

Series: The Letter to the Colossians

Title: “New Life”

Text: Colossians 3:1-4

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Verse 1

At the outset of chapter 3, Paul transitioned from his refutation of the false teaching at Colossae to provide his readers with practical imperatives. He first said, “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God” (Colossians 3:1). The apostle wanted his readers to have a spiritual experience that was rooted in the realities of Christ. Because of who Jesus was and what Jesus had done, the believers at Colossae had an opportunity to live a new type of life.

“If Then You Have Been Raised with Christ”

The word translated “if” at the beginning of verse 1 was the same one used earlier in Colossians 2:20. As it did in that verse, the word “if” referred to a condition that was assumed to be true. Paul used what Bible scholars call “a condition of the first class.”¹ Such a condition assumed a stated reality was true. One could translate Paul’s words as saying, “Since then you have been raised with Christ.” The apostle intended to convey the idea that what he said was really true.²

In speaking of how his believers had “been raised with Christ,” Paul meant to demonstrate that Christ’s resurrection has bearing on one’s daily life. He had a spiritual resurrection in mind. Just as he didn’t mean to speak of a literal death in Colossians 2:20, he didn’t mean to speak of a literal resurrection in Colossians 3:1. His intent was to speak of the way that Christ’s literal resurrection accomplishes a spiritual resurrection in the hearts of God’s people. Paul made the same point when writing to the Romans: “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4).

One has commented on these things by saying, “What Jesus accomplished through his death and resurrection has a direct bearing not only on how a person becomes a Christian, but how they are enabled to go on to live the Christian life.”³ The entirety of the Christian experience flows from the person and work of Christ. Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection are not momentous events for the first forays into the faith alone. No, such realities provide the believer with supernatural strength and sanctification throughout the entirety of the Christian life. Strong Christians regard themselves as having been made alive through the resurrection of Jesus (Romans 6:11). Paul indicated that the resurrection has practical implications on the daily Christian life when he told the Philippians of his desire to know Christ “... and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death” (Philippians 3:10).

Paul’s if-then language unearthed critical spiritual truth for his readers. The Colossians weren’t to strive to earn favor with God through the demands of the Gnostics and the Judaizers. Instead, they were to live transformational lives that flowed out of the realities of Christ and the cross of Calvary. Paul’s instruction to the Colossians is instructive for us. Understanding who we are in Christ is the ground zero, the starting point, of holy, Christian

¹ Robertson, Archibald Thomas. *Word Pictures in the New Testament: Volume IV, The Epistles of Paul*. (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1931), 500.

² Rogers Jr., Cleon and Cleon Rogers III. *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 466.

³ Johnston, Mark G. *Let’s Study: Colossians and Philemon*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2013), 83.

living. All imperatives in the Christian life flow from the realities associated with what Christ has done for God's people.

“Seek The Things That Are Above, Where Christ Is, Seated at The Right Hand Of God”

The word rendered “seek” was a popular one in the New Testament. It was often used of the believer's spiritual pursuit of the Lord and things related to the Lord. It is important to note that the Greek word for “seek” was a strong one. It implied “labour and effort.”⁴ It referred to “a longing or yearning for something,” depicting “a deep desire that controls the whole direction of life.”⁵ In the original language of the New Testament, Paul used the verb as a present imperative verb; thus, he provided a command, calling his readers to a life-long pursuit of things related to heaven. His language spoke of a continual and habitual action.⁶

Many of Paul's readers in Asia Minor were being duped and distracted by earthly things. False teachers were enamored with ceremonial observances centered on the flesh. Others were being carried away with philosophies of the world. Some mystics were being enchanted by reports of angelic visitations. Paul wanted his readers to look above and beyond such mundane things. His readers needed a heavenly perspective.

In saying “seek the things that are above,” Paul undoubtedly meant to speak of the presence of God. While the exact nature of the heavenly realm remains a mystery to us, there are a few Bible passages that give a smidgen of details concerning what things are like in God's presence. Isaiah got a glimpse of the realm in Isaiah 6:1-7. Paul saw heavenly things in 2 Corinthians 12:1-10, though he was not permitted to give a full report concerning what he saw (2 Corinthians 12:4). John the apostle received perhaps the most detailed vision of what's above (Revelation 4:1-5:14).

