

# Above it All

## Colossians 3:1-4

### Dr. Pierre Cannings

Paul turned his thoughts to a more positive aspect of Christian living in this section of Scripture. The foolish attempts at sanctification found in 2:20–23 often entrap Christian people. The real issue is the outlook found in 3:1–4. Here Paul explained the nature of the Christian’s higher calling (3:1–2) and the reasons to seek this higher calling (3:3–4). Although this section focuses on the Christian’s new values, clearly these values are rooted in conversion. Conversion includes a radical change of mind which produces the desire for separation from the world.

In a spiritual but real sense, Christians have left this life and its loves. They have moved to a new domain where Christ lives. That brings new understanding.

Two commands form the essence of this calling. They define a Christian perspective, and they call people to action. The imperative format urged the readers to get involved in what Paul said.

## I. Seek Above v.1

- a. Raised
  - i. **Raised-** to raise up with from death, physical or spiritual, *raise with*  
fig. of participating in the resurrection of Jesus; the believer, in mystic union
  - ii. Up with Christ
    - 1. Not “if ye be risen,” AV., but “if ye were raised,” viz. at the definite point of time when they became Christians, and were in baptism symbolically buried and raised again with Him, ch. 2:12.
    - 2. What the Pauline gospel offered and emphasized by means of its passive formulations was the promise that the change was not self-contrived but rather enabled and brought about by divine grace, the same divine grace which had raised Jesus from the dead (cf. again 2:12 with Rom. 8:11).
- b. Seeking
  - i. Seek
    - 1. **to devote serious effort to realize one’s desire or objective, strive for, aim (at), try to obtain, desire, wish, desire to possess**
    - 2. In the AV. “set your affection,” etc. The word “affection” was doubtless intended to bear the sense of “*affectus*,” “tendency or bias of the mind.”

3. Seek- It is the sort of change which follows from complete identification with another person or cause, when the service of that person or cause becomes all-consuming, the basic determiner of all priorities, the bubbling spring of a motivation, resolution, and application which perseveres despite even repeated setback
4. Thus  $\zeta\eta\tau\epsilon\nu$  covers the seeking of man and the orientation of his will in the widest sense. If the heathen are primarily concerned about food and clothes, Christians are to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness (Mt. 6:32 f.; cf. Lk. 13:24). They are to seek those things which are above (Col. 3:1). This kind of life will be directed towards the attainment of  $\delta\acute{o}\xi\alpha$ ,  $\tau\mu\eta$  and  $\alpha\varphi\theta\alpha\rho\sigma\iota\alpha$  (R. 2:7). As the merchant in his search for fine pearls (Mt. 13:45)

ii. The things above

1. Above - *seek what is above* (heavenly)
2. The command to continue seeking things above, the essence of these two verb forms, follows a typical pattern in Scripture. Two realms of existence often were designated as above and below by biblical writers. This is illustrated in the account of Jesus with Nicodemus (John 3:12–13), where the discussion follows the pattern of the earthly contrasted with the heavenly. As is typical for John’s Gospel, Jesus claimed to be from above (3:13) and on a mission to the earth below. That Paul accepted such terminology is confirmed in Phil 3:14, where Paul expressed his desire to gain “the upward call” of God. Although the imagery comes from the athletic field, specifically the awarding of a crown, Paul’s thought went further. He thought of the upward call as the prize from Christ Jesus, calling Paul to go to where Christ was.
3. The first command is, “Set your heart on things above” (3:1). The second command parallels it: “Set your minds on things above” (3:2). The primary difference is the difference between “mind” and “heart.” In actuality, the Greek has no word here for “heart”; it is an inference from the translators. The word “mind” is actually a part of the verb used in the second command, “be minded about things above” (*phroneō*). Although these are presented in a parallel structure, they are not synonymous. There is a contrast in the two commands. They speak to two aspects of a person’s being.

iii. Where Christ is

1. Seated at the right hand of God
  - a. The metaphor of “right hand” has two possible meanings. First, it meant *power*. Perhaps Mark 14:62 provides the

insight to understand this metaphor. There Jesus told the high priest, “You will see the Son of Man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven.” The association of right hand with power translated the metaphor. The right hand was a place of power, and Mark alone translated the image for his readers. The term also may refer to a position of privilege. In the Gospels the disciples aspired to a privileged place with Christ in the kingdom. Jesus replied it was not his place to grant such wishes (Matt 20:23; Mark 10:37). F. F. Bruce, referring to the conceptual parallels of Phil 2:10ff. and Eph 4:10ff., says, “Because He has been elevated to the position of highest sovereignty over the universe, He pervades the universe with His presence . This latter interpretation fits the context of Colossians. Paul argued that Christ was the preeminent one over all of natural creation and redemption (1:15–20). He argued later that all portions of the body were supported by the Christ and depended on him (2:19). Although the ideas of privilege and power merge to some degree, the idea of the rule of Christ predominates.

- b. For the early church, the passage demonstrated the deity of Jesus. Their insight was given by the Lord himself (Matt 22:44; Mark 12:36; Luke 20:42).
- c. The consequences for the Christian perspective are thus also clear. If Jesus, the Christ, is so highly favored and acknowledged to be God’s “righthand man,” with all the power and authority to effect God’s will and to protect his own which is implicit in that claim, then Christian life should be entirely oriented by reference to this Christ.
- d. The right (hand) of God (ἡ δεξιὰ θεοῦ) was a way of expressing strength, powerful protection, and favor in Hebrew poetry (e.g., Exod. 15:6, 12; Pss. 16:11; 17:7; 20:6; 44:3; 60:5; 73:23; 98:1; 118:15–16), and to sit at the king’s right was a sign of special recognition and authorization (1 Kgs. 2:19; 1 Esdr. 4:29; Sir. 12:12; Mark 10:37).
- e. The picture is clear. God sits on a throne in heaven (so explicitly in Heb. 8:1 and 12:2), with the exalted Christ sitting on a throne beside him. The imagery was almost certainly drawn from Dan. 7:9–14: the human-like figure (“one like a son of man”) apparently takes the other throne

(7:9—plural “thrones”). This is the implication of Matt. 19:28 and 25:31, the only references to Christ’s throne outside the Christian apocalypse (Rev. 3:21a), both linked to the Son of Man. What made Christ’s throne different from other thrones (Luke 22:30; Rev. 4:4; 11:16; 20:4) is its proximity to God’s throne (hence the confusing picture in Rev. 3:21b; 5:6; 7:17; 22:1, 3).

