

Set on Things Above

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[0:00] Believe it or not, our last study in Colossians was four weeks ago, so it's been a while since! all of us who have been in the Colossians study have looked at it and we're also fortunate to have! the Awana folks join us for the summer break so with that, I'll be happy to have the Awana folks join us for the summer break.

So with that in mind, we're going to do a little bit of an extended review before we get to the new verses for tonight. But if you look at the first two chapters of Colossians, Paul has been focused on what God and Christ have done for believers.

So if you look at chapter 1, verses 12 through 14 first, we'll get our first reminder there. Paul says that he is giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

Then verse 13 says, he has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved son in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

And then from there, Paul focuses on the preeminence of Christ and we see that in verses 15 through 20 of chapter 1. Paul wrote there, He says, And then the next two verses get more personal for us.

[2:05] Look at 1, verse 21 and 22. Paul said, And you who were once alienated and hostile in mind doing evil deeds, he is now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.

And of course, remember that Paul wrote this letter to the believers in Colossae. So when he's speaking here, he's talking to fellow Christians. And if you skip to chapter 2 now and look at verses 9 through 15, Paul is still speaking of Christ when he starts in verse 9.

And starting with 2, 9 and going through 15, he said, And you who were dead in your trespasses, And the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses by canceling the record of death that stood against us with its legal demands.

This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame by triumphing over them in him. The Colossians, however, were being told by some people that Christ alone was insufficient for salvation.

Those heretics said that the Colossians needed Christ plus something else. And we still have that same form of heresy today. Paul attacked the heresies at the end of chapter 2.

[3:55] Some people said that the Jewish regulations and festivals must still be observed. And verses 2, 16 and 17 are where Paul said, Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival, or a new moon, or a Sabbath.

These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. And of course they were a shadow of what was coming in Christ himself. We see in verse 17 that Paul points the people away from the rituals back to the reality.

And that reality is that Christ is enough. And that's the main point he wants to get through here, is that Christ is all we need. And he is the only thing we need.

Other heretics, though, insisted on some sort of mysticism, self-denial, or even angel worship. Paul took on those people in the remaining verses of chapter 2.

And in verse 19, Paul reminded us that Christ is our head, and he nourishes his body, the church. And then next, Paul gives us a summary of his argument against needing something plus Christ to achieve salvation.

[5:05] So listen to verses 20 through 23 of chapter 2. Paul wrote,

And at the end of chapter 2, Paul said that earthly rules and regulations are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

The passage we will study tonight begins showing us what we should be focused on instead. So we've been focused on what isn't effective. Tonight, we'll look at what is effective.

So let's read Colossians 3, 1 through 4. These are the verses that we'll study tonight. Starting with verse 1 of chapter 3, Paul wrote, In the final two chapters of Colossians, Paul moves into the application portion of the doctrines that he's been teaching throughout the first two chapters. Some Christians will defend the truth at the drop of a hat, but their personal lives deny the doctrines that they profess to love. So tonight, Paul is going to start showing us that if we really believe these doctrines, we should live like we believe these doctrines.

[7:36] The pagan religions of Paul's day said little or nothing about personal morality. The Christian faith actually brought a whole new concept into pagan society, and that was what we talked about just a second ago, and that was what we believe has a definite connection to how we should behave.

After all, faith in Christ means being united to Christ, and if we share his life, we must follow his example. He can't live by us in his spirit and permit us to live in sin.

So it's not enough for Christ to be preeminent in the gospel, the cross, the creation, and the church. He must also be preeminent in the lives of Christians.

We'll break tonight's passage into three sections, and the first one is in verses 1 and 2. In those verses, we'll see the requirement. So the requirement is the first thing we'll look at.

Listen to verses 1 and 2 again. Paul wrote, If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

[8:46] Set your mind on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. The requirement is to seek the things that are above. Each of chapter 3's first two verses states that requirement in slightly different ways.

And if you're looking at how that verse is translated in English, you might think that the requirement actually is being raised with Christ, because it starts, If then you have been raised with Christ.

But the first phrase of verse 1 there actually is a reminder. We spent time doing the review because we needed to be reminded that Paul's already shown us how we've been raised with Christ.

