



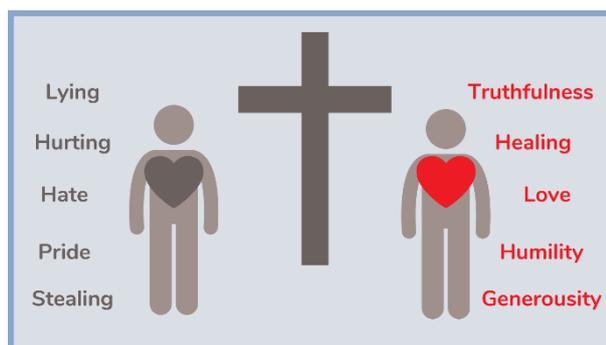
## SEEK THE THINGS ABOVE

(Colossians 3:1-4; Psalm 110) Becky Douglass

You may have noticed that the graphic for the series has changed. When we started, it featured a 'growing' theme to reflect Paul's discussion, particularly in his prayer for the Colossians, on their need to grow in Christ. After laying this foundation, Paul now shifts his focus slightly to looking at how they are to live out their new life in Christ. He wants to help them think about what difference their new life in Christ should make to their everyday lives.

### The Context

This discussion will constantly refer back to Paul's discussion in Chapter 2 about their death and resurrection with Christ. There he has told them that "*you were buried with Christ ... and with him you were raised to new life*". (2:12) You will remember that Paul showed us that out union with Christ in His death and



resurrection took care of two problems, it cut away our old sinful nature, our sinful heart and took away the guilt from our sinful acts. Now we have a new heart, empowered by the life of Christ to choose to do good things and grow in righteousness.

But last week we saw that Paul was concerned about something. He wanted to make sure that they weren't led astray by people who would try to get them to seek the life of Christ and righteousness through merely human means. These people thought that the death and resurrection of Christ was OK initially, but then you had to add in other things, human practices and rituals and self-denial, to help you live righteously. Paul said very strongly that these things were not from God, but actually were Satan's efforts to trap us once again into trying to be good without Christ. But not only that, they didn't work! He said, "*You have died with Christ and he has set you free from the spiritual powers of this world.*" (2:20) Christ has taken care of the root of the problem, our sinful heart. Everything has been done. All these other things only take you away from Christ and complete dependence on Him.

Now, as we move into chapter 3, he will focus on helping the Colossians – and us! – understand how this all works out in our daily lives. He does this first of all by showing How

our resurrection with Christ has changed our perspective and where our focus should be. He says, “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above...”. (3:1)

## **The Command**

There are two things to notice at the beginning. Firstly, being raised with Christ is not something we do, but something which is done to us. As we turn to Christ and put our faith in Him, He does the work of uniting us to Himself and His death and resurrection. It is not something that we can do through pious practices or self-effort. We are merely the recipients of His work in our lives. However, that doesn't mean that we have no role to play. After Paul talks about what God has done, He tells us how we must respond to that work. We are to reorient our thinking, and our whole lives, to our new position in Christ.

Paul gives this command twice. We are to “seek the things that are above” and we are to “set our minds on things that are above”. Both of these are strong words. ‘Seek’ means to ‘devote serious effort to attain’ something. To ‘set your minds on’ means to ‘develop a new habit of the mind’ or to ‘reorient the will’. We need to realise that our new status in Christ means a total change in our ways of thinking and acting. Our previous ways of thinking and acting were based on our old sinful heart and its desires and we were heavily influenced by the world around us which is bent against God. That is not who we are any more and our new status will bring change in us.

Imagine what would it be like if you had grown up as a refugee, living on the move, with never enough food to eat and always in fear of attack and death. This would strongly influence your view of the world, wouldn't it? Now imagine that you finally arrive in a country which welcomes you and gives you a safe place to live. That you now have a good job and sufficient food to eat and the prospect of a good and secure life. That would be wonderful, wouldn't it? But your old way of life would still influence the way you live. You might tend to hoard food because all your life you were never certain if you would have enough food tomorrow. You might not trust people, because all your life, people have sought to kill you. You might not know how to live in a house and take care of it because you have never had more than a temporary shack to live in. It will take time for you to relax and trust your new life and to know how to live in it. Your old life as a refugee has shaped your thinking and you need to ‘set your mind’ on the new realities of your life, changing your mental and physical habits and reorienting your thinking to your new identity and life.