## II. Set Above v.2-3

### a. Set

#### i. Your Mind

1. **Mind- to give careful consideration to someth. *set one’s mind on, be intent on***
2. In other places mind is used in a broader sense that includes the entire mental and moral process or state of being of a man (Rom 12:2; Eph 4:23). A man’s actions flow from the inclinations of his mind. Whether a man is good or evil depends on the state of his mind
3. The verb “be minded” occurs often in Paul’s writings. It occurs in Rom 12:3 where Paul stated that Christians should have a proper mind about themselves and their gifts. More frequently, however, the term occurs in Philippians, where the paradigm is the mind of Christ which should be in believers (Phil 2:5). The term implies more than a way of thinking; it includes values and loves as well. It could well be translated “delight in things above.” In contrast with this second command, which speaks of values, the first command refers to desires. Since basic desires proceed from the heart (Jesus’ words in Mark 7:15), the NIV correctly inserts the word “heart.” The first concern is moral; the second, mental.
4. Your thoughts should be on things above, on spiritual things, and the precepts you have to follow concern moral conduct. Compare “treasure in heaven,” Matt. 6:20
5. the sake of emphasis the exhortation is in effect repeated, again in the present tense to denote a sustained effort or perspective (Φρονέω means not merely to think but to have a settled way of understanding, to hold an opinion, to maintain an attitude (Rom. 8:5; 14:6; 1 Cor. 13:11; 2 Cor. 13:11; Phil. 2:2, 5; 3:19). but a cast of mind, a settled way of looking at things, a sustained devotion to and enactment of a life cause.

#### ii. On things above

iii. Not things on earth

1. Since he is the sovereign one, his concerns should occupy the Christian. Here, as much as anywhere, the twofold perspective of believers appears. They lived in two domains: the fallen order and the redeemed order, a division Paul had already used in 1:15–20. While being a part of the fallen order, they were not to let that environment occupy their thoughts and minds. Their values were to be different. Creation will pass away; the things of God will remain. Before they pass away, however, they will again reflect the glory of Christ, their Creator. The Christians had the responsibility of seeking ways to make that happen here and now. Believers' values and loves were to be focused on the rule of Christ, and consecrated energies were to be devoted to making that rule a reality on earth. In practice, this meant that the believers could not succumb to teachings which limited the focus of Christianity to this earth and its rituals. The task of the Colossian church was to call people to Christ and away from earthly things. It was to call people to life.
2. The alternatives are posed simply and starkly. There is an orientation and manner of living which is firmly rooted to the ground (cf. Phil. 3:19: *οι τὰ ἐπίγεια φρονοῦντες*), which looks no higher than satisfaction of physical appetites and social manipulation, however much it may be dressed up in fine phrases and high sentiments. This was probably the charge brought against the adherents to the Colossian “philosophy” in 2:23, and it is equally polemical here: their claim to participate in the worship of heaven in fact betrayed a very earthbound perspective, not least in its practical outworkings (2:20–23).

b. Dead

- i. Died - Rom 6:2; 2 Cor 5:14; Col 2:20
- ii. Hidden
  1. With Christ in God
    - a. The Christian's life is hidden now, but it will be obvious to all when Christ is manifest to them. The second coming of Christ will be a time of glory (*doxa*).
    - b. Although some may understand the point of this statement to be the safety of believers, Paul used it to refer to the source of believers' lives. The new life source, that which sustains Christians, is Christ. Paul clearly stated as much in the next verse. Just as Christ is now hidden from the eyes

of the world, the Christian's life in Christ is also hidden. Christians appear as dead to the things of the world, but very much alive with a source of life that goes beyond this world and what it can provide. The new life is Christ. His life energizes Christians, enabling them to be and do what they should. The life Christ provides encourages believers to seek the things identified with that life.

- c. The aorist is simply a powerful metaphor for the fact that when they believed in Christ in baptism they were putting their previous way of life to death and having it buried out of sight. Consequently, it should no longer be a factor in their new way of life. They have been freed by that one act to live a quite different kind of life, determined not by their old fears and loyalties but by their new and primary loyalty to Christ and by the enabling which comes from on high (1:11, 29). The fact that no irreversible change has taken place (begun but not completed) is sufficiently indicated by the exhortations which immediately follow (3:5).
- d. It is because the Colossian believers are "with Christ" (see 2:12) that they share in this true reality in its hiddenness; and because Christ is bound up with God ("in God") they, too, are caught up in the ultimate determiner of all things. The perfect tense as usual indicates a continuing state which is the result of a past action (parallel in effect to the perfects in Rom. 6:5; Gal. 2:19; 6:14). "In God" is an unusual Pauline formulation (only in 1 Thes. 1:1 and 2 Thes. 1:1; cf. Eph. 3:9),
- e. The undisputed Paulines do not use the verb *κρύπτω* (though they do use the related adjective); but the theme of hiddenness has been a feature earlier in the letter, where the compounds *ἀποκρύπτω* and *ἀπόκρυφος* were used (1:26; 2:3). The "hiddenness" in mind here is therefore probably the hiddenness of the divine mystery (1:26) and of "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge"

### **III. Above it All v.4**

a. Christ

i. Life

- 1. your true life, not merely your resurrection life. They are seated *ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις*, Eph. 2:4–6.

2. He is Himself the essence of the life; cf. Gal. 2:20; Phil. 1:21
3. While Paul spoke so pointedly against preoccupation with earthly things, he spoke equally challengingly about the earthly nature within Christians. The world is one thing, the heart is another. Both the outlook and the heart must conform to the higher things identified with the rule of Christ in the universe. Paul turned to that subject in the next section.
4. The values and goals of Christians will also be vindicated. The glory of Christ will captivate the minds of unbelievers as well as believers. Unbelievers will know that Jesus is Lord (Phil 2:10), and they will know that they based their lives on the wrong principles. They will also see that Christians built their lives correctly. Their lives and ambitions were energized by Christ through the Spirit, and they sought to contribute to the concerns of Christ on earth. Until then, the Christian life remains hidden. Christians are misunderstood, belittled, and persecuted. Unbelievers attack both Christians and the Christ whom they love and worship.
5. This, too, is not an invitation to understand “life” in mystical or apocalyptic terms, “whether in the body or out of the body I do not know” (2 Cor. 12:2–3). Rather, the “life” in view is that of Rom. 6:4, 10–11; 14:8; 2 Cor. 4:10–12; 5:15; 13:4; Gal. 2:19–20; and Phil. 1:21. That is to say, it is a life lived from day to day within the world of every day, but lived out of a hidden resource (Rom. 6:4; 2 Cor. 4:10–11; 13:4), a still center with Christ in God (Phil. 1:21), lived for God and his Christ (Rom. 6:10–11; 14:8; 2 Cor. 5:15), a life lived by faith in the Son of God (Gal. 2:19–20). Paul and Timothy were evidently wholly confident that this perspective, this hidden resource, would provide all the wisdom needed to cope with the challenges and problems of daily living.