For the purpose of our study, it is important to consider the most prominent figure in all of the heavenly visions recorded in Scripture — God Himself. In giving accounts of their visions, both Isaiah (Isaiah 6:3) and John (Revelation 4:8) placed great weight on the person of God and the holiness of God. They also told of a host of angelic beings giving praise to God (Isaiah 6:1-2; Revelation 4:4-7). Perhaps it was the weight of such otherworldly and awe-inspiring sights that compelled Paul to say he “heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter” (2 Corinthians 12:4). Since the Lord and the worship of the Lord are the most prominent figures of what is “above,” it stands to reason that seeking “the things that are above” involves a pursuit of the Lord.

Believers are to make it their aim to seek after the Lord first of all in life. Aspirations, attainments, accomplishments, and achievements of the Earth are to all be secondary to the pursuit of knowing Him. It is for this reason that Jesus told his disciples, “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matthew 6:33). Paul understood all of these things personally. He didn't just instruct others to pursue things above. He practiced what he preached. When writing to the Philippians, he gave witness, saying, “I press on toward the goal for the prize of the *upward* call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:14). The same Greek word translated “above” in Colossians 3:1 is the one translated “upward” in Philippians 3:14. Paul knew well that the Christian life is to be lived with an “above” and “upward” focus.

Though we live in this world, we are to live for another world. Jesus alluded to such things in John's gospel. In praying for his disciples, he prayed, “I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:15-17). Paul was

⁴ Davenant, John. *Geneva Series of Commentaries: Colossians*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 6.

⁵ Johnston, 86.

⁶ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 466.

certainly aware of Jesus' perspective concerning the believer's relationship to the world. God's people are to always be "in the world" while not being "of the world." It is for this reason that Paul instructed the Corinthians to "deal with the world" as if "they had no dealings with it" (1 Corinthians 7:31). Such advice is helpful for believers of all generations. It was especially helpful for the believers at Colossae, as they were being pulled by worldly religion and earthly dictates. Though they were surrounded by such things, they needed to set their gaze on Christ.

"Where Christ Is, Seated at The Right Hand of God"

Paul indicated that "Christ" is above, "seat at the right hand of God." His words contain an allusion to two important activities in the work of Christ — the Ascension and the Intercession of Christ. In the ancient world, the "right hand" was a place of honor next to a dignitary or royal official (Ephesians 1:20; Romans 8:34; Hebrews 1:3; Acts 1:11; Psalm 110:1).⁷ Scripture seems to use such things as a metaphor for Jesus' current abode in the presence of God. As the Son of God who conquered Satan, sin, and death, our resurrected and ascended Lord holds a special place in heaven. Paul spoke of such things when writing to the Ephesians: "...that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come" (Ephesians 1:20-21). Because of these realities, believers at Colossae had no need to pray through a strata of angelic beings (Colossians 2:18). They could have confidence that when they prayed their prayers would ascend directly to the Heavenly Father because of the work of Jesus Christ who had ascended to the Father (Revelation 4:8).

Verse 2

Paul continued his instruction regarding the pursuit of Christ by saying, "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth" (Colossians 3:2). Paul's words in verse 2 provided a sort of parallel to his words in verse 1. Whereas he commanded his readers to "seek" the Lord in verse 1, he commanded his readers to "set" their minds on the Lord in verse 2. Whereas the word "seek" in verse 1 could have been regarded as referring to one's affections, the word "minds" could be regarded as referring to one's thought processes. Paul's teaching revealed that both one's affections and thoughts are integral to strong Christian living and the experience of the new life.

"Set Your Minds on Things That Are Above"

As with the Greek word translated "seek" in verse 1, Paul used a present imperative verb in saying "Set your minds on things that are above." As a result, his language issued a command that called for a continual action. One has said his words could be translated "keep on thinking about."⁸ His instruction revealed that believers are to take responsibility to continually monitor their thinking, making sure that their minds are stayed upon Christ. In regard to thinking, it is necessary for believers to make it their default pattern of thinking "to meditate and dwell upon Christ's sort of life, and on the fact that he is now enthroned as the Lord of the world."⁹

Obviously, Paul didn't mean to say that believers can never think of things pertaining to practical life. Indeed, one must think about food, clothing, work, family, and more on a regular basis. Paul did not mean to discount the need to show proper concern to the physical things of life. However, he did mean to say that an upward perspective should permeate all of one's dealings with such things. One has commented, "Paul does not mean that we should never

⁷ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 466.

