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Colossians 3:1-4

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# THE THINGS ABOVE

*SERIES: THE CHRIST-FORMED CHURCH*

I grew up in a very modest, frugal home in the Nebraska. The main guideline for living was never to spend one more dollar than necessary. Attending four different schools in 7th, 8th, 9th, and 10th grades wasn't great during the formative teenage years. As a result I didn't have many friends in high school, kept to myself most of the time, and lacked a strong social identity.

My wife grew up in Palo Alto, in the shadow of Stanford University, a city with a strong sense of identity and community. Even though Liz's home was not luxurious, her grandfather was wealthy and she never lacked for anything. On top of this she was homecoming queen when she was a sophomore in high school, giving her a very strong social identity. I have never met anyone as secure as my wife.

How the two of us got together is beyond me – sheer infatuation, the way God tricks us into marriage. When we married we were not established in the Lord and so our core identities and expectations for how we would live collided with great sound and fury.

Here is my point: how we live is largely based on our perception of our core identity. Our basic mindset of who we are and how we perceive ourselves determines how we live in the world.

This is where we come finally in our studies in Colossians – how we live. As he stated in chapter 1, Paul's goal for the Colossians is to present every person complete in Christ, to be formed in Christ, to become like Christ and to live like Christ. Critical to this process is the drastic identity shift that takes place in our lives when we believe in Jesus.

Paul began talking about living in Christ at a major transition point in his letter in chapter 2, verse 6:

**Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving (Colossians 2:6-7 ESV).**

Paul then digressed for a bit, warning the Colossians about the influence of certain teachings and explaining their errors. But now in chapter 3 Paul takes up the theme of living in Christ in earnest, and this will occupy our thoughts for the next four studies in Colossians.

Our text this morning is the first four verses of chapter 3, my favorite text in the letter:

**If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with**

**Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. (3:1-4)**

## The Foundation for Living in Christ

Paul begins with a foundational assumption – “if then you have been raised with Christ...” This alludes to the drastic change in our core identity that Paul has referred to throughout the letter. In chapter one, Paul said this:

**He (God) has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son. (1:13)**

A few verses later he added:

**And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his (Christ) death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him. (1:21-22)**

How did we get transferred into a new kingdom? How were we reconciled to God? Through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Paul's statement in 3:1 is parallel to 2:20:

**“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—” (2:20).**

Dying with Christ and being raised with Christ alludes to Paul's foundational argument in chapter 2, verses 11-13, to dispel the logic of the false teachers:

**In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which *you were also 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.* (2:11-13)**

When one believes in Jesus and his death on the cross as a sacrifice for our sins, then a drastic core identity change takes place. A believer is united in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Everything that happened to Jesus has also happened to us. We are in him and with him, completely loved and accepted. This is Paul's basic argument as to why we don't need a strict discipline of rules and asceticism, or involvement with some other powers in order to reach spiritual maturity. Spiritual formation does not begin with a sin management program. It begins with resurrection, being raised with Christ. We are severed from the old world order and bound to the new order.

Let me give you an analogy.

Suppose that you are a young person working in a faraway land. You are surrounded by crime, poverty, and illness. People are always trying to take advantage of you and you can't trust the government. However, your present situation is very different from how you grew up. Your parents were very wealthy and your home was safe, secure, and greatly enjoyed. You did not have to look out for yourself but were always cared for with abundance. Your present situation is only temporary and you know with certainty that you will one day be going home. How would you live? I can imagine that you would live with the same core identity as you grew up with and not greatly influenced by your environment. You know who you are and where you are going.

Now let's change the analogy a little. Instead of growing up in a wealthy community you grew up in a poor section of town. You were always in want and constantly looked out for yourself. You were driven by the desire to succeed, be comfortable, and find acceptance. The surroundings and environment in the faraway land in which you are working are very similar to how you grew up. How then would you live? I can image that you would live very similar to how you grew up – without a strong, secure core identity.

Then one day you received a letter from an uncle informing you that your parents had died penniless, but this uncle was very wealthy and generous. The letter informed you that your generous uncle was going to take you in as his own and that when you came home you would live with him in luxury. How would that change the way you lived in the present situation in a faraway land? I can imagine that despite the news it would be difficult to immediately change your perception of yourself and how you conducted yourself in the world.

This is not a perfect analogy. But the drastic change in the young person's identity might be similar to what happens to us when we believe in Jesus. Even though our fortunes change for the good, it is not easy to make this paradigm shift and live accordingly. But, we have to get this right or nothing else we do will be effective. We will live by religious rules, play the Christian game, and try to fit into the church without living interiorly with a new identity.