ii. Revealed- **to cause to become visible, reveal, expose publicly Second Advent- when Christ returns**

1. The strictly theological portion of the epistle ends here. Paul began with a prayer for a real knowledge of God’s will. He ended with a call to live in accord with that will. All personal resources should contribute to the rule of Christ. Significantly, Paul ended this section with the believer’s hope—the revelation of Christ.

b. You

i. Revealed with Him

1. The identification (not just association) of Christ with the (real) life of believers (“who is our life”) might seem at first a bold step beyond what has been said. But it is one of Paul’s ways of emphasizing the centrality of Christ for believers, the way everything which gives the Christian meaning and identity focuses on Christ (cf. 1:27; also 1 Cor. 1:30; Eph. 2:14; 1 Tim. 1:1). Here it

is simply the obverse of the “with Christ” formulation of 2:12, 20 and 3:1 and confirms that what is in view is an identification between Christ and believers which in practice amounts to the complete submission of the believers’ selves to Christ as their Lord

ii. In Glory

1. of humans involved in transcendent circumstances, and also transcendent beings: Christians in the next life.
2. The concerns of the false teachers caused misguided Christian living. Christians had a greater destiny than earth. They were to prepare for heaven. They were to call the people of earth to consider the things of heaven and of Christ’s rule. They were to work for the reconciliation of all things—natural and human—in the spirit of 1:15–20. In this, any preoccupations with the things of this earth sidetracked the real concerns
3. In Col 3:4 Paul communicated this glory. Believers will appear in glory with Christ. Christians will share in Christ’s glory, and Christians will contribute to his glory. The present time is a time of death. Often Christians suffer for their faith, but they continue with a life source unknown to those who do not know Christ. Someday, however, Christ will be revealed. When he is, the source of Christians’ lives will become apparent to all persons. The reason Christians have had the values, outlook, and service to God and others will be clear. The hidden life will be manifested.
4. The final clause is a restatement, in terms appropriate to the flow of thought, of the Christian expectation that the climax and completion of the process of salvation would be its extension to the whole person, body included (Rom. 8:11, 23), and that the template of the resurrection body was already given in the resurrection of Christ (1 Cor. 15:45–49; Phil. 3:21).

## Word Studies

**Raised-** to raise up with from death, physical or spiritual, *raise with* fig. of participating in the resurrection of Jesus;

- the believer, in mystic union<sup>1</sup>

**Seek-** to devote serious effort to realize one's desire or objective, *strive for, aim (at), try to obtain, desire, wish*<sup>2</sup>, **desire to possess**

2. In most cases the subject of ζητέω is man. If we restrict our enquiry to passages with a religious reference, we find that in these instances the term denotes man's general philosophical search or quest. The root of this concept is to be found in the frequent LXX use of ζητεῖν for  and also in the use of the term in secular literature, where it is a technical term for philosophical investigation. There is a hint of the latter in the saying concerning the Greek search after wisdom in 1 C. 1:22. In Ac. 17:27, too, Paul uses an almost completely Greek mode of expression.<sup>4</sup> The OT tradition<sup>5</sup> emerges at R. 10:20 in a quotation from Isaiah: εύρέθην τοῖς ἐμὲ μὴ ζητοῦσιν. ζητεῖν here denotes the total

---

<sup>1</sup> William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 967.

<sup>2</sup> William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 428.

<sup>4</sup> D gig Iren ClAI go much further, reading τὸ θεῖον for τὸν θεόν. On this whole question cf. E. Norden, *Agnostos Theos* (1913), 14–18.

OT Old Testament.

<sup>5</sup> ζητεῖν θεόν or ζητεῖν κύριον is constantly used in the OT to describe man's voluntary turning to God, so that it almost becomes a technical term. In 2 Ch. ζητεῖν is used almost exclusively in this sense [Bertram].

attitude towards God (cf. v. 20b and on this → 687). Also based on the OT (ζητεῖν τὸ πρόσωπον τοῦ Θεοῦ, ψ 23:6; 26:8; cf. 39:16) are passages in which ζητέω is used in the absol. in relation to the hearing of prayer: ζητεῖτε, καὶ εύρήσετε ..., ὁ ζητῶν εύρίσκει (Mt. 7:7–11). For prayer is seeking God if it is to be successful prayer, to open the door and to give access to God. Thus ζητεῖν covers the seeking of man and the orientation of his will in the widest sense. If the heathen are primarily concerned about food and clothes, Christians are to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness (Mt. 6:32 f.; cf. Lk. 13:24). They are to seek those things which are above (Col. 3:1). This kind of life will be directed towards the attainment of δόξα, τιμή and ἀφθαρσία (R. 2:7). As the merchant in his search for fine pearls (Mt. 13:45) one day finds a jewel for which he will sell all the rest, so man is to direct everything towards the one great goal. In Pauline terms, he is to seek to be justified (Gl. 2:17). Seeking after God can be perverted in the demand for a sign with which a morally corrupt generation hopes to find an easier way to God than that indicated by the call to repentance (Mk. 8:11 f. and par.)<sup>3</sup>

Above- ζητεῖν *seek what is above (heavenly)* Col 3:1.<sup>4</sup>

**Set Mind- to give careful consideration to someth., set one's mind on, be intent on<sup>5</sup>**

With the writings of Paul one moves into the Greek world. Paul understood the mind as distinct from the spirit of man. It possesses the ability to understand and to reason (1 Cor 14:14–19); it is the seat of intelligence. In other places mind is used in a broader sense that includes the entire mental and moral process or state of being of a man (Rom 12:2;

---

v. verse.

OT Old Testament.

par. parallel.

