saw this happen in your life or the faith journey of someone you know. Why is this so dangerous that the apostle Paul warns you about it?

4. **Read Colossians 1:15–20.** Make a list of the things this passage declares about Jesus. What are the implications for the Church and your life of faith if each one is true?

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5. When you understand that Jesus is the firstborn and live with him as your true center (both in community with God's people and in your individual faith journey), what impact can this have on *one* of the areas below?
 - How you deal with the enticement to sin and wander from God's care
 - How you relate to other followers of Jesus in your church and community
 - When you face times of darkness and pain
 - How you relate to people who are far from Jesus or antagonistic to your faith
 - How you care for and relate to members of your family
 - Some other area or aspect of your life

6. What is a specific way you have learned to slow down and fix your eyes on Jesus in the busyness of life and the storms you face? How has this practice helped you keep Jesus in the center of your life?

MEMORIZE

At each session, you will be given a key verse (or verses) from the passage covered in the video teaching to memorize. This week, your memory verses are from Colossians 1:19–20:

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Have everyone recite these verses out loud. Then go around the room and ask for any volunteers who would like to say the verses from memory.

RESPOND

What will you take away from this session? What is one practical next step you can take to fix your eyes on Jesus as the center of your life, community, and the world?

PRAY

Close your group time by praying in any of the following directions:

- Praise, worship, and celebrate Jesus as the divine center of the universe, your church, and your life.
- Pray for churches, other believers, and yourself to recognize when syncretism is slipping into our thinking and practices. Ask for the power of the Holy Spirit to resist this deceptive temptation.
- Confess where you have let any sort of “ism” or syncretistic thinking taint your purity of faith in Jesus alone. (You might want to do this as a group or make time for silent confession.)
- Lift up members of your group and pray that they will follow, worship, and live for Jesus as the true and only center of their life.

YOUR 40-DAY JOURNEY

SESSION ONE

Reject on the material you have covered in this session by engaging in the following between-session learning resources. Each week, you will begin by reviewing the key verse(s) to memorize for the session. During the next five days, you will have an opportunity to read a portion of Colossians, reflect on what you learn, respond by taking action, journal some of your insights, and pray about what God has taught you. Finally, on the last day, you will review the theme of the session, reflect on what you have learned, and review how it has impacted your life.

DAY 1

Memorize: Begin this week's personal study by reciting Colossians 1:19-20:

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Now try to say these verses completely from memory.

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Reflect: All of the fulness of divinity dwells in Jesus. He is God with us. The center of all things. Jesus is in the reconciliation business. We know that he came to reconcile us to the Father through his sacrifice, but there is much more. Stop and ponder this truth: Jesus came to reconcile everything in heaven and on the earth to himself. Let that reality wash over your soul and fill your mind. What is Jesus presently healing, restoring, and reconciling in your life? What is he restoring and reconciling in the world around us? How can you rejoice in the reconciling work of Jesus?

DAY 2

Read: Colossians 1:1-2.

Reflect: The Holy Spirit inspired the apostle Paul to write to “brothers and sisters” in Christ in the city of Colossae. So often we read the Bible in isolation and filter it through our own mind, life, and immediate needs. There is no question that the Scriptures relate to each believer and that God wants to speak to you personally. But there is something bigger going on here. God is building a church made up of people from every tribe and nation. As you read the Bible, listen with ears and a heart as big as the vision of God. Our Savior came to offer himself for people from every walk of life. Read his Word with the whole human family in mind and you will receive fresh perspectives and vistas you have never seen before. How do I tend to read the Bible? Who do I think God is speaking to?

Journal:

- How can you expand your understanding of the Scriptures by reading (or listening) with a larger audience in mind?
- How might your life change if you learned from the Scriptures in a community (like your small group and in church services) and let the presence and insights of other people help shape your faith in Jesus?

Pray: Pray for your group members by name and ask God to grow each of them as they open God's Word and learn from the teaching of the Bible.

DAY 3

Read: Colossians 1:3–8.

Reflect: Praying for God's people is a central theme in the Bible. In this passage we are captured by the heart and spirit of prayer. Paul and his ministry partners are "always thankful." What a beautiful picture! They have heard about the growing faith, the unquenchable hope, and expansive love of the Colossian Christians. These people are fruitful in sharing

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the good news of Jesus and they live in the grace of God. Do you get a sense that Paul knows and loves these people (if even from a distance)? He and his companions are praying often with hearts filled with joy. Who do you pray for in your church and in other churches? What is your knowledge of the spiritual condition of these people? How can you pray with increasing passion and frequency?

