

Risen with Christ

Text:

Colossians 3:1-4

“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.”

Introduction:

In the previous passage we were warned against false spiritualities. Paul now moves to an exposition of true spirituality in chapter 3, and in today’s text he lays the foundation. The rest of the teaching of this epistle will be a development of the thesis laid down in these four verses. The entire passage is of central importance for it is an exposition of the true Christian life. If you have ever asked yourself the question: “what does it mean to live the Christian life?” then this passage merits your careful attention. In it Paul sets forth in systematic fashion the answer to that question. He has told us what it is not in the previous passage. He will now tell us what it is.

Paul had a very clear idea of what it meant to live in Christ. This is not the only passage where he speaks of the truths of which he speaks in this passage. In our study of this section of the book we will let him be his own interpreter by seeking to understand what he is saying in light of what he says elsewhere in his other letters. His teaching is consistent. We can summarize it as follows:

- To know Christ is to be indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and to have new life
- This new life is the basis of the Christian life, but it must be cultivated
- Although we have new life in Christ we have not yet been completely delivered from the old life so we must consciously put off all that is sinful and pertains to the old life
- We must at the same time consciously put on the virtues that pertain to the new life, the life of Christ

- The new life especially manifests itself in the way we relate to others because ultimately it is a life of love since God is love, Christ came to manifest God's love, and it is the life of Christ that is being formed in us

These are the principles we will be learning in our study of the remainder of this book. They are foundational to the Christian life and to true spirituality. If we learn them and learn how to implement them into our lives, both individually and collectively as a church, we will reap a rich spiritual harvest. If we neglect them we will do so to our own peril. There is no other way. This is God's ordained way of life, the only way that can lead us into God's blessing.

As we look at the thesis that Paul establishes in these four verses we first observe the centrality of Jesus Christ. In four verses he is mentioned three times. Everything Paul says is related to our identification with him: we died with him, we arose with him, our life is presently hid with him, and we will one day be revealed with him. Paul does not budge from the central theme of the letter and of his life; "God has made all the fullness of the godhead to dwell in him bodily, and, in him are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge". All God has for us as Christians is communicated to us through our relationship with his Son, Jesus Christ. Any teaching about the Christian life that does not give a central place to Christ is to be rejected.

A closer look at the text indicates that it contains a basic exhortation stated in two slightly different ways: "seek those things which are above"; "set your mind on those things which are above", and a triple reason for the exhortation. The three reasons concern a past act; we died and rose again with Christ, a present reality; our life is presently hid with God in Christ, and a future hope; When Christ who is our life shall be revealed, we shall be revealed with him. Let us now examine the text in this order.

I. The Exhortation

We should begin by stating that the "if" at the beginning of the passage is not conditional. Paul addresses these believers as if they really have been raised to new life in Christ. This is the reason the NIV translates it correctly as "since". All who are in Christ, all who have confessed him as savior have received new life. Paul is no doubt reminding them of their baptism. He is saying to them: "remember that when you came up out of the baptismal water Christ was signifying to you in this act that you have been spiritually resurrected." Now he says that this new life, this spiritual life that we receive in Christ, causes us to have new desires that we no longer seek the things that we sought before. He says that we should be seeking the things which are above, not the things that are on the earth.

The first thing we need to do with this exhortation is to fix in our minds a clear image of what he means by “things above”. Jesus said something very similar in Matthew 6:31-33: “Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.” What Jesus calls the “kingdom of God”, Paul calls the “things above”. We might call them the things of God. Jesus particularly puts them in contrast with the normal cares of life, food, shelter, and clothing. He says: “don’t be preoccupied with these things. I will take care of them”. Paul sheds light on what he means by “things above” in II Corinthians 4:14-18 where instead of calling them “things above”, and “things below”, he calls them “seen” and “unseen” things. Here is what he says:

“ Knowing that he which raised up the Lord Jesus shall raise up us also by Jesus, and shall present *us* with you. For all things *are* for your sakes, that the abundant grace might through the thanksgiving of many redound to the glory of God. For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward *man* is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding *and* eternal weight of glory; While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen *are* temporal; but the things which are not seen *are* eternal.”

