

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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| Series: | Scripture Memory | | Pastor/Teacher |
| Number: | 3 | | Gary L.W. Johnson |
| Text: | Colossians 3:1-4 | | |
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Heavenly Mindfulness

I will be devoting the first Sunday of the month to the Scripture memory passage for that month. (I will be catching up on the first two in due time!) Colossians 3:1-4 is a passage we have examined from time to time, but it is one of those texts that demands our attention. Alexander Maclaren, the great 19th century Scottish expositor wrote: “The fact that St. Paul should have felt justified in writing thus to inhabitants of Colossæ is a remarkable evidence of the power of Christianity to touch hearts and change lives. Colossæ, although no worse than the average contemporary city, can scarcely have been much better; and a few years before, it is tolerably certain, the notion of sending a communication of this kind to people of the place would have been a melancholy sarcasm. But all that had been changed. There were men and women in its streets and lanes now who had believed in Jesus Christ, and who possessed the peace and joy of reconciliation. Risen with Christ, they had the very springs of their being hid with Him in God. Once there had been no depths in their life; all had been shallow, specious, external, busy with affairs that mattered little, crowded with trifles, pathetically wasted in worthless ambition and fleeting pleasure. Then God called them, as He calls us, into a new domain, and their whole experience was re-created. In the barren wastes fountains of water were springing up; in wide ranges of unprofitable folly mines had been discovered that would yield the gold and gems of faith and hope and love. Once they were content with a poor, starveling, fortuitous morality; always untrustworthy, always unequal to a new or sudden strain, whereas now their stores of power and gladness in service were held high above the reach of sorrow and temptation, because treasured and guarded well by Christ in the unseen.”¹

In the preceding context, Paul has just explained our glorious and sufficient fullness in Christ due to representative union with Him, assuring us of forgiveness of sins, deliverance from the bondage of the Law, and triumph over the satanic hosts (cf. 2:6-15). The apostle has also warned against the erroneous rules and regulations in the teaching of the heretics (cf. 2:16-23). And so now in his letter to the saints in Colosse, to the fruitless exercise of the false philosophy Paul opposes the true exercises, or to childish rudiments of the world he counters with heavenly meditations. Against the false asceticism of the errorists, he pits the true Christian asceticism of seeking and setting our affection on the things above. Let's turn to Paul's counsel.

I. THE EXHORTATION TO THINGS ABOVE (Col. 3:1-2)

- A. The exhortation to seek (1). Paul's view of things is directly opposed to the modern view of things. The modern life is a secular life, engrossed in the fleshly, the material, the psychological, and occasionally the philosophical things. Entertainment and indulgence are glorified in the media – on the pages of the newspapers, on television, in the literature - and the church is not unaffected. Entertainment is the key to success in the religious world too, and evangelicals are not unaffected. In fact, evangelicals are in the van of the secularizing of our society, while all the time decrying it. David Wells, who has written extensively on the demise of evangelicalism, points out that “conformity is as much triumphant in modern evangelicalism as it is in American culture. In both spheres the power of the pollsters is extraordinary. Their ability to gauge the “norm” of belief and practice in a society that worships that norm has effectively conferred on them the power

to prescribe what *should be* believed and practiced. Because of our deep need to conform, we have in effect allowed pollsters to become our teachers and ethicists, our philosophers and theologians, the arbiters of what the church must model if it is to be accepted and to succeed. The pollsters provide only one of the many channels along which worldly values are mediated to the church, but we have granted them a special, virtually unassailable authority. Unlike the other channels of mass culture (e.g., television, the movies, rock music) that reflect our image back at us, that embody and pass along the values that we hold in common, the offerings of the pollsters carry the imprimatur of science, the validity of hard numbers and margins of error fixed to the decimal point. There was a time when American evangelicals prized and cultivated biblically chaste Christian thought and an incisive analysis of the culture from a perspective apart from it. But the past few decades have seen an erosion of the old distinctions, a gradual descent into the “self” movement, a psychologizing of faith, and an adaptation of Christian belief to a therapeutic culture. Distracted by the blandishments of modern culture, we have lost our focus on transcendent biblical truth. We have been beguiled by the efficiency of our culture’s technique and sheer effectiveness of its strategies, and we have begun to play by these rules. We now blithely speak of marketing the gospel like any other commodity, oblivious to the fact that such rhetoric betrays a vast intrusion of worldliness into the church.”² Paul followed in the steps of our Lord, who said, “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal” (Matt. 6:9-20). The exhortation to seek the things above begins with the conditional clause, “If ye then be risen with Christ.” The construction is such that the apostle does not doubt the fact that the believers have been raised with Christ. The “if” is that of the assumption of the reality of the statement, as is plain from verse 12 (cf. v. 20). The apostle, then, assumes their resurrection with Christ, and on the basis of it calls upon them to “seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God.” A person seeking after divine things is in itself remarkable, for elsewhere Paul says, “there is none that seeketh after God” (cf. Rom. 3:11). Here, however, he refers to a seeking believer, not a seeking unbeliever. This is the only human search for God, and it is divinely initiated and motivated (cf. Phil. 2:12-13). The great puritan theologian John Owen is instructive when he observes, “we have all grace and holiness from Christ, or we have it of ourselves. The old Pelagian fiction, that we have them from Christ because we have them by yielding obedience unto his doctrine, makes ourselves the only spring and author of them, and on that account [it was] very justly condemned by the church of old, not only as false, but as blasphemous. Whatever, therefore, is not thus derived, thus conveyed unto us, belongs not unto our sanctification or holiness, nor is of the same nature of kind with it.”³ The present tense in the verb, “seek,” indicates that this is to be a constant attitude. But what are the “things which are above?” Well, one thing we can say is this: They are things where Christ is at home, and where Christ is at work, or heavenly things. In this context, however, Paul had these three things in mind:

1. *First*, he wishes the Colossians to avoid the legalistic ceremonies and regulations of the Gnostic Judaizers, which forced them to grovel in earthly rules (cf. 2:16-23). The ceremonies, and the taboos, are dead!
2. And, *second*, he wanted the Colossians to avoid the earthly lusts, the fleshly, materialistic, and humanistic passions, to which he refers in the following verses (cf. 3:5-17).
3. And, *third*, he was urging the Colossians to pursue the paramount things, the things that get “top billing in heaven,” to use the terms of the day. The psalmist would put it this way, “As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God” (Psa. 42:1).

- B. The exhortation to set our minds on things above (2). Paul begins this section, as Bishop Lightfoot suggests, by saying, “You must not only seek heaven; you must also think heaven.”⁴ As Augustine said, the soul is not where it *lives* but where it *loves*. Heaven is to be the guide of life below. Thus, we are to accumulate possessions in heaven (cf. Matt. 6:20). We are to value popularity with heaven (cf. John 12:43; II Tim. 2:4). The pleasures of heaven may be enjoyed even in the here and now (cf. Psa. 16:11). And we are to rejoice in our status in heaven (cf. Luke 10:20) and look forward to the prize of heaven (cf. Phil. 3:13-14). Another of the old divines wrote, “Therefore, the Apostle would have us raise our minds to heaven, and perpetually have those things above at heart; neither that alone, but that we should ardently love those things, and fix our affection upon them. Unless we join these two, no one will prepare to seek heavenly things; for *there is no desire of a thing unknown*: it is, therefore, necessary to know, and frequently to revolve in mind, these heavenly things; for no one seeks that about which he thinks not: But neither is it sufficient to think, unless it is done with love and affection; for nothing is sought by us except that which is desired and loved. Bernard truly observed, *The understanding and the affection in men are sometimes opposed to each other, so that the one knows and approves the things which are above, although the other is found to desire the things on the earth*. When that happens, the mind is distracted and torn away, not excited to seek. Hence it is that Paul exhorts us not only to know, but to savour the things which are above.”⁵ Paul, of course, is not suggesting that temporal things are to have none of our attention, for that would be to say that we should have nothing to do with this life at all. If so, a person so heavenly absent-minded could never be involved in practical affairs at all. A Christian could not be a physician, a businessman, a mechanic, a chef, or even a husband, or wife, or an employer, of whom Paul speaks later.