Journal:

- How can you get to know the spiritual condition of other believers in greater depth?
- How can you increase your passion and engagement in praying for other Christians in your church and in other churches in the community where you live?

Pray: Think about two or three other churches in your community that worship and follow Jesus as the Lord of the universe and center of their congregation. Pray for these churches with a thankful heart, asking for God to grow their faith, hope, and love.

DAY 4

Read: Colossians 1:9–14.

Reflect: In Colossians 1:3–8 we are captured by the spirit and heart of Paul’s prayer for the church. In this passage we are stunned by the powerful content of his prayer. Reflect on what the apostle and his ministry colleagues are praying for these believers and learn from their example. They are praying for:

- Knowledge of God’s will . . .
- Power to live a life worthy of the Lord . . .
- Strength to live in ways that please God . . .
- To bear fruit in all they do . . .
- Growth in the knowledge of God . . .
- The believers to be strengthened and empowered . . .
- To live with great endurance and patience . . .
- The Colossian Christians to share in the inheritance of God’s people . . .

If you have ever been praying for another believer and wondered what to lift up to heaven on their behalf, Colossians 1:9–14 is a great place to start. What do you learn about the content of prayer for other Christians in this passage?

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Journal:

- Write down the names of three Christians you love and care about. How could you pray the content of this prayer for each one of these people?
- What might happen if you begin praying the content of this passage for yourself? What might God do in you as the power of heaven is unleashed?

Pray: Take time right now and pray each theme of this prayer for yourself and for one other Christian you love and care about.

DAY 5

Read: Colossians 1:15–20.

Reflect: This passage expresses, with laser-like precision, the person of Jesus. You could spend an hour reflecting on this passage every day for a year and still not comprehend the greatness of the sovereign Lord of the universe. The closing words point us to a hill called “the skull” and to a Savior whose body was broken and whose blood was poured out for our

salvation. The pinnacle of this passage points not to heaven but to a place on this planet where the divine One bore the shame that broken and rebellious people deserved. From the stench of a stable to the torture of Roman execution, the life of Jesus was marked by sacrifice. Our reconciliation was bought at an infinite price as the center of the universe moved into our space, time, and skin. This rich passage focuses on Jesus, the Lord of glory. Why do you think it begins with Jesus' power, creation, glory, sovereignty, and supremacy but ends with sacrifice, blood, and a cross?

Journal:

- What do you learn about Jesus in this passage?
- What does each thing you learn about Jesus teach you about yourself?

Pray: Take this passage and personalize it into a prayer lifted up directly to Jesus. Jesus, you are the Son of God, the perfect image of the God I can't see. You are the firstborn of all creation. . . .

DAY 6

Read: Colossians 1:21–29.

Reflect: When we recognize the magnitude of and reason for Jesus' suffering, we hear the Spirit of God invite us to join him on this journey of sacrifice. Paul actually tells the Colossian believers that he rejoices that he is able to suffer in his service to the Church, including their congregation. For the sake of God's people, the body of Christ, Paul is willing to bear physical pain in his own body. What a picture! What a declaration! Paul has been transformed from a powerful and aggressive persecutor of the Church to a humble servant who is honored to suffer for God's people. When Paul sees the hope of the glory of Jesus come alive in other people, both Jewish and Gentile, he is willing to pay any price. This is one picture of what it means to become like the Savior. What are you willing to sacrifice and give up for the sake of Jesus and to help others come and receive the hope of glory?

Journal:

- Reflect on people who sacrificed and even suffered to share the truth and grace of Jesus with you. What could you do to honor, thank, or encourage these people?

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- What are one or two ways you could count the cost, sacrifice, or suffer for the sake of following Jesus?

Pray: Thank Jesus for the people who willingly and gladly sacrificed so that you could come to know Jesus, the hope of glory. Pray that you will have this kind of impact on the lives of many others.

DAY 7

Memorize: Conclude this week's personal study by again reciting Colossians 1:19–20:

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Now try to say these verses completely from memory.

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Reflect: Peace through sacrifice. Jesus came to heal our relationship with the Father in heaven and to allow us to love each other and live for him. This peace comes through his life, death, and resurrection. It was sealed by his blood shed for us. How has the finished work of Jesus on the cross brought peace in your life, relationships, and with God? Is there a relationship where you are not living in peace? How can you bring this to Jesus and ask for his completed work to empower you to seek restoration, reconciliation, or peace in this relationship?