Now the distinction he makes between the “seen” and the “unseen” is that the “seen is temporal” and the “unseen” is eternal. Remember what he said in last week’s text about the spiritual practices of the false teachers; that they are concerned with things that perish in the using. Paul is concerned with the eternal. What is eternal? Of all that I am going to deal with today, what will endure for all eternity, and what will perish? This is the question that we must ask ourselves. When we think about it the only thing that is eternal is what we often refer to as souls. What we mean by “souls” in this case is the eternal part of human beings. There is something about me, and about all those people around me that will survive eternally. Furthermore, the degree to which I grow spiritually in this life will be carried over into my eternal existence. Therefore, to seek the things which are above is to seek God’s glory which will be to the good of my own soul and the souls of those around me.

Before moving to the reason for the exhortation, there is one more thing in the exhortation worth pointing out. Paul states the same exhortation with two different verbs. The first is “seek”, the second “set your mind on.” I would make two observations here. First, we will seek what we set our minds on, and secondly what we set our minds on is a choice. We must make a deliberate effort to focus our attention on the right things. This will involve the kinds of activities with which we occupy our free time, but we will never have control of our lives until we have control of our thoughts. Doing the right thing will be preceded by thinking the right thing. This is the reason Paul exhorted the Philippians: “Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things *are* honest, whatsoever things *are* just, whatsoever things *are* pure, whatsoever things *are* lovely, whatsoever things *are* of good report; if *there be* any virtue, and if *there be* any praise, think on these things” (Philippians 4:8).

II. The Reasons for the Exhortation

The global reason for this command is our relationship with Christ. When we examine the text closely we see that that relationship affects our past, our present, and our future. In the past, Paul says, we died with Christ, and we have been raised with him. We have new life. We belong to a new world. This new life in Christ is always the starting point. In II Corinthians 5:17 he says: "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creation. Old things have passed away, behold all things have become new." In Romans 6:1 he asks the question: "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?" He then answers in verse 2-4: "God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein? Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life."

The second reason why we should "walk in newness of life", and "seek those things which are above", and have our sight fixed on the "things which are eternal" is that presently "our life is hidden with God in Christ." I must confess that this passage puzzled me for many years. What does Paul mean that our life is hidden with God in Christ. One thing is sure in this passage; our life is already, in one sense, in heaven, because it is "hidden with God in Christ", and Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Many have seen in this, and rightfully so, a great assurance. They see it as parallel to what Peter says in I Peter 1:3-5: Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." While there is truth in this and we can draw comfort from the passage, I think Paul is making another point. J. A. Bengel explained it this way: "The world knows neither Christ nor Christians, and Christians do not even fully know themselves." It is what Paul is getting at in the passage we previously quoted from II Corinthians 4:17 when he says that "our light affliction which is but for a moment, works for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory." He hints at it also at the end of I Corinthians 13 when he says: "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known." It is John, however, who sheds the most light on it when he says: "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not. "Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is" (I John 3:1-2).

The second reason is to be understood in light of the third: our future hope. "Hidden", in verse 3, stands in opposition to "revealed" in verse 4. For the moment we cannot fully know the

glory that awaits us, but if we could, it would transform our lives. So we must accept that glory by faith and let it motivate us to keep our attention focused things eternal.

What Paul is telling us here is that we cannot fully appreciate how glorious our lives are in Christ. We must, to some degree, accept it by faith, but if we can just get a little glimpse of our coming glory that is already a present reality with Christ in heaven, but presently hidden from us then certainly our attention would be focused, not on the present suffering, but on the coming glory. C. S. Lewis was making this point when he wrote in *The Weight of Glory*:

“It may be possible for each to think too much of his own potential glory hereafter; it is hardly possible for him to think too often or too deeply about that of his neighbor. The load, or weight, or burden of my neighbor’s glory should be laid daily on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken. It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature, which if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or the other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts civilization—these are mortal, and their lives are to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors. This does not mean that we are to be perpetually solemn. We must play. But our merriment must be of that kind (and it is, in fact, the merriest kind) which exists between people who have, from the outset, take each other seriously—no flippancy, no superiority, no presumption, and our charity must be a real and costly love, with deep feeling for the sins in spite of which we love the sinner—no mere tolerance or indulgence which parodies love as flippancy parodies merriment. . .” (p. 14-15).