Just as another reminder of that, listen to chapter 2 verses 12 through 14 again. Chapter 2, 12 through 14 say, Having been buried with him in baptism, in which you also were raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God who raised him from the dead.

And you who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses by canceling the record of death that stood against us with its legal demands.

[9:58] This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. So the first phrase of Colossians 3.1 actually is a reminder. It's better translated, Because you have been raised with Christ.

Believers spiritually are entered into Christ's death and resurrection at the moment of their salvation. And 3.1 is closely tied to the statement a few lines earlier in 2.20 when it says, If with Christ you died.

The two statements belong together because with Christ you died and you have been raised with Christ then. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are events of massive importance in the history of the world.

Paul has already spoken in this letter of the entire creation being put back together again reconciled to Christ, the one in whom all things were created and the one for whom all things exist.

We saw that when we looked at verses 15 through 20 of chapter 1. In the death and resurrection of Jesus, God has pacified a deep alienation that has disrupted the order of all things.

[11:07] So the new age of God's kingdom has begun in the death and resurrection of Jesus and you and all of us who have come to trust him have been so united to him that we have died with him and we were raised with him.

So the new life had at its heart the forgiveness of all our trespasses. And the forgiveness of all our trespasses or sins is the beginning of the restoration of all things.

It's being raised with Christ and of course it has eternal consequences. And it's the most important thing that's happened to any one of us. One of the consequences of becoming a believer should be a change in what we seek.

Jesus said that the life of the Gentiles, by which he meant the pagan nations who do not know God, is characterized by what they seek. Consider this quote here.

Jesus said, The Gentiles seek after all these things. What shall we eat? What shall we drink? And what shall we wear? And that comes from Matthew 6, 31 and 32.

[12:13] So a person seeks what they're anxious about, what matters to them, what they know they need, or perhaps just what they want. And having been raised with Christ, our seeking should be given a whole new direction.

And Paul says that we should seek the things that are above where Christ is. Seeking the things that are above is the requirement that we're talking about in these verses.

And the good thing is that we don't have to do that on our own. Christ gives us the resources to do that. So there's a conscious and deliberate movement on the soul to fix itself on spiritual realities as opposed to the trivial things of this world.

Holiness actually comes from a mind captivated and controlled by the beauty and majesty of the risen Christ and all that we are in him and all that we have in him.

To be preoccupied with heaven is to be preoccupied with the one who reigns there and also to be preoccupied with his purposes, his plans, his provisions, and his power.

[13:18] And it's to view all things, all people, and all events in this world through his eyes and view them with an eternal perspective. So when believers focus on the realities of heaven, they can then truly enjoy the world their heavenly father has created.

So when you think about it, it's not that we become so heavenly minded that we are of no earthly good as you might hear some people say. It's that we think of things with the heavenly perspective so that when we see things going on in this world, we understand how it all fits together with God's plan and we're not surprised by what we see.

It talks about Christ being seated at the right hand of the Father. And to be seated at the right hand was a common way among both Jews and Gentiles of that day of declaring that someone has been granted the highest honor and favor.

So it's a description of privilege and exaltation, not distance from us. So Paul is emphasizing here the supremacy and lordship of Christ, not his distance from earthly affairs.

And Paul in no way is trying to suggest that the Lord is spiritually absent from the earth or unconcerned about its plight and problems. It's more of a statement of his position.

[14:34] Seated at the right hand of God also is a reference to the Messianic Psalm 110. And verse 1 of Psalm 110 says, The Lord says to my Lord, Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.

So the Old Testament promise that God would give his Messiah the place of honor and power at his right hand has been fulfilled in the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus.

Jesus has already begun his reign. And so to seek the things above means to seek Jesus' reign.

And it means to set your heart on Jesus' reign. So we should cling to him and we should find in him the center and the source of all of our joys.

So it's what we should do if we have been raised with Christ. And of course, we know that Christians have been raised with Christ. So to really help us grasp this, Paul says it again in slightly different words.

Later on, he says to set your minds on at the beginning of verse 2. And this means to consider, to think, or set your mind to. And the present tense implies continuous action, so we should always be thinking about those things.

[15:47] So our whole disposition should orient itself toward heaven where Christ is, just like a compass always orients itself to the north. Obviously, though, the thoughts of heaven that should fill our minds must come from Scripture.