In a sense, that is the position we are in as Christians. Paul is telling them that although Christ has done everything necessary to change who they are and where they are headed, now they must begin the process of changing their thinking and actions to be in line with their new identity in Christ.

## **The Cause**

We're going to come back to this thought at the end and look more at verse 2, but now I want to look at what Paul has to say in verses 3 and 4 where he talks some more about what has happened to us and why we need to reorient our thinking. Why should we seek the things above?

- Christ's Position

Paul says that we should set our minds of things above because that is “*where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.*” (3:1) This description of Christ probably came from Psalm

110:1 which we read this morning. Christ applied this verse to himself and several of the other writers of the New Testament also used it to describe Christ's position in the heavenlies.

In the ritual of kings, Caesars and other rulers in Paul's day, being seated at the right hand of the ruler was a position of power and favour and honour. And usually only the king, queen and maybe their most trusted advisor ever sat in the presence of the king. Everyone else stood in respect. Scott and I have been watching "The Hollow Crown" on ABC which is an adaptation of Shakespeare's historical plays about the kings of England. We've seen there a similar culture around royalty and that the English certainly understand about using ceremony to put people in their place!

It is a bit difficult for us to understand the full force of this description because we live in a very different situation. The closest we come is the analysis the press sometimes makes of who is with the Prime Minister or Premier when they have a press conference. Sometimes a person's absence is a signal that they have fallen from favour or are under a cloud of some kind.

Being seated is also a signal of victory. In Psalm 110:1 we read, "*The LORD said to my Lord, 'Sit in the place of honour at my right hand until I humble your enemies, making them a footstool under our feet'*". As we read earlier in Colossians, "*He (God) disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him (Christ)*". (2:5) We have seen Paul comment on Christ's victory over Satan and his plans several times. It is a part of salvation which isn't talked as much about today. We tend to focus on our personal sin and guilt being taken care of on the cross. As we read the rest of Psalm 110, we may struggle with the imagery of war and aggression, but we need to realise that until Christ sets us free, we are in bondage to Satan and his rule and it is only through Christ's defeat of him that we are free. Christ isn't a greedy tyrant seeking more territory for himself, he did it to liberate us from sin and give us a chance to choose life and peace in Him. The Psalm conveys this briefly by stating that Jesus is not only a victorious warrior, but also a priest – one who stands between God and humanity to bring them together. Paul is reminding us that Christ's death and resurrection accomplished two things - forgiveness for our sins and a cosmic victory over Satan.

So, Christ being seated in at the right hand of God reaffirms His acceptance by God and His supremacy over everything. It also proclaims and the completeness of His work of salvation and His victory over Satan. It is this on which we need to set our minds. It is this reality which has changed everything.

- Our Position

But there is more! Paul goes on to say, "*For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God*". (3:3) Not only do we need to realise that Christ is seated in heaven, but that because of our union with Christ, we are seated there as well! This verse talks about our present reality as children of God in Christ. We have died to our former life and it has no more power over us. We have an unbreakable bond with Christ which lifts us into a new reality. We are also "*hidden with Christ in God*". This speaks of a position of safety and security. Satan is on the outside and we are within the safety of God's love and power. This is our position now.