<sup>3</sup> Heinrich Greeven, “Ζητέω, Ζήτησις, Ἐκζητέω, Ἐπιζητέω,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 893.

<sup>4</sup> William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 92.

**someth. someth.** = something

<sup>5</sup> William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1065.

Eph 4:23). A man's actions flow from the inclinations of his mind. Whether a man is good or evil depends on the state of his mind.<sup>6</sup>

**Heaven - surface of the earth as the habitation of humanity, *earth*** (as heavenly body: Tat. 27, 2 τῷ λέγοντι ... τὴν σελήνην γῆν 'one who says ... the moon is an earth') in contrast to heaven<sup>7</sup>

**Died-** Rom 6:2; 2 Cor 5:14; Col 2:20<sup>8</sup>

Hidden - *hide* in a safe place ἀπὸ μάστιγος γλώσσης σε κρύψει *he will hide you from the scourge of a tongue*<sup>9</sup>

**Reveal - to cause to become visible, *reveal, expose publicly*<sup>10</sup>** **Second Advent- when Christ returns**

Elsewhere in the Pauline corpus the situation is the same: ἀποκαλύπτω and φανερόω are used synonymously (cf. Eph. 3:5 with Col. 1:26), and we also find γνωρίζω (→ I, 718, 4 ff.).<sup>11</sup> Revelation takes place in proclamation (Col. 1:25 f.; 4:4; R. 16:25–27). But now the connection with light categories plays a bigger part (Eph. 5:13 f., cf. 3:9), and we also find the antithesis revelation/concealment (Col. 3:3 f.), especially in the form of the revelation

---

<sup>6</sup> Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, “[Mind](#),” in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1461.

Tat **Tat**, II A.D.—List 5

<sup>7</sup> William Arndt et al., [A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 196.

<sup>8</sup> [New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update](#) (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> William Arndt et al., [A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 571.

<sup>10</sup> William Arndt et al., [A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1048.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Eph. 3:5, 10; R. 9:22 f. ἀποκαλύπτω does not occur at all in Col.

schema.<sup>12</sup> This schema, which derives from pre-Pauline tradition<sup>13</sup> in which apocalyptic and Gnostic elements are intermingled, becomes the sustaining theologoumenon (Col. 1:26 f.; Eph. 3:4 f., 9 f.; R. 16:25–27). It speaks of the salvation-bringing mediation of proclamation by specific **V 9, p 5** bearers of revelation.<sup>14</sup> In a free form we find it in the Pastorals (2 Tm. 1:10 → 10, 4 ff.; Tt. 1:2 f.) and also in 1 Jn. 1:2 → line 18 ff. The schema is understood christologically in 1 Pt. 1:18–20. With the hymn in 1 Tm. 3:16 this passage is the only one in the Pauline tradition in which φανερόω is applied to a past revelation that has taken place in Christ.<sup>1511</sup>

**Glory-** of humans involved in transcendent circumstances, and also transcendent beings: Christians in the next life.

---

<sup>12</sup> Cf. on this Bultmann theol.<sup>5</sup>, 107; N. A. Dahl, “Formgeschichtliche Beobachtungen zur Christusverkündigung in d. Gemeindepredigt,” *Festschr. R. Bultmann*, ZNW Beih., 21<sup>2</sup> (1957), 4 f.; Lührmann, 124–133.

<sup>13</sup> The only earlier instance in Paul is at 1 C. 2:6 f.), as against H. Conzelmann, “Pls. u. d. Weisheit,” NTSt, 12 (1965/66), 239; otherwise the tensions in the text make no sense.

<sup>14</sup> The schema is not meant christologically but refers to proclamation.

<sup>15</sup> So also Hb. 9:26.

<sup>11</sup> Rudolf Bultmann and Dieter Lührmann, “Φαίνω, Φανερός, Φανερόω, Φανέρωσις, Φαντάζω, Φάντασμα, Ἐμφανίζω, Ἐπιφαίνω, Ἐπιφανής, Ἐπιφάνεια,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 4–5.

## Commentary Study

**3:1-4.** *Ye must have a loftier aim; ye have risen with Christ and your life is hid with Christ in God. Seek therefore those things that are above, where He is, seated at God's right hand*

**1. εἰ οὖν συνηγέρθητε τῷ Χριστῷ.** Not “if ye be risen,” AV., but “if ye were raised,” viz. at the definite point of time when they became Christians, and were in baptism symbolically buried and raised again with Him, ch. 2:12. The death as a death from τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου is mentioned in 2:20. εἰ does not express a doubt, but, as in 2:20, the ground of an inference.

**τὰ ἄνω ζητεῖτε, κ.τ.λ.** There is no longer any direct reference to the precepts of the false teachers (as if τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, ver. 2, were τὰ περὶ βρωμάτων καὶ ἡμέρων, Theoph.). These have been cast aside as concerning only those living in the world, and the apostle rises into a higher region. **Your thoughts should be on things above, on spiritual things, and the precepts you have to follow concern moral conduct.** Compare “treasure in heaven,” Matt. 6:20; τὸ βραβεῖον τῆς ἄνω κλήσεως, Phil. 3:14.

**οῦ ὁ Χριστός ἐστιν, κ.τ.λ.** **ἐστιν** is not the copula: “where Christ is, seated,” etc. “*Par enim illuc tendere studia curasque membrorum, ubi jam versator caput,*” Erasm.

**2. τὰ ἄνω φρονεῖτε.** “Set your mind on the things above,” RV., an advance on ζητεῖτε. In the AV. “set your affection,” etc. The word “affection” was doubtless intended to bear the sense of “affectus,” “tendency or bias of the mind.” The bishops’ Bible had “affections.” The Vulgate has “sapite,” “savour,” as Wyclif renders. We have the opposite state of mind in Phil. 3:19, οἱ τὰ ἐπίγεια φρονοῦντες. Compare Rom. 8:5.