The Bible is the only source of reliable information and knowledge about the character of God and the values of heaven. So if you can't find the description of heaven in Scripture, then you probably should stay away from that description.

Paul does more, though, than to tell us what to set our minds upon. He tells us what to avoid setting our minds upon. And we're to avoid setting our minds on the things of this earth. So when we think about that, is Paul saying that we should isolate ourselves from the rest of the world?

The answer to that question is no, because to seek and think about things above doesn't mean that we're to ignore and to neglect the daily affairs and responsibilities of life here and now.

Instead, Paul is using these categories to make a distinction in quality. So the contrast between below or on the earth and above, between down and up and also between here and there,

corresponds to the distinction between the present age that's in rebellion against God still and the age to come in which the lordship of Christ will be fully and finally manifested.

[17:17] Of course, we know that Christ is Lord now, but we don't see evidence of that always on the earth. And that's what Paul is trying to get across here. We're not to be focused on the things that are going on in the earth in the sense that we're worried that Christ has lost control.

Instead, we're to be focused on the things above and what is coming and realize that this is all part of the plan that's laid out in scripture. When Paul refers to things below or things on the earth, he has in mind the worldly system that's under the dominion of Satan.

So he's talking about the values and goals and principles that conflict with the revelation of God in scripture. Said another way, things on earth are whatever is driven by pride, greed, lust, and disregard for the glory of God.

When he talks about setting our mind on things above, though, he's really talking about setting our minds on whatever reflects the beauty of Christ, whether that be when we're helping someone change a diaper in the nursery because the church has a need, or maybe when we're taking a meal to friends, or celebrating the Lord's Supper.

Anything that we do for the glory of God qualifies as setting your minds on the things above. And we know from other places in the Bible that we're to be in the world but not of the world.

[18:40] So remember the definition of the phrase set your minds upon. We said it meant consider, think, or put your mind to. So Paul's talking about the focus of our attention. We have to deal with earthly things because that's where we are now, but we have to avoid being preoccupied with them.

And of course that's one of the hardest things to do because it is very easy to get preoccupied with the things of the earth. Though what Paul is telling us is that our minds, our thinking, and our understanding are to be focused and informed by the things above.

And he's talking about Christ, of course. And understanding the things above will transform and empower our lives in this world and it will give us a better perspective on how to deal with the difficulties here on earth.

So that actually begs another question. If we're going to become or remain focused on Christ, how are we going to do that effectively? Well, obviously it's going to take some deliberate turning of our minds and our affections to Christ in such a way that he becomes the shaping power of our lives. Of course, the most common way to do that is the Christian practice of regular daily Bible reading and prayer. And it's a practice that's been proven for generations of believers.

[19:59] It's an effective way to seek the things that are above where Christ is. A daily quiet time, though, is not prescribed anywhere in the Bible. And if you think about it, it's possible to have a quiet time without actually doing what's spoken of in verses 1 and 2 of chapter 3.

You can go through the motions of daily Bible reading and prayer without really setting your mind on the things above. So, also when you think about it, seeking the things above couldn't possibly be limited to just a few minutes in the morning or the evening or whenever you do your quiet time.

There are many other ways in which we can respond to what Paul wants us to do here, and it includes the times of meeting together in fellowship and Bible study like what we're doing here and what we'll see the believers do later in this chapter.

Conversations with believers ought to stimulate us to seek the things that are above. And of course, we just said you can have quiet time without being effective with the quiet time, but still, we need to realize that the value of daily reading of God's word and prayer can never be underestimated.

And we need to do that as well. We just need to make sure that we're doing it for the right reasons and in the right way. So sometimes it's easy to fall into the trap of thinking that seeking the things above is hard work.

[21:21] So because it's so hard work, why would we want to do that? Well, Paul actually gives us the answer in the second section of our lesson, and in verse 3, we see the reason.

So the reason is what comes next. The reason, then, is the reason why we should seek the things that are above. Paul says in verse 3, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. From our study in Colossians so far, we already knew that reason, but we always need a reminder, and so let's explore what Paul is telling us in verse 3. Once again, he says, for you have died, and he means, of course, that you have died with Christ.

So there's been a decisive end to our old lives if we're Christians now, and that's what we heard about in 2.20, and it was the subject of 2.9-15 as well.