However, our position in Christ is currently hidden in another sense. It is not fully apparent to us and the world just as Christ's full victory over Satan and sin is hidden. It is real, but not yet revealed in all its glory. However, *"when Christ (who is your life) is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory"*. (3:4) I think the word 'revealed' as used in some translations captures the contrast best. Christ's present victory and reign over all is currently hidden until God chooses to reveal it. Our live in Christ is real but hidden in the present, but it too will be revealed with Christ when He is revealed. Our future is as great and as certain as Christ's future. Not because we are great, but because we are Christ's and He has made us His own precious people. John also comments on this reality in his first letter:

*"Dear friends, we are already God's children, but he has not yet shown us what we will be like when Christ appears. But we do know that we will be like him, for we will see him as he really is. And all who have this eager expectation will keep themselves pure, just as he is pure."* (John 3:2,3)

We will share in His glory by being like Him in ways we can't even imagine now. But John says this future hope, should affect our lives now. Our hidden reality in Christ above should impact our visible reality here on earth now. That is what we really are and our response to this must be to increasingly align our current lives with this reality. This takes us back to the verse we skipped over earlier.

### **The Contrast**

Paul tells the Colossians to *"Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth"*. (3:2) Paul sets up a contrast between *"things that are above"* and *"things that are on earth"*. I think it is helpful to look at this a bit because I know I have made some assumptions in the past about what this means that have not been helpful.

I think that in Christian circles we have tended to think that 'things on the earth' is to be equated with 'physical' and that 'things that are above' are spiritual things. This can lead people to think that our physical lives are of secondary importance to our spiritual lives. We can come to think that Christian ministry is more important than regular work, or even family life. We think that an ideal Christian will withdraw from everyday life and focus only on their relationship with God – like monks and nuns. That there is something suspicious about enjoying life here on earth too much. That to *"seek the things above"* means to distance ourselves as much as possible from the physical.

This is similar to many other religions and philosophies. They propose that our physical lives are of secondary importance to our spiritual lives. They believe that that humanity's goal is to somehow transcend this reality and live above the physical, focusing only on the spiritual. Their goal is to move towards pure spirit.

After studying this a bit, I don't think that Paul is here saying that our life here on earth has no value. Nor is he saying that our material world is bad in itself. God made this world and blessed it and said that it was good. He made us to live in this world and Genesis 1 and 2 paint a picture of humanity playing a vital and important role in the world as God's representatives and caretakers of His world. The Bible never says that the physical life that we lead is of secondary value to our spiritual life.

I believe the Biblical picture is that our physical and spiritual realities always have been and always will be entwined. Both were created by God as good. Even after we die, we will rise again in physical bodies, not as some kind of pure spirit as some religions believe. However,

the Bible also says that both our bodies and our spirits have been corrupted by sin and are under bondage to Satan to do his will and not God's will. They are "earthly" because they are no longer in communion with God but with all that is against God.

Another passage might help us to see this contrast. James is talking with his readers about two different sources of wisdom. He details the relational discord that is happening in their midst and says about its source:

*"This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic ... But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere."* (James 3:15,17)

What makes the wisdom earthly is that its source is not God but rather sinful humans influenced by Satan. It results in destroyed relationships instead of the unity and love that comes from following God's wisdom.

Rather than calling people to leave this world behind, I think Paul has something even more radical in mind. In Paul's system, "*the things above*" are the values and practices which come from God and "*the things of earth*" are the values and practices of all that are in opposition to God. I think that he is saying that with our minds full of the reign of Christ and the reality of our position in Him, we are in fact, to seek to bring heaven to earth. Our union with Christ will renew our minds and reorient our values. We will look at life through the eyes of Christ and not of Satan who only seeks to kill and destroy. This new perspective will radically change how we live. As we re-focus our lives on the reality of our death and resurrection with Christ, we can begin to really live in this physical world as God intended humanity to live in it. In the rest of chapter 3, Paul will develop this idea, culminating in the final verses where he paints a picture of transformed relationships which are shot through with the love of God that values everyone and gives everyone a vital place in his world.

But all this doesn't just happen. It takes us to realise the change which needs to happen and be willing to open ourselves to God's work in our lives to transform us in the way that we think and the way that we naturally, automatically live. All of us are more broken than we realise. All of our thinking has been warped by the sin in our hearts and in the hearts of all around us. But there is hope! God is in the business of healing broken hearts and restoring warped lives. There can be real and substantial change in our lives now that can have a real and substantial impact on our world. That is why we are here. And one day, when Christ is revealed, we will be revealed with Him and share in His glory!