**3. ἀπεθάνετε γάρ.** Not “ye are dead,” as AV., but “ye died.” Conybeare, indeed, urges that the associated κέκρυπται shows that the aorist is here used for the perfect; but this is erroneous. The aorist expresses what occurred at a particular moment in the past, while the perfect κέκρυπται expresses the resulting and now existing state. Nor does the nature of the verb θνήσκω preclude a rigorous translation, as even Ellicott suggests. True, in ordinary narrative, ἀπέθανε, “died,” implies, though it does not express, “is dead”; but not so when there is reference to a possible afterlife. Accordingly, Plato in the *Phaedo* never confounds θνήσκειν or ἀποθανεῖν with τεθνάναι. For example, p. 72 C, εἰ ἀποθνήσκοι μὲν πάντα, ὅσα τοῦ ζῆν μεταλάβοι, ἐπειδὴ δὲ ἀπεθάνοι, μένοι ἐν τούτῳ τῷ σχήματι τὰ τεθνεῶτα καὶ μὴ πάλιν ἀναβιώσκοιτο ἄρ’ οὐ πολλὴ ἀνάγκη τελευτῶντα πάντα τεθνάναι καὶ μηδὲν ζῆν; τὸ τεθνάναι

having been defined in 71 C as the opposite of τὸ ζῆν, while ἀποθνήσκειν was the opposite of ἀναβιώσκεσθαι, *ib.* E.

So Homer, *Il.* ψ. 365, uses τέθναθι with critical accuracy, not “die,” but “lie dead.”

Here “are dead” would contradict συνηγέρθητε. They died, indeed, but at the same time rose again, and that to a life spiritual and heavenly. They were, indeed, νεκροὶ τῇ ἀμαρτίᾳ, but ζῶντες τῷ Θεῷ, Rom. 6:11.

ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν, your true life, not merely your resurrection life. They are seated ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις, Eph. 2:4–6.

**κέκρυπται.** “*Neque Christum neque Christianos novit mundus; ac ne Christiani quidem plane seipsoſ,*” Bengel. Compare Rom. 2:29, ὁ ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ ιουδαῖος.

**4. ὅταν ὁ Χριſτὸς φανερωθῇ, ἡ ζωὴ ἡμῶν.** “When Christ shall be manifested, who is our life,” not “shall be manifested in the character of our life,” as Bengel and Eadie. Compare ὁ ἔχων τὸν υἱὸν ἔχει ζωήν, 1 John 5:12. **He is Himself the essence of the life;** cf. Gal. 2:20; Phil. 1:21. The absence of δέ or καὶ makes the expression more striking and vivid. Bengel observes on this: “*Sermo absolutus lectorem totum ... repentina luce percellit.*” For the transition to the first person cf. 2:13.

**φανεροῦσθαι** is used here with propriety instead of ἀποκαλύπτεσθαι, which does not so distinctly imply actual present existence.

**τότε καὶ ὑμεῖς σὺν αὐτῷ φανερωθήσεσθε ἐν δόξῃ.** Compare 1 John 3:2, οὕδαμεν ὅτι ἐὰν φανερωθῇ ὅμοιοι αὐτῷ ἐσόμεθα, and Rom. 8:19, τὴν ἀποκάλυψιν τῶν υἱῶν τοῦ Θεοῦ ἀπεκδέχεται: and on ἐν δόξῃ, Rom. 8:17, ἵνα καὶ συνδικασθῶμεν, and 18, τὴν μέλλουσαν δόξαν ἀποκαλυφθῆναι εἰς ἡμᾶς.<sup>12</sup>

#### TO THE DOCTRINE OF SANCTIFICATION (3:1–4)

Paul turned his thoughts to a more positive aspect of Christian living in this section of Scripture. The foolish attempts at sanctification found in 2:20–23 often entrap Christian people.

---

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Kingsmill Abbott, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians*, International Critical Commentary (New York: C. Scribner's sons, 1909), 278–279.

The real issue is the outlook found in 3:1–4. Here Paul explained the nature of the Christian’s higher calling (3:1–2) and the reasons to seek this higher calling (3:3–4). Although this section focuses on the Christian’s new values, clearly these values are rooted in conversion. Conversion includes a radical change of mind which produces the desire for separation from the world.

### *The Nature of the Christian’s Higher Calling (3:1–2)*

These two verses begin like the last section. A “since” clause provides the foundation for the theology.<sup>241</sup> Paul discussed the Christian’s resurrection. In a spiritual but real sense, Christians have left this life and its loves. They have moved to a new domain where Christ lives. That brings new understanding.

Two commands form the essence of this calling. They define a Christian perspective, and they call people to action. The imperative format urged the readers to get involved in what Paul said. They were to learn the theology in mind and life.

**3:1–2** The first command is, “Set your heart on things above” (3:1). The second command parallels it: “Set your minds on things above” (3:2). The primary difference is the difference between “mind” and “heart.” In actuality, the Greek has no word here for “heart”; it is an inference from the translators. The word “mind” is actually a part of the verb used in the second command, “be minded about things above” (*phroneō*). Although these are presented in a parallel structure, they are not synonymous. There is a contrast in the two commands. They speak to two aspects of a person’s being. The verb “be minded” occurs often in Paul’s writings. It occurs in Rom 12:3 where Paul stated that Christians should have a proper mind about themselves and their gifts.<sup>242</sup> More frequently, however, the term occurs in Philippians, where the paradigm is the mind of Christ which should be in believers (Phil 2:5). The term implies more than a way of thinking; it includes values and loves as well. It could well be translated “delight in things above.” In contrast with this second command, which speaks of values, the first command refers to desires. Since basic desires proceed from the heart (Jesus’ words in Mark 7:15), the NIV correctly inserts the word “heart.” The first concern is moral; the second, mental.

The command to continue seeking things above, the essence of these two verb forms, follows a typical pattern in Scripture. Two realms of existence often were designated as above and below by biblical writers. This is illustrated in the account of Jesus with Nicodemus (John 3:12–13), where the discussion follows the pattern of the earthly contrasted with the heavenly. As is typical for John’s Gospel, Jesus claimed to be from above (3:13) and on a mission to the earth below. That Paul accepted such terminology is confirmed in Phil 3:14, where Paul expressed his desire to gain “the upward call” of God. Although the imagery comes from the athletic field, specifically the awarding of a crown, Paul’s thought went further. He thought of the upward call as the prize from Christ Jesus, calling Paul to go to where Christ was. The imagery served Paul’s purpose well.

---

<sup>241</sup> Like 2:20, this is a first-class condition in Greek which sets up a logical relationship. It should be “assuming you have been raised with Christ, then....”

<sup>242</sup> The root word occurs four times in that verse as Paul warned about “high-mindedness” (*Ύπερφρονεῖν*) and urged “soberness” (*σωφρονεῖν*) in their appraisals of themselves (*φρονεῖν*, twice). He defined soberness as in accord with the “measure of faith.”

