

The Risen Life is Oriented to the Exalted Christ

Colossians 3:1-4

In 1845, the ill-fated Franklin Expedition sailed from England to find a passage across the Arctic Ocean. The crew loaded their 2 sailing ships with a lot of things they did not need: a 1,200 volume library, fine china, crystal goblets, and sterling silverware for each officer with his initials engraved on the handles. Amazingly, each ship took only a 12 day supply of coal for their auxiliary steam engines. The ships became trapped in vast frozen plains of ice. After several months, Lord Franklin died. The men decided to trek to safety in small groups, but none of them survived.

One story is especially heartbreaking. Two officers pulled a large sled for more than 65 miles across the treacherous ice. When rescuers found their bodies, they discovered that the sled was filled with the expensive table silver. Those men contributed to their own demise by carrying what they did not need. They were not rightly oriented. But don't we sometimes do the same? Don't we drag baggage through life we do not need? Evil thoughts hinder us. Bad habits drag us down. Grudges we will not let go.

We could summarize the text today as Paul advising us, "**Keep your orientation clear and focus up on the risen Christ.**" When followers of Jesus know who they are, which side is up, their core values, and where they are headed, they are not nearly as vulnerable to the side attractions & not so likely to take wrong roads.

The Apostle Paul knew the people in Colossae were facing many religious and philosophical options, none of which were neutral. Notice, Paul does not say, "Just add Jesus to what you already believe." Nor does he say, "Include Jesus in this or that ritual." The claim, "Jesus is Lord," does not allow that. If Jesus is Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer of all creation, than all other teachings must give way. All people must bow before Him and only to Him. There simply is no middle ground and no other options. In refuting heresy, no wiggle room is allowed.

These four verses are a bridge, a connector between chapters 1 & 2 and the rest of the book of Colossians, chapter 3 & 4. They move us into the ethical sections. Plus we keep hearing imperative, authoritative, and vital language. Examples in Colossians include, "be holy, be reconciled, kill your earthly impulses, set your mind on heaven above" and so on.

Two imperatives set the direction and tone of these 4 verses. The first is seek. Seeing has to do with the orientation of our will. Visualize a compass needle seeking the magnetic pole. Seeking does not have to do with hunting God, because the Almighty is not lost! Instead, it has to do with our aims, ambitions, desires and perspectives. Seeking is not just investigating, it is learning, maturing and obtaining wisdom.

The other imperative is, set your minds on Jesus. The King James conveys what this means by saying, "set your *affections* on things above." The Common English Bible says, "*look* for the things that are above." To keep thinking about, to concentrate on, to be disposed toward – these convey the meaning and support the overall theme of orientation – of what we are to seek and what we prioritize. Paul uses the same imperative in Philippians 2:5 to focus our attitudes our of which our right behavior springs. "Your *attitude* should be the same as that of Jesus Christ."

Jesus' Resurrection is regarded in the Bible in three ways. **First**, as a fact establishing our Lord's messiahship. **Second**, as a prophecy of the believer's rising from the dead. And **third**, as an enabling for the Christian life here and now. This last aspect is the one taught in these verses. Scripture teaches that the believer is so joined with Jesus that we have died and risen with Him. So let's dive into this passage.

We find here a series of practical admonitions & encouragement, directing believers on how to live a life that is so heavenly minded, that it will be of earthy good. In Colossians, Paul has already set forth the superiority of Jesus Christ over creation, religion, philosophy and the church, in the first two chapters. He has also

given specific warning about the doctrines of the false teachers, the failure of mysticism, worldly philosophy, asceticism, ritualism, angels and legalism to produce a godly life. As he summarized in Colossians 2:23, “These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, (but are) of no value against fleshly indulgence.”

This human wisdom fails in making a person right with God, and it also fails in controlling fleshly desire. Why? Because sin is a problem of the mind, heart and habits. Sin is not just outward behavior. Self-discipline may result in restricting, controlling, resisting sinful negative destructive behavior. But it cannot change the sinful heart. So sinful thoughts continue and we give into temptations. So Paul lays out the foundation for how to live a successful and fruitful life that is pleasing to the Lord. That shows in a risen life, exalting Christ Jesus.

These verses lay the foundation for successful Christian living by point out the consequences of being raised with Christ. In four short sentences, Jesus is referred to 5 times. Four by name and once as a personal pronoun. Because of this, we seek what is above where Jesus is; we think about what is above – set our minds on; we have our lives hidden with Him; and we will share in His future glory. Then the rest of chapter 3 gives us specific instructions on setting aside our old lives, (vs. 5-11); living according to Christian virtues (vs. 12-17); and having proper social relationships (vs. 3:18-4:1)

Paul starts, “Since you have been raised up with Christ.” The grammar here indicates this is a fact. The same grammar is used in Chapter 1, verse 20. It points out that since believers have died with Christ to the elemental things and spirits of this world, therefore they should not be submitting to the decrees of the false teachers. Paul explicitly states in several of his letters, that rules, rituals, and self-denial are not the best path of spiritual growth. Trying to grow, spiritually, through these efforts, including relating with ungodly spirits, is as impossible as a body part developing naturally

while severed from the head. Living under severe rules might look good to others, but it is not how the Almighty has called us to relate to our Creator as Jesus followers. So Paul argues that being raised up with Christ will have consequences in what we seek, what we think, our security, our future, and where we look.

Since we have identified with Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection, we are also raised up with Him. This is a repeated theme throughout Colossians, because it is the heart of the gospel. God delivers us from the domain of darkness and into the Kingdom of His beloved Son through the redemption and forgiveness of sins. (1:13-14). We have been reconciled to the Lord through the death of His fleshly body in order that we might be holy, blameless and beyond reproach before Him (1:22). Or as Colossians 2:12 states, “Having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you are also raised up with Him through your faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.”

Paul says this in his other letters like Romans 6:4. “We were therefore buried with Jesus through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father we too may live a new life.”

The early Christians regarded baptism as dying and rising again. It was common for the Greeks to speak of the dead as being “hidden from the earth.” But followers of Jesus have died a spiritual death in baptism and so are not hidden from the earth. This seems to be a term using a common cultural phrase of the time. Instead, we are hidden in Christ. The act of baptism is seen as wrapping the believer around Christ. We have been raised up with Christ, the person we used to be is crucified with Christ so that we are free from the bondage to sin, Satan & world. We are no longer our own masters. Instead, we are slaves to righteousness who do not love the world. We are raised up, identified with Jesus (2:13). Paul in 2 Corinthians 2:17 says it this way. “Therefore, if any person is in Christ, they are new creatures.”

So since we are raised up with Christ, the first thing Paul states in encouraging this trust is, “Keep seeing the things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.” This is not an option for the true follower of Jesus. This is an imperative, a command, not a suggestion. It is stated in the present tense meaning, it is an ongoing quest and not something done once in the past of something that will not occur until sometime in the future. This is the logical consequence of the radical change that occurred in you when you were regenerated by the holy Spirit to be alive in God. We have a completely different purpose in our existence now, than before conversion because we have a different relationship with our Creator.

We must remember, we are to seek, search, strive, investigate and pursue the things above. This is an active undertaking. It is not something that will happen if we do not change what we are currently seeking or passively waiting for someone to bring to us. If we do not change what we are seeking, we will simply default to live in pursuit of the same sinful goals we had before our profession of faith. We will not grow in our knowledge of God or our Creator’s will. And we will not bear fruit in godliness or service and witness to the Almighty.

Another translation of this phrase is, **set your mind on heaven above**. So a change of mind, repentance, must be accompanied by a change of direction, looking up, or there is not evidence of any actual change of mind. Our stated beliefs and faith must demonstrate that our thoughts, our minds, our efforts, our habits, are actively focused on heaven, on Jesus. Our lives must not show passiveness about this. Paul follows this thought up by saying, do not focus on what is down here, **stay focused on what is above, not earthly things**.

Why? Because our old life is dead and gone. Our value system, desires, goals, purposes and our efforts are not totally different from what the world things is important, since we are raised with Christ and set our minds above.

One example of this upside down thinking, among many teachings is, “Jesus taught, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon 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 or steal; for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” (Matthew 6:19-21)

There are many other heavenly mindset and action “rules” in the Bible. Love your enemies. Do not lust in your hearts. Turn your cheek. Be salt and light. Take care of the speck in your own eye. Watch out for false prophets and fake disciples. Be generous as your Father in heaven is. Do not worry. Take care of your neighbor. And so on. Paul is reminding us, of a whole host of heavenly focused rules. And he also reminds us about earthly rules we are not to do.

Paul keeps circling back to, look up – we have been raised with Christ, so seek the things above where Christ is, set your minds on thing above, not things on earth, because our old life is dead and gone. **For you have died, & your new life is hidden with Christ in God**. The Voice version says, “Our new lives are enmeshed with the Anointed One who is in God.”

We keep being reminded that our identification is with Jesus’ death. Our old selves have died and risen, with Jesus’ resurrection. Romans 6:6, simply puts it, “Your old self was crucified with Jesus.” What we were is dead, and now we have a life that is hidden with Christ in God.

The death and resurrection of Jesus for many people is just an objective fact concerning how the world was reconciled to God. We can not be too emphatic about this fact, but that is not the whole Gospel. The Gospel is intended to be personally received. It is intended to change lives. It is intended to become a living reality in the lives of those who believe, receive and look to Jesus as their life. It is the foundational principle for truly living the Christian life.

So we are to concentrate our concern on the eternal, not the temporal. “Fix your eyes not on

what is seen, but on what is unseen. “For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal,” Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:18.

Two examples might help us. In his classic spiritual allegory, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, John Bunyan paints a word picture of a man who only looked downward. This poor guy was on his knees in the dirt and filth, working constantly trying unearthen with a rake, some choice morsel that would enrich his life. Yet all the while a bright crown of immeasurable worth was within reach, just above him.

Bunyan summarizes the tragedy: “There stood One over his head with a celestial crown in His hand, and offered him that a crown for his muck rake; but the man never looked up as he continued to gather to himself the straw, the small sticks and the dust of the floor.”

Bunyan’s words remind us that the rewards of heaven will have no appeal unless we set our mind, “on things above, not on things on the earth.” We always have to remember that we are first and foremost citizens of heaven.

Although we who have trusted Christ as Savior, have to live here in this world, we should not cling to worldly philosophies or material things. Instead we must become so occupied with pleasing Him and working for the crowns of eternal rewards that we lose our preoccupation with digging in the dirt of this fleeting world. That’s what verse 4 tells us. **“On that day, the Anointed One, who is our very life, is revealed, you will be revealed with Him in glory.”** “When Christ your life shall appear, they you too shall appear with him in glory.”

What a promise! This is a reference to Jesus’ second coming since that is when He will appear in glory along with His saints who will then be in the resurrection bodies. The word revealed or appear here means to “make visible.” There is no time stated as to when this occurs. So we need to be sure we have died and are hidden and raised with Christ – now! And the reality is, our lives are visible to those around us – now. Are we in Christ or not!

The second illustration is: Your life is safe if it is in Christ. You can risk following Him for He is with you and He will watch out for you. British clergyman F. B. Meyer wrote about 2 tourists who wanted to climb the Matterhorn. They hired three guides and began the steep and treacherous ascent. They roped themselves together in this order: guide, traveler, guide, traveler, guide.

They had gone only a little way when the last man lost his footing. He was held up by the other four, because each had a toehold in the niches they had cut in the ice. But then the next man slipped and pulled down the two above him. The only one to hold on was the first guide, who had driven a spike deep into the ice. Because he held on, all the men below him regained their footing.

Meyer concluded his story by drawing a spiritual application to Christ. He said that He is like one of those men who slipped, but thank God, he is bound in a living union with Christ. “Because He stands secure, I will never perish.”

All of us slip again and again as we walk the Christian pathway. But we are held securely by the Lord, and we can be restored to close fellowship when we confess our sins (1 John 1:9). Yes, we are safe in Christ (Col. 3:3). We can have the confidence that Jesus will keep us and bring us to our final destination. Our salvation is secure. God is doing the holding.

You can see these 4 verses are loaded with life giving information. Paul is really making the point as to how central and important it is to not water Jesus down, and to keep looking up. A tweet offers this great summary. “No one gains the mindset of heaven passively. You seek it or you don’t have it.” So don’t just believe in the idea of God. Instead, let’s seek and set our minds on what is above, so we will be raised with Christ. May our lives be fully oriented to and on and in the exalted Christ – God’s only begotten Son. There is where we will find glory – with Christ Jesus. The risen life here on earth needs to be oriented up to and in the exalted Christ in heaven.