II. THE FOUNDATION OF THE EXHORTATION (Col. 3:3)

- A. Our death is past (3). The apostle writes, “For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God.” The ground of this text is again the covenantal union, or the representative union, of the believers with Christ, their Head. With Him we have died (cf. 2:20).
- B. Our resurrection is past (1). As Paul states in verse 1, we have risen with Christ. That is our spiritual position (cf. Eph. 2:6). Our bodily resurrection shall take place at His coming again.
- C. Our future is assured (3). Paul writes, “your life is hid with Christ in God.” To have our life hidden “with Christ” and “in God” is, in the words of John Owen, “the principle of all power and operation. And the life here intended is that whereby we live to God, the life of grace and holiness; for the actings of it consist in the setting of our affections on heavenly things, and mortifying our members that are on the earth. This life Christ is. He is not so formerly; for if he were, then it would not be our life, but his only. He is, therefore, so efficiently, as that he is the immediate cause and author of it, and that as he is now with God in glory. Hence it is said that we live, that is, this life of God, yet so as that we live not of ourselves, but ‘Christ liveth in us,’ Gal. ii. 20. And he doth no otherwise live in us but by the communication of vital principles and power for vital acts; that is, grace and holiness from himself unto us. If he be our life, we have nothing that belongs thereunto – that is, nothing of grace or holiness – but what is derived unto us from him.”⁶ The clause suggests the thought of secrecy, for the secret springs of our life are hidden in God, from whom come all our aspirations, hopes, and enablings. The clause also suggests the thought of *identity*, for our ultimate relationship to God is known only by God, being hidden even from the view of the saints themselves. As the next verse (4) states, our heavenly life will be fully manifest in all its glory when Christ who embodies it appears at his Parousia. We too who share in his life will share his glorious epiphany. What is not secretly present shall be revealed when Christ shall appear.⁷

III. THE CULMINATION OF THE EXHORTATIONS (Col. 3:4)

- A. The manifestation of Christ (4). The hidden life, Paul says, has its future unveiling. The root of spiritual life is found in the cross, but its fruit includes participation in the coming of Christ. As Paul says, “When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory” (v. 4). The “Sitting One” shall come. The Greek text by its use of an indefinite conjunction, rendered by “when,” suggests no specific date for His coming, but it plainly states that He *will come*. Christ is called by Paul in verse 4, “our life.” He is that. He is our life in the sense that He stands for us as our Head, with His life given to us in regeneration, reckoned to us in justification, nourished in us by sanctification, and manifested at His coming in glorification.
- B. The manifestation of Christians (4). Two remarkable phrases are here, “with him” and “in glory.” In fact, “with him” – “in glory,” makes a good exposition of what heaven essentially is, to be with Him in glory. What a glorious hope we have!

CONCLUSION: True life, then, is found in seeking and setting our minds upon “things above,” the things concerning Christ as He is seen in the Word of God, and not in the reckless enthusiasm of the worldling for the fleshly and worldly things, nor in the shallowness of Christian occupation with so-called “healings,” “visions,” “prophecies,” and other sub-orthodox experiences. No Christian experience is genuine if it is not wedded to the words of Scripture. Cultivate the hidden life through the reading and studying of God’s Word, through communion with God in Christ through the Word and sacraments, and in obedient response by faithful and loving concern for the saints and the lost. I close by passing along these words of W. G. T. Shedd, one of the great Reformed theologians of the 19th century, “Suppose that every professing Christian should devote himself with an equal assiduity, to the training of his own soul in divine knowledge and piety. Suppose that, like the scholar, he should make business and pleasure second and subservient to the one ruling principle of his mind and heart. Would not that principle—and he has professed before angels and men, that it is the principle of faith in Christ’s blood—be as powerfully stimulated, and as vigorously elicited, as is the principle of literary ambition in the ardent and toiling student?”⁸

ENDNOTES

¹ *The Great Texts of the Bible: Ephesians and Colossians*, vol. 17, ed. James Hastings (rpt. Eerdmans, 1949), p. 500.

² David Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Eerdmans, 1994), p. 57

³ *The Works of John Owen III* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1965), p. 522.

⁴ J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (rpt. Zondervan, 1971), p. 207.

⁵ John Davenport, *An Exposition of The Epistle to the Colossians II* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1948), p. 219.

⁶ Owen, p. 522.

⁷ Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon: Word Biblical Commentary* (Word, 1982), who writes, “The day of the revelation of the Son of God will be the day of the revelation of the sons of God (the position *SUN AUTO* lays stress on the closeness of the relation of “you” and “him,” as well as keeping *EN DOXA* in a position of final emphasis), as Paul makes plain with his “then” (TOTE which is emphatic pointing to the same time or occasion specified in the *OTAN* clause, i.e., when Christ is revealed), the additional words “you also” (*KAI HUMEIS*) and his selection of the same verb “reveal” (*PHANEROŌ*) to apply to the believers themselves as well as to Christ. That manifestation will take place “in glory” (*EN DOXA*) “Glory” was a characteristic theme in apocalyptic thought where it was closely associated with heavenly existence as it is also in Paul’s writings. The future manifestation in glory predicted here for the believer has particular reference to his sharing Christ’s likeness (cf. I John 3:2, “we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is”), and to receiving the glorious resurrection body.” (p. 167)

⁸ W. G. T. Shedd, *Sermons to the Spiritual Man* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1972), p. 311.