In Gal 4:26 he used the term again, this time of the “upward city,” Jerusalem, which is free. Developing an allegory between Hagar and Sarah and their offspring, he spoke of a figurative Jerusalem. In reality, the Christian belongs there; it is of the heavenly realm.<sup>243</sup>

The higher things, those above, are defined in Col 3:1 as “where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.” This imagery calls to mind the enthronement of Christ, and Paul based his thought on Ps 110:1:

The Lord says to my Lord:  
“Sit at my right hand  
until I make your enemies  
a footstool for your feet.”

For the early church, the passage demonstrated the deity of Jesus. Their insight was given by the Lord himself (Matt 22:44; Mark 12:36; Luke 20:42). In dialogue with the Jews, he asked, “What did David mean?” There were two Lords here, David’s Lord and the Lord who spoke to him. Following Jesus’ pattern, the early church used the text as one of the primary Christological passages from the Old Testament to indicate the deity of Jesus Christ.

The New Testament writers applied the text consistently, although Paul rarely used it.<sup>244</sup> The metaphor of “right hand” has two possible meanings. First, it meant *power*. Perhaps Mark 14:62 provides the insight to understand this metaphor. There Jesus told the high priest, “You will see the Son of Man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven.” The association of right hand with power translated the metaphor. The right hand was a place of power, and Mark alone translated the image for his readers. The term also may refer to a position of privilege. In the Gospels the disciples aspired to a privileged place with Christ in the kingdom. Jesus replied it was not his place to grant such wishes (Matt 20:23; Mark 10:37). F. F. Bruce, referring to the conceptual parallels of Phil 2:10ff. and Eph 4:10ff., says, “Because He has been elevated to the position of highest sovereignty over the universe, He pervades the universe with His presence.”<sup>245</sup> This latter interpretation fits the context of Colossians. Paul argued that Christ was the preeminent one over all of natural creation and redemption (1:15–20). He argued later that all portions of the body were supported by the Christ and depended on him (2:19). Although the ideas of privilege and power merge to some degree, the idea of the rule of Christ predominates.

This command called the Colossians to focus on matters related to the rule of Christ in the world. Since he is the sovereign one, his concerns should occupy the Christian. Here, as much as

---

<sup>243</sup> Each of these texts uses the word “above” (ἄνω) in a contrast.

<sup>244</sup> It occurs three times in the Pauline Epistles (Rom 8:34; Eph 1:20; Col 3:1) and five times in Acts (2:25, 33, 34; 5:31; 7:55, 56). The most occurrences in the epistles are in Hebrews, where the psalm is quoted or referred to five times (1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2). Of course, the Gospel writers employed it as well (Matt 22:44; 26:64; Mark 12:36; 14:62; Luke 20:42), recording it from the lips of Jesus.

<sup>245</sup> Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon*, 259.

anywhere, the twofold perspective of believers appears. They lived in two domains: the fallen order and the redeemed order, a division Paul had already used in 1:15–20. While being a part of the fallen order, they were not to let that environment occupy their thoughts and minds. Their values were to be different. Creation will pass away; the things of God will remain. Before they pass away, however, they will again reflect the glory of Christ, their Creator. The Christians had the responsibility of seeking ways to make that happen here and now. Believers' values and loves were to be focused on the rule of Christ, and consecrated energies were to be devoted to making that rule a reality on earth. In practice, this meant that the believers could not succumb to teachings which limited the focus of Christianity to this earth and its rituals. The task of the Colossian church was to call people to Christ and away from earthly things. It was to call people to life.

### *Reasons to Seek the Higher Calling (3:3–4)*

Paul presented three reasons Christians should seek things above. The theological incentive behind these reasons are found in v. 1. The three reasons are: the resurrection with Christ (3:1), the new life source (3:3–4), and the future manifestation of glory (3:4).

This entire section presents the nature of the resurrection life, but in v. 1 Paul called them to recognize the reality of it. Paul's logic emerges in 3:4, as he recalls the believer's death with Christ: If the believer died with Christ, how does he now live? He lives in resurrection as a new creation of God.

**3:3** The question may well be asked: If I died with Christ, how do I continue to live? Paul's answer was that Christians' lives are "hidden with Christ in God." Although some may understand the point of this statement to be the safety of believers, Paul used it to refer to the source of believers' lives. The new life source, that which sustains Christians, is Christ. Paul clearly stated as much in the next verse. Just as Christ is now hidden from the eyes of the world, the Christian's life in Christ is also hidden. Christians appear as dead to the things of the world, but very much alive with a source of life that goes beyond this world and what it can provide. The new life is Christ. His life energizes Christians, enabling them to be and do what they should.<sup>246</sup> The life Christ provides encourages believers to seek the things identified with that life.

**3:4** The believer's life, which is hidden in Christ, will be revealed. At his return each person will see him and, perhaps for the first time, be confronted with the magnificence of his person. The theme of hidden/manifestation occurs here.<sup>247</sup> The Christian's life is hidden now, but it will be obvious to all when Christ is manifest to them. The second coming of Christ will be a time of glory (*doxa*).

In Col 3:4 Paul communicated this glory. Believers will appear in glory with Christ. Christians will share in Christ's glory, and Christians will contribute to his glory. The present time is a time

---

<sup>246</sup> It should be emphasized that Paul did not say, "Christ provides life," though, of course, he does, and Scripture attests to it. Here he stated, "Christ *is* life." That is the point!

<sup>247</sup> The terms suggest that what is unknown now will become openly known later. Κεκρύπτω is contrasted with φανερόω, forming a thematic/semantic pattern which holds the verses together.

of death. Often Christians suffer for their faith, but they continue with a life source unknown to those who do not know Christ. Someday, however, Christ will be revealed. When he is, the source of Christians' lives will become apparent to all persons. The reason Christians have had the values, outlook, and service to God and others will be clear. The hidden life will be manifested.

The values and goals of Christians will also be vindicated. The glory of Christ will captivate the minds of unbelievers as well as believers. Unbelievers will know that Jesus is Lord (Phil 2:10), and they will know that they based their lives on the wrong principles. They will also see that Christians built their lives correctly. Their lives and ambitions were energized by Christ through the Spirit, and they sought to contribute to the concerns of Christ on earth.

