



BEFORE ALL THINGS

Studies in Colossians

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Before All Things – Participant’s Guide

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Welcome to Before All Things

“The center and the circumference of the Christian life is none other than the person of Christ,” wrote Leonard Sweet. “All other things, including those related to Him, are eclipsed by the sight of His peerless worth. God put an image in our galaxy to demonstrate what Christ is to us. We call it the sun. Without it, no life can exist on planet Earth. We are dependent upon the sun for everything. And just as the sun is the center of our solar system, Jesus Christ is the centerpiece of God’s universe, and even our lives.” (Sweet, Leonard. *Jesus Manifesto: Restoring the Supremacy and Sovereignty of Jesus Christ*. Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.)

So many voices. So many questions! Who is right? Does God exist? Which God should we follow? Does anyone have the answer? Paul was excited about what he had come to know and experience about Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus had changed his life completely. He went from the greatest skeptic and persecutor of the Christian faith to ardent apostle.

We cannot help be moved by his passion in the first few verses of his letter – “We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God’s people – the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel that has come to you. In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world – just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God’s grace.” (Col. 1:3-6). So, what was it about Jesus that so changed Paul’s mind and heart from hating and attempting to wipe out belief in Jesus to dying for the faith he once tried to destroy?

No literary work of Paul in the New Testament lays out the crux of his *raison d'être* for the supremacy of Christ better than the letter to the Colossians. Here Paul responds to questions others are having about Jesus by getting right to the point. He believes in Christianity because he believed completely in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Each of Paul's letters have a different scope and cover various issues. His letter to the Romans sets out his clearest and most well-developed argument for the gospel. Galatians is a kind of polemic cliff notes version of Romans. I and II Corinthians deal with a host of practical issues plaguing the church and Ephesians is his clearest ecclesiology and theology of the church, but Colossians, I would suggest, may be his best apologetic work on Jesus among other god's, beliefs and ideologies. Here Paul differentiates Jesus and His message from other competing ideas and philosophies emphasizing the full and absolute deity of Christ. Colossians helps us understand what is so unique about Jesus and why it so necessary for us to get it right. With so many competing beliefs and ideas on today's college campus it is the perfect study for students curious about why they should follow Jesus.

As Ravi Zacharias put it so well in *Jesus Among Other Gods*,

"At the heart of every major religion is a leading exponent. As the exposition is studied, something very significant emerges. There comes a bifurcation, or a distinction, between the person and the teaching. Mohammed, to the Koran. Buddha, to the Noble Path. Krishna, to his philosophizing. Zoroaster, to his ethics.

Whatever we may make of their claims, one reality is inescapable. They are teachers who point to their teaching or show some particular way. In all of these, there emerges an instruction, a way of living. It is not Zoroaster to whom you turn. It is Zoroaster to whom you listen. It is not Buddha who delivers you; it is his Noble Truths that instruct you. It is not Mohammed who transforms you; it is the beauty of the Koran that woos you.

By contrast, Jesus did not only teach or expound His message. He was identical with His message. 'In Him,' say the Scriptures, 'dwelt the fullness of the Godhead bodily.' He did not just proclaim the truth. He said, 'I am the truth.' He did not just show a way. He said, 'I am the Way.' He did not just open up vistas. He said, 'I am the door.' 'I am the Good Shepherd.' 'I am the resurrection and the life.' 'I am the I AM.'"

Zacharias, Ravi. *Jesus Among Other Gods* (pp. 89-90).
Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

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Breaking
Down
Journey

Journey was created for college students to use in larger, weekly meetings either on or off campus in a teaching and small group discussion setting. The beginning paragraph is an illustration that introduces the topic of study.



- **Journey Together** helps ease participants into the topic through ice-breaker related questions.



- **Road Map** is the main Bible passage discussion will focus on, and the questions that follow will help flesh out the topic. If you are leading *Journey*, feel free to depart from these as needed and come up with your own, as long as they stay on track with the main direction of the lesson laid out in the leader's guide.



- **My Journey** is a continuation of the larger group meetings meant for smaller groups of people that meet during the week to check in with one another and reflect on how God is using *Journey* in their daily life. I recommend these groups be flexible in terms of location and meeting time. Keep in mind that the amount of questions have been purposefully limited in this section to allow for more personal interactions and life application.

Getting
the most
out of
Journey

What You're Going to Need for *Before All Things*:

- Good soil—an open and receptive heart
- Willingness to work the soil—determination and diligence
- Hunger and thirst—a desire for God

Dynamic group discussion will bring out points from others that studying alone might miss. However, the most important discipline in what we take from our time in this letter will come from a careful reading of the text. To help us mine the golden truths in this letter here are five suggested practices to get the most from our study and discussion.