⁸ Robertson, 500.

⁹ Wright, N.T. *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon*. (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 132.

think of the things upon the earth, but that these should not be our aim, our goal, our master. The Christian has to keep his feet upon the earth, but his head in the heavens. He must be heavenly-minded here on earth and so help to make earth like heaven.”¹⁰

For Paul, correct thinking was part and parcel of the way one lives a strong and holy Christian life. He advocated for healthy Christian thinking elsewhere in his writings. To the Romans, he said, “Do not be conformed to this world, but *be transformed by the renewal of your mind...*” (Romans 12:2). When writing to the Philippians, he enjoined them, saying, “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Philippians 4:8). To truly experience the life of Christ, one must be careful to have thoughts that are centered on the realities of Christ. The French philosopher Charles Baudoin once said, “An idea upon which attention is peculiarly concentrated is an idea which tends to realize itself.” Such is true in both the practical and spiritual realm. It is no wonder that Paul was so concerned that his readers set their minds “on things that are above.”

“Not on Things That Are on Earth”

The believers at Colossae were being infiltrated by a spurious form of Christianity that placed a lot of stock in earthly things. Paul had previously warned his readers of such things, reasoning with them by saying, “If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations” (Colossians 2:20-21). Believers of all generations should be on guard, making sure that they don’t have a mode of life that is dominated by the world’s values (1 John 2:16). Sadly, even religion can be used as a pretext for worldly pursuits.

Instead of thinking of the lowly things of the Earth, Paul wanted his readers to direct their focus towards heaven. Many were so enamored with pagan philosophies, cultic rituals, and angelic encounters that they had no headspace to think about the most important things of life — Christ and Christ’s kingdom. The life of Abraham would have stood as a great example for such professing believers. Of the great patriarch, the author of Hebrews said, “By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God” (Hebrews 10:9-10). Abraham was more concerned about heavenly rewards than earthly rewards; thus, he followed the Lord faithfully.

Sometimes, modern believers mockingly speak of some other believers by saying they are “too heavenly minded for any earthly good.” Paul’s instruction in Colossians 3:2 reveals that believers are to make heavenly mindedness their aim. As was the case in Colossae, most churches are filled with professing believers who are too earthly minded for any heavenly good. Conscientious Christians will recognize their need, like Abraham, to direct their gaze toward Christ in the heavenlies.

Verse 3

Paul explained why his readers should have avoided worldly things by saying, “For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:3). Paul’s words spoke of a supernatural transformation that takes place at salvation. In regeneration, believers experience a change that can be likened to the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. There is a sense in which believers were simultaneously crucified and resurrected with Christ at Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection.

“You Died”

Obviously, the mention of death did not refer to a literal physical death. As in Colossians 2:20, Paul used literal death as a metaphor for the spiritual death that takes place at Christian

¹⁰ Robertson, 500.

conversation. When one is born again, the power and penalty of sin is broken in one's life. Christ undoes the death that was experienced because of Adam and Eve's first transgression (Genesis 2:16-17; 3:1-7, 23-24; Romans 5:12). Prior to conversion, one is dead because of spiritual death incurred through original sin. With conversion, sin and death are put to death and one is raised to live a new type of life. Paul spoke of these realities in Galatians, saying, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

Paul's language in Colossians 3:3 was strong. He implemented an aorist active indicative verb, pointing to a definite event.¹¹ His words conveyed the same idea of Romans 6 — "How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" (Romans 6:2-3). To be strong in the faith and to exude Christian character, believers need to live with an awareness of their state of being in Christ. Because of Jesus, the power and penalty of sin is completely broken in their lives. As a result, they have no need to live as slaves to old temperaments and temptations.

An understanding of these realities is a prerequisite to living a godly life. It is unlikely that one will live unstained by the world if one doesn't regard oneself as being spiritually untethered from the world. Calvin once said, "We must be dead to the world that we may live to Christ."¹² When believers begin to flirt with the fallen values and philosophies of a sin-stained world, a spiritual fallout is inevitable.

"Your Life Is Hidden with Christ in God"

The word translated "hidden" is the Greek word from which we get our word for "crypt." It was likely a key term of the mystical teachers at Colossae who boasted of hidden knowledge they supposedly received through mystical experiences. Paul likely used the false teachers' jargon against them in our current verse. It seems he did something similar in Colossians 1:26.