Living in Christ begins by growing in an understanding and appropriation of our new core identity as a result of dying and rising with Christ. For most of us this takes time and is a big part of our spiritual journey. Early in life our identity is formed by our family and environment. Life is very structured through our school years. But when we start living on our own and begin to realize that life doesn't turn out the way we imagined, the time is ripe to claim our new identity. We think that going to the right school, finding a person to marry, and having a good and enjoyable job are the most important things for us to accomplish. But they aren't. The most important thing is claiming our new identity in Christ.

### Exhortations for Living in Christ

Now, based on the fact that we have been raised with Christ and have a new core identity, Paul gives two exhortations. The first

is to “seek the things that are above.” This is “a reference to the orientation of man's will, which can be directed to unprofitable aims (Romans 10:3, 1 Corinthians 1:22) or to worthwhile ends (Romans 2:7).”<sup>1</sup>

“Above” refers to the heavenly realm where Christ currently resides, seated at the right hand of God. The right hand is symbolic of honor and glory. Paul is referring to Christ's ascension, enthronement, and sovereign rule. This is probably an allusion to Psalm 110:

**The LORD says to my Lord:**

**“Sit at my right hand,**

**until I make your enemies your footstool.” (Psalms 110:1)**

Psalm 110 was a regular part of early preaching and is alluded to or quoted 33 times in the New Testament. Christ has been enthroned in the heavens and will continue to rule until all his enemies have been submitted to him.

The second exhortation is similar: “set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.” To set your mind means to think, judge, give one's mind to. Setting your mind indicates a way of thinking and implies that the way one thinks is related to how one lives. Setting your mind also has to do with the will, with the aims and motives that underlie your actions. The rules and rigid asceticism espoused by the false teachers in Colossae involved the body, but not the mind.

Twice Paul uses the phrase “the things above.” The things above are in contrast to the things of the earth. Earth is the old order, the fallen creation, the sphere of sin and death that is fading away. “Above” is the new order where Christ is enthroned. While we live physically in the old order, we seek and set our minds on the things above. We occupy our mind not on the flesh but on the Spirit.

What are the things of earth? For the Colossians it might refer to the false teachers and their preoccupation with rules, the body, traditions, and visionary experiences. Many things associated with religion are man-made and are of the earth.

But other examples of things of the earth come quickly to our minds. Setting our minds on the things of the earth means to focus on selfish interests rather than the interests of others. It means to occupy our mind with riches, status, power, achievements, and pleasure, all as ends in themselves. It means to seek gratification for our fleshly desires and would include pornography and sexual fantasy. Things of the earth might also include video games, Internet surfing, and television if they possess your mind and your time. James defines the wisdom from the earth as “jealousy and selfish ambition” that results in “disorder and every vile practice” (James 3:14-16).

I don't mean to imply that we ought never think about food or doing something fun. I am talking about obsessing and having our minds preoccupied solely with the things of the earth, things that move us away from God.

What are the things above? These would be the things that are essential, eternal, and transcendent; the things of the kingdom of God, God's will instead of our own will, and God's glory instead

of our own glory; and the things that God himself thinks about – salvation, redemption, love, grace, and forgiveness.

James says: “the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere” (James 3:17). To seek the things above means to cultivate character and relationship with God; to occupy our minds with truth through spiritual reading, sacred music, and authentic fellowship; and to seek activities and relationships that are healthy, uplifting, and draw us to God. Jesus told Nicodemus that one had to be born again (or literally, born from above) to see the kingdom of God (John 3:3). If we are born from above then we occupy ourselves with the things above.

Again, I am not saying that you always have to be thinking or doing something serious and purposeful and can never have fun. But even in fun, even when you are watching a movie or hanging out with friends or playing golf, you are seeking to live in the sphere where Christ is enthroned. We live here on earth consistent with how we will live for all eternity. We don’t wait until we get to heaven to occupy our hearts and minds with heaven.

We are reminded of Jesus’ words to “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things (daily needs and concerns) will be added to you” (Matthew 6:33).

In John 1, two of John the Baptist’s disciples are following Jesus. Jesus turns around and asks them, “What are you seeking?” (John 1:37-38) That is always a worthwhile question for all of us to contemplate daily. What are we seeking? What are we setting our minds on? What are we looking for? Are my thoughts consistent with the things above?

### Motivation for Living in Christ (3-4)

So, why the things above and not the things of earth?