The Five S's of Hearing and Discerning God's Voice

- **Seek:** Pray for God to open up the passage for you. Is there a promise for you to claim, a sin to confess, a word for you to follow, an insight to share?
- **Soak:** Read the passage each day and write down any observations, thoughts, questions, connections, or anything God speaks to you about the passage.
- **Seal:** Seal God's word deep within your heart by taking some time to meditate on the most important truth to you this week. Ask God to open the deeper recesses of your heart to teach you what you need most for your life this week.
- **Script:** Journal or write—it can be just a few lines—noting the ways that God spoke to you from the passage, your meditation, or our group time together. This will help you keep better track of God's voice and the way He is speaking through Scripture.
- **Share:** Share with someone what you are learning from your time with God. As you share what you are learning, it will help drive God's word home even more and you will notice how God will use what He has revealed to you to bless others.

Learning to practice these five disciplines will move us beyond a surface reading of the text to God's discernable voice in our life. We want more than Bible facts. We want God to move and act in our life as we read about Him in scripture. This requires a deeper listening to God's voice and soaking in His word. The great thing is that Jesus promised more for those who desired more. See Mark 4:24:

“Consider carefully what you hear,’ he continued. ‘With the measure you use, it will be measured to you – and even more.’”

We don't want to lose anything of what God has for us. We want to soak it up together – first in our own personal time with the passage for the day, then in group time (Journey Together), again during the teaching time (Back Story) as we all consider the broader lessons together, and finally in our smaller cell groups during the week (My Journey) as we wrestle with God's call in our lives. In the end, my prayer is that we will see our way clearly through the fog of competing and /confusing messages of truth on campus to the Truth of God in Christ for Hhe is...

“Before all things and in him all things hold together.” – Colossians 1:17

*Journey
Covenant*

I want to grow in my understanding of Jesus and the life he has for me. I want to participate in Journey to enhance my own relationship with God this year. I will commit to doing the weekly assignments and life group meetings.

Signature _____

My best times of availability are

Morning: _____

Evening: _____

Email address _____

Cell Phone _____

Christ For the World: *Transformed*

The revolutions of 1989 formed part of a wave of freedom in the late 1980s and early 1990s that resulted in the end of communist rule in Central and Eastern Europe and beyond. The period is often referred to as the fall of communism. Nations that had been under communist rule and dictatorship were falling one by one—first Poland then Hungary, East Germany, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, and finally, Romania. Just a little over ten years later, the Arab world would also experience a wave of freedom in what would be referred to as the Arab Spring. People were demonstrating in the streets as communist dictatorships fell one by one and much of the change was affected and led by college students. The world seemed to be undergoing a fundamental shift toward freedom as students and ordinary people took to the streets demanding change.

This is the kind of excitement that the Apostle Paul opens with in his letter to the house church in Colossae. As far as we can tell, Paul never visited the city of Colossae, but he had heard about them from his ministry partner Epaphras, who first shared the message of Christ with them. He is excited that the Gospel has come to them and is bearing fruit among them just as it was doing all over the world. The message of Christ was bringing about change and a freedom from within. It is the mustard seed growing into a large tree—the leaven mixing into the dough and permeating the entire batch. It was a message of hope to a world under the oppression of Satan—the world’s worst dictator. What a great beginning to a powerful treatise announcing the victory and supremacy of Christ!



1. What big changes have you experienced in your lifetime?

2. What good news have you ever shared with perfect strangers?



Colossians 1:1-14

1. Paul has never met these people, yet he cares enough about them to write them a letter of appreciation and instruction. What drove Paul to care this much for them? When have you cared enough about perfect strangers on your campus to share the gospel with them?

2. Paul mentions that the Gospel is growing and bearing fruit all over the world. Where do you see the Gospel growing and bearing fruit on your campus, and how is it being spread?

3. Prayer plays a significant role right at the start of Paul's letter to the Colossians. He is writing to them because he is praying for them. What role does prayer still play in the success of our ministries? What role is prayer playing in your campus ministry?

4. How does Paul's prayer in verses 9-11 compare with what he thanks God for in verses 12-14?

5. The gospel is growing and bearing fruit all over the world. How is the fruit of faith, hope, and love growing in your life?

6. What do you appreciate most about being rescued from the dominion of darkness, and brought into the kingdom of Christ?