The new life we have in Christ can't be thought of as an add-on to the old life. The new life only comes on the other side of a death, and as we trust in Christ, his death is our death, and our old life is over.

[22 : 35] And the past tense of you have died indicates that a death took place at salvation, and of course, this is consistent with what Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5.17.

2 Corinthians 5.17 is the familiar verse that says, therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away.

Behold, the new has come. So let's think about what Paul means when he says that we have died. In what sense have we died? Well, we've died in the sense that the penalty for sin has been paid.

We know that the wages of sin is death, so we must die. But by our union with Jesus Christ, we die the required death in him. The penalty's already been paid, and sin can never claim us again.

So sin's presence and power may still affect us, but that presence and power can't condemn us.

That's all good news, but Paul's focus here in verse 3 is the second part of the verse.

[23 : 40] And the second part of the verse says, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

Believers share a common life with the Father and the Son. And in 1 Corinthians, Paul wrote about this.

1 Corinthians 6.17 says that he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. And also in 2 Peter 1.4, Peter wrote that believers are partakers of the divine nature.

So the new life is concealed from the world now. Unbelievers are unable to grasp the full significance of the believer's new life. The false teachers troubling the Colossians couldn't grasp the truth that the Colossians had already gained spiritual knowledge and life, and therefore had no need for their false teaching.

They had everything they needed already. Believers are eternally secure, and they're hidden protectively from all spiritual foes. And no passage says that better than Romans 8.31-39.

And that's a lengthy cross-reference, but if you want to follow along, go ahead and flip over to Romans 8.31-39. Of course, that's another letter from Paul.

[24 : 53] And in Romans 8.31-39, Paul said, What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?

He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect?

It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died. More than that, who was raised. Who is at the right hand of God?

Who indeed is interceding for us? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?

As it is written, For your sake we are being killed all the day long. We are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered. No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

[25 : 54] For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

It is interesting there how much Paul emphasizes that nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God. He has that whole long list, and then he adds, nor anything else in all creation, just in case he might have left something out there.

So our new life in God is hidden, for the time being anyway, just as Christ is hidden for now from our physical eyes. Make no mistake, though, our new life is real.

It is as real as the forgiveness of all our trespasses that we read about in Colossians 2.13. And it's known by who matters. It's known by God, and it's known by the believer.

Our new lives are with Christ in God. It's just that, for now, that new life is not seen for all that it is. And that's why we need to look up to where Christ is and seek and consider the things that are above.

[27 : 06] In other words, we can't and we must not simply live by present appearances because our life is actually hidden in Christ. So all of us know that seeking the things that are above is rarely easy.

And because our future life is hidden, we can easily fall into worrying about earthly, temporary things. So is focusing on the things that are above really worth the effort? Well, actually, Paul answers the question of whether it's really worth the effort in the last section of our passage tonight. That comes in verse 4. And there, Paul reminds us of the result. We'll talk about the result or actually the ultimate result for us and all believers that are true believers. So look at that result in verse 4. Verse 4 says, When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. The believer's identification with Christ brings not only a past break with sin, but a present security. [28:13] And it also means a glorious future. So really, we await the time when Christ appears. And the word translated appears there refers to an open display.

When Christ appears, we will also appear with him in glory. So we know from earlier in the passage and other texts in the Bible that Christ is now seated at the Father's right hand. hand, but one day he will come to take his people home. And when he does, we'll enter into eternal glory with Christ. And when he is revealed in his glory, we also shall be revealed in glory. And according to Paul, we've already been glorified. We saw that in Romans 8.30, right before the passage we read earlier. And the glory simply has not yet been revealed for what it is. But we know that Christ has already given us his glory, even though the full revelation of that glory awaits the return of the Savior. So at Christ's return, each person will see him and perhaps for the first time be confronted with the magnificence of his person. [29:18] So the Christian's life is hidden now, but it will be obvious to all when Christ is made manifest to them. So the second coming of Christ will be a time of glory. Christians will share in Christ's glory and Christians will contribute to his glory.

The present time is a time of death. Often Christians suffer for their faith, but they continue with the life source unknown to those who do not know Christ. Someday, though, Christ is going to be revealed.