Until then, the Christian life remains hidden. Christians are misunderstood, belittled, and persecuted. Unbelievers attack both Christians and the Christ whom they love and worship. Someday, however, that will change. The King of glory will return and become the preeminent one in creation and redemption, as Paul wrote in 1:15–20. Christians will share in that great day.

For these reasons, Christians should seek higher things. The concerns of the false teachers caused misguided Christian living. Christians had a greater destiny than earth. They were to prepare for heaven. They were to call the people of earth to consider the things of heaven and of Christ's rule. They were to work for the reconciliation of all things—natural and human—in the spirit of 1:15–20. In this, any preoccupations with the things of this earth sidetracked the real concerns.

While Paul spoke so pointedly against preoccupation with earthly things, he spoke equally challengingly about the earthly nature within Christians. The world is one thing, the heart is another. Both the outlook and the heart must conform to the higher things identified with the rule of Christ in the universe. Paul turned to that subject in the next section.

The strictly theological portion of the epistle ends here. Paul began with a prayer for a real knowledge of God's will. He ended with a call to live in accord with that will. All personal resources should contribute to the rule of Christ. Significantly, Paul ended this section with the believer's hope—the revelation of Christ. The Christian virtues Paul so appreciated in the Colossians were based on hope (1:3–8). The instructions Paul issued made sense only in light of this hope—the manifestation of Christ's glory and the vindication of Christian living.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Richard R. Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, vol. 32, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1991), 279–283.

### The Perspective from Which the Christian Life Should Be Lived (3:1–4)

1 *If then you have been raised with Christ, seek what is above, where the Christ is,<sup>2</sup> seated on God's right. 2 Set your minds on what is above, not on what is on the earth. 3 For you died and your life has been hidden with Christ in God. 4 Whenever the Christ, who is our<sup>3</sup> life, has been revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.<sup>4</sup>*

---

<sup>2</sup> Almost all agree that a comma should be inserted here, the verb ("is") introducing a more established description ("seated on God's right"); see, e.g., Harris 137.

<sup>3</sup> ὑμῶν is more strongly attested (Metzger 624), but it is more likely that ἡμῶν was altered (deliberately or unconsciously) to conform with the consistent second person plural usage of the paragraph. It was evidently a Pauline characteristic to move awkwardly from second to first person to ensure that his readers did not think that what was said applied exclusively to them (see, e.g., Lightfoot 184 and 208). Translators and commentators are as divided as the textual considerations between "our" (RSV, NEB/REB; e.g., Abbott 279–80; Lohmeyer 131 n. 2; O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* 157) and "your" (JB/NJB, GNB, NIV, NRSV; Dibelius, *Kolosser, Epheser, Philemon* 40; Masson 140 n. 1; Pokorný 162).

<sup>4</sup> Note the neat structural parallel between 3:3 and 3:4 (O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* 159):

For you died

Whenever the Christ

and your *life*

who is our *life*

has been hidden *with Christ*

has been manifested, then you also will

be manifested *with him*

*in God.*

*in glory.*

As noted above, 3:1–4, particularly 3:2, has encouraged the view that the writer has adopted a Hellenistic mystical or Gnostic perspective (Grässer, etc.: see n. 1 above). But this ignores the fact that τὰ ἄνω can as readily denote an apocalyptic perspective, which fits much more consistently with the apocalyptic-mystical character of the Colossian philosophy (cf. Findeis 421 n. 162). Levison, indeed, makes a persuasive case for seeing the thought of the paragraph as more consistently expressive of apocalyptic perspective, closely similar to that evident in 2 *Baruch* 48:42–52:7, where the “things above” (3:2) are synonymous with the “life hidden” of Col. 3:3–4. Either way this attempt to outflank the Colossian philosophy was somewhat hazardous—the key difference, and the main reason for its prominence, presumably being the sustained focus on Christ throughout 3:1–4 (Lincoln, *Paradise* 125–28).

Wolter 164–65 takes 3:1–4 as the *peroratio*, summing up the considerations of the *argumentatio* (2:9–23) and drawing the reader to a favorable reception of the following more specific *exhortatio* (3:5–4:6).

**3:1** εἰ οὖν συνηγέρθητε τῷ Χριστῷ, τὰ ἄνω ζητεῖτε, οὗ ὁ Χριστός ἐστιν ἐν δεξιᾷ τοῦ Θεοῦ καθήμενος. As 2:20 took up what we might call the “down side” of 2:12 (“you were buried with Christ”), so now Paul and Timothy take up the “up side” of the same verse (“you were raised with him”). The event of death-and-resurrection was two-sided for Christ himself (2:15); a message of the cross without the resurrection would not be gospel, and a call to embrace the implications of the cross without a call also to embrace the implications of the resurrection would be poor teaching. So here: it was not enough to remind the Colossian recipients of the lifestyle and religious praxis that they no longer do or need follow out; that would have been too much like the “Do not’s characteristic of the Colossian Jews’ praxis (2:21). The message of the resurrection has equally positive corollaries for the believer’s daily life, which have to be spelled out to provide a sufficient counterweight to the evident attractiveness of the more traditional Jewish lifestyle: “If, therefore, ...” in the sense of “Since it is the case that....”

As in 2:12, the language is metaphorical and not literal. The resurrection with Christ in a resurrection like Christ’s still lay as much in the future as it had in the earlier treatment in Romans 6 (see on 2:12, and note the prominence of “hope” in 1:5, 23, and 27). The very fact that an exhortation to “seek what is above” was required and needed to be repeated (“set your minds on what is above,” 3:2) is sufficient indication that what was in mind was a change of perspective, not (yet) a (complete) ontological change (see also Lohmeyer 132–33; Gnilka, *Kolosserbrief* 171–72; and Lincoln, *Paradise* 122–23, 131–34, against Grässer’s overemphasis on the “already” dimension: baptism understood as ascension to heaven [150–53]). It is the sort of change which follows from complete identification with another person or cause, when the service of that person or cause becomes all-consuming, the basic determiner of all priorities, the bubbling spring of a motivation, resolution, and application which perseveres despite even repeated setbacks. In

---

1 With varying emphases: Dibelius, *Kolosser*, *Epheser*, *Philemon* 40; Bornkamm, “*Hoffnung*”; Grässer; J. T. Sanders, *Ethics* 69–73; Stegemann 528–30; Schulz 559; Schnackenburg, *Botschaft* 2.75; Lohse, *Ethics* 148; Hübner 360–61; only “traces of future eschatology” according to Steinmetz 29–32.

the ancient world such self-identification would normally be with a patron and his or her cause or with a club or cult. Today we might think of a mother with her handicapped child or an artist with his or her calling. What the Pauline gospel offered and emphasized by means of its passive formulations was the promise that the change was not self-contrived but rather enabled and brought about by divine grace, the same divine grace which had raised Jesus from the dead (cf. again 2:12 with Rom. 8:11).