7. How can this group pray for you today?



1. How has God been using *Journey* in your life this week?

2. How is God using you to share good news on campus?

Christ Above All: *Transcendence!*

On January 12, 2007 a famous violinist played for 45 minutes in a subway station in Washington, D.C. He played eight selections from Bach, some of the most intricate pieces ever written, on a violin worth \$3.5 million. His name was Joshua Bell, one of the most famous concert violinists in the world. Three days before, he played to a soldout audience in a Boston theatre at \$100 a seat. But in the subway only six people stopped to hear him play. When the music stopped, no one noticed. No one applauded and no one cared.

Paul does his best to help us understand who Jesus really was in verses 15–29 of Colossians 1. Like Joshua Bell playing his violin in the subway, outside heaven Jesus looked like another humble teacher, but nothing like God in human flesh. He is gentle, compassionate, and selfless. Jesus is approachable, inclusive, and inviting, but we must not forget who He really is. In these verses Paul captures a true glimpse of His greatness. He is *“before all things and in him all things hold together”* (Col. 1:17). Let’s see what we can learn about the One who is *“the image of the invisible God and who God dwelt in fully”* (Col. 1:15).



1. Have you ever been in the presence of someone well-known that you mistook for just another average stranger? How did you feel when you learned their true identity?

2. Have you ever been mistaken for someone else? How did it make you feel?



Colossians 1:15–29

1. What are your impressions of Jesus after reading Paul's description here?

2. Paul says that Jesus is the image of the invisible God. Who else was made in God's image and why is this so important?

3. List some of the many other things Paul mentions here about Jesus. Which things stand out to you? Which things surprise you or impress you?

4. How important is it that "all the fullness of the Godhead" was dwelling in Jesus? Why do the Colossians need to know this? Why is this important for others to know on your campus?

5. Paul reminds us that the good news is that before Christ came, we were alienated from God, but now we have been brought into His favor through Christ's death and resurrection. Why is this good news for the whole world? Why is this good news to you? How can you share this news on campus?

6. Paul talks about the "glorious mystery of Christ in you." How is this a mystery and what is so glorious about it?

7. Paul says that Jesus is "before all things." How is Jesus before everything else in your life? What things need to take a back seat right now if your life is going to match up with how Paul describes Jesus here? How can you help others recognize the supremacy of Christ?



1. How has God been using *Journey* in your life this week?

2. How does Jesus mean even more to you after this week's lesson?

Dangers of Delimiting Christ: *Entranced*

When I was fresh out of college as a new youth pastor, my wife Carolyn and I were very green and highly influenced by church members older than us. One day while hosting our youth group for lunch one of the parents invited herself along. All was going fine. Carolyn served an amazing meal, but when we relocated to our living room we were shocked to discover that this intrusive mom had taken it upon herself to completely rearrange our entire living room according to her decorative taste while we were busy getting the meal together. Apparently, she thought her arrangement and style superior to ours, so she did us a "favor." We were speechless. Not wanting to create a scene, we waited until they all left and promptly put everything back the way we had arranged it in the beginning.

Our interior decorating was not sufficient. It needed a superior touch. The misguided religious teachers in Colossians 2 were doing a similar redecorating of the gospel by adding and subtracting various philosophies and religious practices to the already perfect work of Christ, and Paul would have none of it. After all, how can anyone improve on what is already complete, unqualified, and perfect? Let's see!



1. Have you ever tasted something so good that you could not imagine being able to improve on it? What was it and what made it so perfect?
-
-

2. How have you seen others adding to the gospel?



Colossians 2

1. What mysteries of God have been unveiled for you through Jesus? What treasures of wisdom and knowledge of God have you discovered in Him?

2. How are you living and being rooted and built up in Christ?

3. In verse 8 Paul warns against being taken captive to:

- Hollow/deceptive philosophy
- Human traditions
- Basic principles of this world

What do you think he means by each of these and what influence have they had in your life?

4. Paul says we have all come to fullness in Christ. How have you experienced the fullness that Paul talks about here?

5. What was the written code that Christ nailed to the cross and what does it have to do with circumcision?

6. How can religious practices like festivals, Sabbath keeping, and dietary laws degrade into false humility? How are these things only a shadow of the real object—the fullness of God in Christ? How can practices like these become linked to “the elemental spirits of the universe”?

7. Are philosophical ideas, religious practices, and the presence of angels bad in themselves? How can anyone of these delimit Christ? What helps you keep Christ supreme in your life?



1. How has God been using Journey in your life this week?

2. What things in your life are delimiting Christ? How is Jesus becoming more and more to you in your study of Paul's letter to the Colossians?

Living in Christ: *Transfixed!*

Iron Man is one of Marvel Comics' fictional superheroes. Actually, he doesn't really have any superpowers unless we consider his super intelligence. (According to the story, Tony Stark is a genius who enrolled at MIT at the age of 15 and finished with degrees in mechanical engineering and physics.) Stark uses his knowledge to build an iron suit—a kind of machine-powered exoskeleton that allows him to fly and transform into a virtual human weapon while protecting him from pretty much every force imaginable. But until Stark slips into his body of protective armor, aside from being a genius, he isn't much different than the rest of us.

What would it be like to slip into a new body and take on a whole new persona? This is how Paul presents our new life *in Christ Jesus*. In solidarity with Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension through baptism, our identity and position have changed. Paul's two favorite expressions describing our new life in Christ are "*in Christ*" and "*Christ in us*." We have been born again into a super life in Christ Jesus. How different things could be if we could shed our old skin and assume a brand new identity—the identity of Christ Jesus who beat death on our account. Not even Iron Man could imagine that!



1. What is your birth order and how has it impacted your life?

2. If you could be anybody else, who would you be and why?



Colossians 3:1-11

1. Where does Paul say Christ is now and what does His position have to do with us?

2. According to verse 1 our greatest challenge concerning our new life in Christ is focus. How do you keep your heart and mind set on Christ above? What distractions do you face on campus from this heavenly focus?

3. What are some of the earthly character traits from our nature listed here? Which of these do you find yourself struggling with most?

4. If we are to consider ourselves dead to our old manner of life and alive in Christ, why do we need to put these things to death if we are already dead to sin? If our life is now hidden with God in Christ above, why do we still find ourselves in tension with the character traits and habits of life on earth?

5. How do you put on the “new self being renewed in knowledge of the image of our creator”? What steps are you intentionally taking for ongoing renewal?

6. What is it about our new identity in Christ that provides the key to victory over our earthly nature, especially amid the distracting and sometimes opposite influence of a college campus?

7. How can this group pray for you?



1. How has God been using *Journey* in your life this week?

2. What are you learning about living with God in Christ with your heart and mind set on things above, and seated with Christ?

3. How can you help others experience a new position and identity in Christ?

Christ in Us!

Transfusion

Return to Me is a romcom film from 2000 about a woman receiving a heart transplant from the deceased wife of the man she eventually falls in love with. Bob (David Duchovny) and Elizabeth Rueland (Joley Richardson) live and work in Chicago. Bob is an architect and Elizabeth is a zoologist. Elizabeth is killed in a car accident, and her heart is transplanted to Grace Briggs (Minnie Driver), who has suffered from heart disease since the age of 14 and is nearing death. Blood pulsates through Grace's veins from the healthy, vigorous transplanted heart of Elizabeth. Her borrowed heart feeds every area and organ of her body. You could say that Elizabeth is alive in Grace so much so that when she meets Bob and they begin a relationship, both he and Bob's dog seem to sense a familiarity in Grace that somehow reminds them of Elizabeth.

Transfusion is the goal of our new life in Christ as well. We were in the death spiral of sin. We needed a heart transplant. Jesus took our old diseased and broken hearts to Himself. This is what took His life. Scripture makes clear that He died of a broken heart—our broken hearts. In His resurrection, Jesus' life-giving heart has been transplanted in us. His life is now pulsating through our veins. We live because He lives! What's it like to have God's heart beating in our chest? Let's find out!



1. Have you ever given or received a blood transfusion? What was that like?

2. What would you choose as part of a completely new wardrobe?



Colossians 3:12-4:1

1. Christ in us is like donning a new set of clothes. What aspect of your old nature wears like a comfortable old shirt and is hard to part with?

2. What are some of the items Paul lists in our new set of clothes? Which ones grab your attention? Which ones are you eager to try on? Which ones will you be comfortable wearing when you're out with others?

3. After a closer look, our new clothes appear more like a uniform. Our life in Christ is a life in community. How would our witness on campus be received if our community was dressed in these articles of clothing?

4. Letting Christ rule in our community reminds me of filling out our new clothes. The wardrobe we have been given by Christ is way too big for us. It will take time for our community to grow into these garments. What measures will need to be taken for Christ to rule in your community?

5. Christ's life pulsating through the veins of our community impacts our romantic relationships, familial relationships, and student to student/employer to employee relationships. Why is submission the key to healthy relationships in each of these areas? What do you find most difficult about submitting to others?



6. What do you need to pray for as a community for Christ in you, the hope of glory?

1. How has God been using *Journey* in your life this week?

2. What are you learning about the life of God in you and your community?

Christ in Community! *Transaction*

College was a great experience for me. I made some of the best friends I ever had in college. Even now I could name the people I learned to love, pray with, hike and camp with, study scripture with, and oh yes, sit with through classes. Christian community is one of the things I appreciated most about college.