The Gnostics boasted of "hidden" visions and wisdom, but what did it mean for Christians to have their lives "hidden with Christ in God?" In the original language, Paul used a perfect tense verb, depicting a completed state.¹³ His intent was to portray his readers' lives as being permanently hidden with God. A consideration of such things can lead believers to several conclusions. First, Paul likely used the word "hidden" to speak of the way the ascended Christ is no hidden from our sight, interceding on our behalf before God the Father (Hebrews 1:3).

Second, the word could have referred to the way the unseen Spirit of God provides readers with the spiritual strength they need in a "hidden" fashion (Galatians 5:16, 22-23). Contrary to some of the practices in Colossae, spiritual force or might was not to be received through physical ceremonies that were plainly seen by all. Instead, spiritual sustenance and life comes to believers through Christ who is now unseen (John 16:16). Though he dwells in a hidden place in the presence of God (Revelation 5:6), Christ actively bestows his people with the spiritual life they need for godly living.

Third, the word "hidden" could have alluded to the security believers enjoy in Christ. The Greek term (*krúptō*) was a compound word. It was made up of two words that literally meant "locked together." Believers at Colossae were being filled with doubts. Many were spiritually insecure because of the teaching and demands of false religionists. Paul wanted the genuine believers to know that they were "locked together" with Christ. Because of the new

¹¹ Robertson, 500.

¹² Calvin, John. *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul The Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948), 207.

¹³ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 466.

birth, they had no need to fear the unlawful judgments and expectations of others. Paul's teaching was in alignment with that of Jesus. On one occasion, our Lord said the following concerning his disciples, "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand" (John 10:28-29). Commenting on Paul's words in Colossians 3:3, one has said that Paul depicted believers as "...locked together with Christ and no hellish burglar can break that combination."¹⁴

Verse 4

Paul next made a strong statement concerning the believer's future hope in Christ, saying, "When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory" (Colossians 3:4). The apostle's words indicated that the work of Christ guaranteed the believer's future resurrection in Christ at the end of time. Paul shared similar truth in his letter to the Romans, saying, "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you" (Romans 8:11).

"Who Is Your Life"

What did Paul mean when he spoke of his readers' relationship to Christ by saying, "Christ who is your life?" It seems that Paul's words revealed the bare essence of Christian salvation. Whereas sin brought death to humanity (Genesis 2:16-17; Romans 5:12), Christ's substitutionary work on behalf of sin provided life. In fact, one could say that the one word "life" provides a summation of the entire Christian experience. Jesus told Nicodemus, "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (John 3:14-15). On another occasion, he told his disciples, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). Life is the hallmark of the Christian religion. Jesus once said, "And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3).

"Appears"

Paul's words in verse 4 were undoubtedly a reference to the Second Coming of Christ. The is true, since the Greek word for "appears" in verse 4 is the same one John once used to say, "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2).

Interestingly, the apostle linked the Second Coming of Christ to an event he had mentioned earlier — the Ascension (Colossians 3:1-3). Christ's act of going up into heaven and occupying a place at God's right hand provides assurance that he will one day return to Earth. Such was made plain by the angel's announcement when Jesus ascended before his disciples: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). In addition, Jesus himself personally told his disciples that his departure from Earth would serve as a guarantee concerning his return: "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also" (John 14:3).

The Gnostics boasted of "hidden" knowledge and unseen mysteries. Paul contented that gospel-centered Christians indeed had a hidden relationship with God through Christ; however, the hidden nature of the true Christian life was completely different than the one proposed by the Gnostics. In addition, Paul wanted his readers to know that the veil that produced "hidden" realities in Christ would one day be removed. At the end of all things, Christ would return and faith would be made sight. Hidden mysteries would eventually be fully exposed.

¹⁴ Robertson, 500.

“In Glory”

The Greek word for glory is one that carried meanings of honor or praise. Associated with the Second Coming of Christ, the word depicted the way the Lord's appearing will solicit praise and honor from those who dwell on the Earth. In the book Revelation, John said, “Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen” (Revelation 1:7). Paul had previously drawn his readers attention in Colossae to the hope of the Lord's future glory (Colossians 1:27). He wanted his readers to know that their confidence and courage in Christian living was to derive from the promises of Christ, not counterfeit religion.