Paul mentions two motivating reasons in verse 3 and 4. The first reason is based on the fact that we are with Christ at this very moment: “For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” This is my favorite verse in Colossians.

In 2:20 Paul said: “with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world.” Now he says it again and implies that we died to the things of the earth. Here again we see that being united with the death of Christ changes everything. In some mysterious way when Christ died on the cross we were there with him dying as well. Our earthly nature, the person that was born into this world, has passed away. God had a funeral. That person no longer exists. Our relationship to the world and to our flesh has been severed and no longer has control over our lives. Therefore Paul will go on to say in verse 5 that we are to put to death any earthly part that remains in us.

As a result of dying with Christ, we are joined together with Christ in his resurrection and ascension. As Paul says in Ephesians 2, we are seated with him in the heavenly places (Ephesians 2:6). Here Paul says that our life is hidden with Christ in God. Notice that Paul doesn’t say your body is hidden with Christ, but rather your life is hidden with Christ. The essential, eternal, transcendent you is right now with Christ in God. Paul uses a perfect tense here, meaning that it has happened in the past when you died and it has ongoing and permanent effects.

This life is hidden, meaning that it is invisible – hidden to others and in some measure is hidden to us. This life is also in God, meaning that it is not earthly or material. We are in God “because Christ himself has his being in God and those who belong to Christ have their being there too... The life of a believer is already a heavenly life”.<sup>2</sup>

The second reason for living in Christ is based on the future: “When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory” (verse 4). The word “appear” means to reveal or make known. It refers to the second coming of Christ and is a contrast to “hidden.” At this moment Christ is hidden in the heavens but there will be a day when he will become visible. When that happens the hidden life of believers will also be revealed. Those who are in God will be in glory, the glory that is Christ’s by right and ours by grace. We will share in Christ’s likeness and be clothed with our resurrection body. We note that not only is our life hidden with Christ, but Christ is our life. Clearly the focus of these four verses is on Christ, who is mentioned four times.

Presently our life is hidden with Christ in God. In the future we will appear with Christ in glory. We are the person living in a faraway land receiving a letter informing us of a drastic change in fortunes. We have received a new core identity and we look forward to a future of eternal bliss. This mindset reorients all of our thinking. We live now much differently than we did before. We seek the things above, set our minds on the things above because even though we are physically on earth, our life is hidden with Christ in God.

At this point you might ask, “If my life is hidden safe and secure in Christ and my future is certain, then why not do what I want here on earth?” The short answer is you can’t. God won’t let you. He cares too much about you. Like Liam Neeson’s character in the movie “Taken”, God has a particular set of skills acquired over a long period of time. He will find you. He will humble you. He will make you his own. So avoid the pain and don’t try it. Life is hard enough as it is.

George Herbert wrote a beautiful poem based on Colossians 3:3 in which he reflects on the double life we now live – our earthly life and our heavenly life.

My words and thoughts do both express this notion,  
That **Life** hath with the sun a double motion  
The first **Is** straight, and our diurnal friend,  
The other **Hid**, and doth obliquely bend.  
One life is wrapt **In** flesh, and tends to earth.  
The other winds towards **Him**, whose happy birth  
Taught me to live here so, **That** still one eye  
Should aim and shoot at that which **Is** on high:  
Quitting with daily labor all **My** pleasure,  
To gain at harvest an eternal **Treasure**.

George Herbert (1593–1633)

The sun appears to have a double motion. One is diurnal, i.e. daily: the sun rising in the east and setting in the west. The other is annual, and “obliquely bends” in an elliptical pattern. This movement is hidden. Christ himself experienced a double motion. He came to earth as a human being but was raised to heaven in his resurrection and ascension.

This double motion is also true of us. We have a life that is “wrapt in flesh, and tends to earth”, and another life that “winds towards Him.” The motion of one life is visible while the other is hidden. We don’t always recognize the movements of God in our life and how he is working in the world. But we continue to aim at the things above.

The poem’s beauty appears in an extended line running diagonally through the poem: “My Life Is Hid In Him That Is My Treasure.”

Again, the words of Jesus come to mind:

**Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:19–21)**

When David anticipated his son Solomon building the temple, he said to the leaders of Israel:

**Now set your mind and heart to seek the LORD your God. Arise and build the sanctuary of the LORD God, so that the ark of the covenant of the LORD and the holy vessels of God may be brought into a house built for the name of the LORD. (1 Chronicles 22:19)**

The sanctuary now is in our hearts and as we set our minds to seek the Lord, our life becomes a place for the name of the Lord.

1. Peter O’Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, (WBC; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 160.

2. O’Brien, 166

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