And when he is, the source of Christians' lives will become apparent to all people. The reason, in other words, that Christians have had the values, the outlook, and the service to God and others will be clear.

So the hidden life will be manifested ultimately. When you think about it, the values and goals of Christians also will be vindicated. Unbelievers will know that Jesus is Lord, and they will know that they base their lives on the wrong principles.

They also will see that Christians built our lives correctly. Christians' lives and ambitions are energized by Christ through the Spirit, and Christians sought to contribute to the concerns of Christ on earth.

[30:32] So that's great news, but before we leave this verse, we need to focus on one other phrase in it because Paul says, Christ is our life. He talks about when Christ, who is our life, appears.

So what does it mean to say that Christ is our life? Well, it means that apart from him, we actually have no life of any meaning. So life, both physically and spiritually, finds its source in him and is sustained by him.

We read about that when we studied verses 16 and 17 of Colossians chapter 1. Whatever life we now have is not of our own making. Remember what Paul said to the Athenian philosophers in Acts 17:25.

Paul said, he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. So the mere fact that there is an I, a you, and a we is because of the creative intent and energy of the Son of God himself. Paul also has in mind here the vital irrevocable union we have with Christ such that the Christian simply can't conceive of life in any meaningful way that's separate from the indwelling, energizing, loving presence of Christ.

[31:45] The believer's identity should be so inextricably wrapped up in who Christ is and what he's accomplished that it makes no sense to even conceive of a me that's independent of Christ.

A few months ago we studied a book called Counterculture on Sunday nights and we can't get more countercultural than to say that we don't exist independently of Christ.

And that's one of the reasons why we are hidden right now but one day that will be manifested. So to say that Christ is our life is to say that our lives exist ultimately to make him look great and glorious.

Now we don't make him look great and glorious, he already is that, but we do exist to reveal and display that greatness and glory in all that he does through us. So the day is coming when the reality is going to be revealed and when Christ who is your life appears, when he is revealed, that's when the glory and the reality will be revealed.

Because you have died with him and been raised with him, then you also will appear in that glory and you'll be revealed with him in glory. So what is now hidden will no longer be hidden.

[32:57] Paul's speaking of that day when Jesus Christ will come in glory. On that day he will be seen as he really is and our new life that was hidden in him will also be seen for what it really is and that of course is glorious too.

So I think I put this quote from John Piper in your notes. It's a quite thought-provoking quote. He wrote, Do you love the thought that you exist to make God look glorious?

Do you love the thought that all creation exists to display the glory of God? Do you love the truth that all of history is designed by God to one day be a completed canvas that displays in the best way possible the greatness and beauty of God?

Do you love the truth that you personally exist to make God look like what he really is, glorious? I ask again, do you love the fact that your salvation is meant to put the glory of God's grace on display?

Do you love seeing and showing the glory of God? This is why God created the universe. This is why he ordained history. This is why he sent his son. This is why you exist forever to see and savor and show the glory of Christ who is the image of God.

[34:12] So let's think about how we apply this to our lives today because we know the future will be great. That's obvious from what we see in verse four. But what do we do in the meantime?

Well, the real life of the Christian, the true life in the spirit, is not something that we live out in some distant realm that's detached and unconnected with the dirt and sweat and frustrations of trying to cope with other fallen people in this world and our own obligations to them.

The real spiritual life of the Christian is right here and right now and it's empowered and lived out by and through the exalted Christ with whom we are forever identified.

So people who are fixated on things above should more than all others positively influence life in the here and now. So really it all boils down to Paul's desire being that we should bring to bear on the present the power of the future.

So Paul is laboring to raise up people whose heavenly mindset yields an earthly impact for the glory of God. And that's the real key because of what Christ has done for us.

[35:19] We should make the most positive impact on the world and therefore influence other believers and let God use us to bring those other believers to him.

But regardless of what happens here on earth, we know the truth of Colossians 3, 4. And that, of course, is the verse that says, when Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

So on that positive thought, let's go ahead and close with prayer. Father, we thank you for the reminder from Paul tonight that what we believe and what you teach us in the early chapters of Colossians should impact how we live our lives today.

Help us be examples in the world for you and help us continue to reach out so that you can use us to display your glory. And let us always make sure that everything we do is for your glory.

And please empower us to do that. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen.