

# CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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**Series:** Exposition of Romans  
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## THE CALL TO HIGH-MINDEDNESS

The late John Lennon's song "Imagine" with its nihilistic lyric, "Above us only sky," is boldly displayed as the official slogan at the John Lennon International Airport in Liverpool, England. This has become the favorite hymn of sentimental, secular atheists everywhere.

"Imagine there's no heaven,  
It's easy if you try  
No hell below us  
Above us only sky"

Lennon is simply echoing the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) best known for his role in declaring that "God is dead." Nietzsche stated that belief in God impoverishes human lives. He further argued that belief in heaven after life here on earth reduces dignity and the value of human existence in the here and now. "That person is so heavenly-minded, he's no earthly good!" This expression is often used in reference to someone who appears to be so preoccupied with their religious devotion that they ignore and neglect their earthly responsibilities. Well, that could never have been said of the Apostle Paul, and it is not something that could be deduced from our text. When Paul draws a distinction between things above and the things of this earth, what he has in mind is the contrast between heaven and earth in an ethical sense. As in Philippians 3:19, the earth is viewed as a special theater of sin.<sup>1</sup> What does Paul mean when he exhorts his readers to *set your hearts and minds* on things above? How is this done? What does it mean to be *heavenly minded* in the Pauline sense?

### I. PAUL'S GREAT FUNDAMENTAL FACT

The Apostle begins the third chapter by assuming his readers' knowledge of this great theological truth: Christ died and rose again. Everything that follows is based on this. This is the exact same pattern that we see in Romans 12:1. Note how the Apostle deals with the great truth. It is a historical fact that Jesus Christ died on a Roman cross and that He was buried. Even non-Christian historical sources acknowledge this much.<sup>2</sup> The New Testament declares that He rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. Furthermore, the New Testament declares that Christ died for sinners and rose again for their justification. Notice how Paul handles this—if Christ died for our sins, He died to take them away. All those, for whose sins Christ died, died then with Him and they in turn died with Him to sin. These also rose with Him that they might live again to God. "And here now is the great fact in its fullness which Paul assumes and lays at the base of our present passage; the great fact of the participation of Christians in Christ's death and rising again."<sup>3</sup> Do you see Paul's point? Because Christians have died with Christ and have been raised to the newness of life, we have, in a very real sense, already passed from this earth to heaven. We are called, therefore to *manifest our resurrection* by actions that are suitable to our estate.

### II. PAUL'S GREAT EXHORTATION

Christians are called to live according to their new estate. They have passed out of the realm of sin and death, out of a merely earthly orientation, have been made a citizen of the heavenly Kingdom

and, therefore, live a life conformable to this great change. How do we do this?

A. Set Your Hearts on Things Above

The ESV better captures Paul's language, "Seek the things above." *ZETEO*, to seek, has particular reference to the orientation of the will. Paul puts it in the present tense and in the imperative mood (a direct command) to show that this is a continuous effort. Richard Sibbes describes the import of this word, "Seeking implieth, first, want; for a man will never seek for that which he hath; secondly, it implieth a *valuation and esteem of the excellency of the thing* that is sought for; thirdly, it implieth *hope to get it*, else none would seek it, but leave it as a thing desperate; fourthly, it doth imply *means and use of means* to attain to that we want, esteem of, and hope to attain; lastly, he that wants a thing which he doth highly esteem and hopes to attain in the use of the means, will by all means *avoid all contraries that may hinder him from attaining thereunto*."<sup>4</sup> The basic reason for seeking the things above is now stated—*that is where Christ is*, seated at God's right hand.<sup>5</sup>

B. Set Your Minds on Things Above

The verb used here is different (the NIV gives the impression that they are the same). *PHRONEITE* means to think, to give one's mind to, and is always a word that is of governing one's life. Thus, the word expresses not simply an activity of the intellect, but also a movement of the will and thus carries the connotation "to be of a disposition or mind-set." In other words, this word indicates whole bent of thought and is set forth elsewhere by Paul in Romans 8:5, 6. What are Christians to think about? The things above, i.e., the things that have to do with Christ and His Kingdom. It is a call to engage the mind with those theological truths that address our salvation. "If the heart be filled with the cross of Christ," observed John Owen, "it casts death and undesirableness upon [the things of this world]; it leaves no seeming beauty, no appeasing pleasure or comeliness in them."<sup>6</sup>

### III. PAUL'S GREAT MOTIVATION

You will note how this seeking and mind-set works itself out in vv. 5-17. The Apostle addresses motives for this heavenly walk (that is produced by a heavenly mindedness). These are drawn from the past, the present and the future.

A. Motive Drawn from the Past

"Since you were raised with Christ." It is a call to gratitude. It is a call to understand what has happened, to remember what the Lord Jesus has done for us.

B. Motive Drawn from the Present

"For Your life *is* hid with Christ in God." This is the *exalted* Christ Paul is speaking of, and believers share in His exaltation—therefore, walk worthy of such a privilege.

C. Motive Drawn from the Future

"When Christ, who is our life, *shall* be manifested, then *shall* we also with Him be manifested in glory." Therefore, do not grow weary or be disheartened. The day is coming when we will behold Him and we shall be like Him (cf. I John 3:2).

**CONCLUSION:** We must keep in mind that Paul's statements are true of all believers. The Bible knows nothing of two classes of Christians (the haves and the have-nots). All Christians are imperfect and all must contend with indwelling sin, but a believer in Christ should never be *discouraged*—the Christian ought to be humble, watchful and, even at times, fearful, but never despondent. Have we been brought to see our guilt before a Holy God and to readily accept Christ as our atoning sacrifice? Are we trusting only in Christ as our righteousness? Then we ought to *cultivate* our faith—which is another way of saying we should manifest our resurrection. This is the meaning of Paul's language when he exhorts believers to "put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge" (3:10). "To *put them on* therefore, is to put them forth; to elicit them; to draw them out from within, and exhibit them in daily life. They are all contained germinally in the regenerate mind, and the particular duty which is devolved upon the believer is that of training them."<sup>7</sup> This is what it means to be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

## **ENDNOTES**

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<sup>1</sup> This spatial contrast in Paul's writings is to be sharply distinguished from the dualistic cosmology being advocated by the Colossian philosophy that plagued the church at Colossae. "The contrast is not metaphysical in the sense that God belongs to the upper realm which is good because spiritual and has nothing to do with the lower realm which is evil because physical and material. Rather, what we see is the Old Testament concept of the two parts of created reality being taken up into Paul's eschatological perspective. Owing to Christ's exaltation, heaven highlights the superiority of the life of the new age, so that 'the above' becomes the source for the rule of Christ (3:1), for life (3:3), for the new man (3:10). The earth, on the other hand, has in this verse taken on the connotation of the sphere of sin and of the present evil age." A.T. Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 126

<sup>2</sup> Graeco-Roman sources include the ancient historians like Thallus and Tacitus. From Jewish sources we have the record of fifth-century Babylonian Talmud (b. Sanh. 43a) that states that Jesus was hung on the eve of Passover because he led Israel astray. The Jewish historian Josephus likewise recorded that Jesus was put to death under Pilate. Cf. Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (InterVarsity Press, 1987), pp. 196-202 and Gary Habermar and Antony Flew, *Did Jesus Rise From the Dead? The Resurrection Debate*, ed. T.L. Meithe (Harper & Row, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> B.B. Warfield, *Faith and Life* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1990), p. 351.

<sup>4</sup> *The Complete Works of Richard Sibbes* V (rpt. Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1863), pp. 199-200.

<sup>5</sup> The apostles were aware that they were using figurative language when they spoke of Christ's exaltation to the right hand of God. They no more thought of a literal throne at the literal right hand of God than we do. Ancient Jews and Gentiles alike commonly regarded the right side and a position at the right hand side as symbolic of honor or good fortune." P.T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon: Word biblical Commentary* (Word, 1982), pp. 162-163.

<sup>6</sup> *The Works of John Owen* VI (rpt. Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), p. 250.

<sup>7</sup> W.G.T. Shedd, *Sermons to The Spiritual Man* (rpt. Banner of Truth Trust, 1972), p. 311.