The last chapter of Paul’s letter to the Colossians reminds me of the kind of community of friends I developed in college and have continued to enjoy in my relationships with college students over the years. He opens by praying for the people of Colossae and moves on to name the people God placed in his life to share in friendship and ministry. What Paul describes here in these few verses as he mentions each one by name is the kind of community Jesus had in mind when He commanded us to love one another as He loves us. Let’s see what we can learn from the kind of deep relationships Paul mentions here and about the supremacy of Christ experienced and shared in the fellowship of Jesus.



1. What new friends have you made in college? What do you appreciate most about each one?

2. Give an example of something important you learned about Jesus from others.



Colossians 4:2-18

1. Paul spends nearly one fourth of his letter greeting people in Colossae and mentioning his fellow partners in the Gospel. Who are these people and what do they mean to Paul?

2. Prayer is the link between Paul, his partners, and the Colossians. What are they praying for and why is it so important for their relationship and ministry?

3. What is Paul's advice for speaking about Jesus to outsiders in verses 5 and 6? What do you think he means by letting our conversation be seasoned with salt?

4. Onesimus is one of the people delivering Paul's letter to the Colossians. Onesimus is the main character in Paul's personal letter to Philemon, also a citizen of Colossae and member of the church. Who is Onesimus to Paul and what is his relationship to Philemon? What can we learn about reconciliation and interceding for others here? (Read the short read of Philemon.)

5. What are you learning about the supremacy of Christ in your own Adventist Christian Fellowship chapter modeled here by Paul's Christian community?

6. Why not complete your small group time praying for some of what Paul prayed for here?

- For others sharing the gospel on your campus and for other Adventist Christian Fellowship leaders.
- Divine appointments with others making the most of every opportunity.
- Clarity in sharing the message of Jesus.
- Wisdom and tact in our speech with unbelievers.
- Grace and thoughtful answers to legitimate questions about belief in Christ.



1. How has God been using Journey in your life this week?

2. What are you learning about wrestling in prayer for one another as modeled by Epaphras for the Colossians?

3. How can you help your Adventist Christian Fellowship chapter look more like Paul's Christian community and partners in the gospel?

Christ on Campus! *Translation*

We were conducting a CRAVE Campus Outreach, inviting students to write about their cravings on a large black 8' x 8' wall. Students were stopping by and writing on the wall while seminary students in their field school of the campus evangelism program engaged them in conversation about human urges and cravings. There was a point to this. Students were being invited to evening messages and discussion on how our cravings lead to the craving we all have to love and be loved.

Interesting conversations can take place with students on campus. Some lead to deeper questions and an interest in spiritual things. One of our conversations seemed to be heading in that direction with an older gentleman who wasn't even a student. However, the more he talked about Jesus and the kingdom of God, the kingdom he referred to seemed very different from the kingdom Jesus talked about. He was using the right words, but had a completely different perspective of Jesus' mission and message. Our message seemed lost in translation.

I have a similar impression of the issues and questions Paul addresses here in the letter to the Colossians. The Colossians are using the same words in discussion about Christ and His message, but the meaning is very different from Paul's. They too seemed to be missing the translation of Christ. This is why Paul painstakingly goes point by point to emphasize the absolute supremacy of Jesus. Looking back over the entire letter to the Colossians will help us appreciate even more how Jesus is *before all things!*



1. What's one new thing you have learned about yourself, others, your studies, or life in general this week?

2. When have you found it difficult to explain an important truth or concept to someone who speaks a different language than yours?



Colossians 1-4 (main focus on 1:15-20)

1. What are some of the most important things you are going to take away from the letter to the Colossians? What have you learned about the mystery of Christ that Paul mentions here again and again?

2. What was your comprehension of Jesus and His message before this series? How has your understanding grown or changed?

3. What do Paul's words "*He is before all things and in Him all things hold together*" mean to you now?

4. If someone were to ask you who Jesus is or why He is so pivotal to our understanding of God and our relationship to Him, how would you answer them from the letter to the Colossians?

5. How will you translate Paul's message to the Colossians for yourself, your Adventist Christian Fellowship chapter, and your campus?

6. How will the letter to the Colossians help you to be "*wise in the way you act before outsiders*"?



1. How has God been using *Journey* in your life this week?

2. What is one thing you have been able to share with others from the letter to the Colossians?

3. How are you helping your Adventist Christian Fellowship chapter put Jesus first and before all things including time, finances, relationships, family, and school programs?