The key factor in this new perspective is the fact that Christ has been raised and exalted (the two are not distinguished here) to sit on God's right in heaven. The language is formulaic, clearly echoing Ps. 110:1: "The LORD said to my Lord, 'Sit on my right' (Κάθου ἐκ δεξιῶν μου), till I make your enemies a stool for your feet."<sup>5</sup> This was a passage which featured greatly in earliest Christian apologetic, since it provided such a good explanation of what had become of the resurrected Jesus. It is explicitly cited in Mark 12:36 pars.; Acts 2:34–35; and Heb. 1:13 and clearly alluded to elsewhere (Mark 14:62 pars.; Rom. 8:34; 1 Cor. 15:25; Eph. 1:20; Heb. 1:3; 8:1; 10:12–13; 12:2; 1 Pet. 3:22). That makes it the Old Testament text most often alluded to in the New Testament.<sup>6</sup>

The picture is clear. God sits on a throne in heaven (so explicitly in Heb. 8:1 and 12:2), with the exalted Christ sitting on a throne beside him. The imagery was almost certainly drawn from Dan. 7:9–14: the human-like figure ("one like a son of man") apparently takes the other throne (7:9—plural "thrones"). This is the implication of Matt. 19:28 and 25:31, the only references to Christ's throne outside the Christian apocalypse (Rev. 3:21a), both linked to the Son of Man. What made Christ's throne different from other thrones (Luke 22:30; Rev. 4:4; 11:16; 20:4) is its proximity to God's throne (hence the confusing picture in Rev. 3:21b; 5:6; 7:17; 22:1, 3).

The exalted Christ sat on God's immediate right (ἐν δεξιᾷ τοῦ Θεοῦ). The image is one of power. The right (hand) of God (ἡ δεξιὰ Θεοῦ) was a way of expressing strength, powerful protection, and favor in Hebrew poetry (e.g., Exod. 15:6, 12; Pss. 16:11; 17:7; 20:6; 44:3; 60:5; 73:23; 98:1; 118:15–16), and to sit at the king's right was a sign of special recognition and authorization (1 Kgs. 2:19; 1 Esdr. 4:29; Sir. 12:12; Mark 10:37). Speculation in some Jewish circles about who should sit on God's right evoked considerable fear among the early rabbis that the unity of God was being infringed (the "two powers heresy"); and there is a rabbinic tradition of the great rabbi Akiba at that time being rebuked for his suggestion that the second throne in heaven was for the Messiah (Babylonian Talmud *Hagigah* 14a).<sup>7</sup> But there is no indication at this

<sup>5</sup> The lack of other specific allusions to particular Old Testament passages in Colossians is striking and as puzzling as the equal lack of clear references to the Spirit (apart from 1:8).

<sup>6</sup> The main specialist studies of Ps. 110:1 are still D. M. Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand: Psalm 110 in Early Christianity* (SBLMS 18; Nashville: Abingdon, 1973); W. R. G. Loader, "Christ at the Right Hand—Ps. 110:1 in the New Testament," *NTS* 24 (1977) 199–217; M. Gourges, *À la droite de Dieu* (Paris: Gabalda, 1978); Juel ch. 6.

<sup>7</sup> See A. F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), particularly ch. 2.

stage that Jews in general perceived the Christian claim regarding Jesus as such a threat, even though Christians were already in effect making the same assumption as Akiba (we could translate “where the Messiah is, seated ...”). On the contrary, the problem for Colossian Christian Jews was likely to be the reverse, that the visionary worship envisaged in 2:18 was itself in danger of postulating too many heavenly powers, of whom Jesus was only one. It was the Christian belief that Christ had to be recognized as having distinctive, indeed unique, significance among the powers of heaven which was having to be asserted at this stage and which resulted a generation after the probable date of this letter in Jewish authorities accusing Christians of abandoning the unity of God with their claims regarding Christ (John 5:18; 10:33).

The consequences for the Christian perspective are thus also clear. If Jesus, the Christ, is so highly favored and acknowledged to be God’s “righthand man,” with all the power and authority to effect God’s will and to protect his own which is implicit in that claim, then Christian life should be entirely oriented by reference to this Christ. This is summed up in the exhortation  $\tau\alpha\ \alpha\nu\omega\ \zeta\eta\tau\epsilon\tau\epsilon$ , in which  $\tau\alpha\ \alpha\nu\omega$  (“the things above”) is a shorthand way of referring to heaven (as in John 8:23; in Paul cf. Gal. 4:26 and Phil. 3:14).  $\zeta\eta\tau\epsilon\tau\epsilon$  (present tense) probably has the force not so much of “try to obtain, desire to possess” (BAGD s.v.  $\zeta\eta\tau\epsilon\omega$  2a; NEB/REB “aspire to the realm above”) as of “keep looking for” that which is of Christ or from heaven in the situations of daily living (cf. Matt. 6:33; Rom. 2:7; 1 Cor. 10:24; Heb. 11:14; 13:14; NIV’s “set your hearts on” is not quite right). What is in view is a complete reorientation of existence (Wolter 166). The theological worldview implied is that of 2:17, including some degree of merging of Platonic (but not yet Gnostic) cosmology and Jewish apocalyptic (see above on 2:17, and see Lincoln, *Paradise* 117–18, 123–24). Such Jewish-Christian adaptation of more widespread Hellenistic cosmologies is already an indicator of how readily a spatial conceptuality (heaven as above) can be translated into a different conceptuality where “higher” retains its positive significance.

**3:2**  $\tau\alpha\ \alpha\nu\omega\ \phi\tau\omega\epsilon\tau\epsilon$ ,  $\mu\nu\ \tau\alpha\ \epsilon\pi\iota\ \tau\eta\zeta\ \gamma\eta\zeta$ . For the sake of emphasis the exhortation is in effect repeated, again in the present tense to denote a sustained effort or perspective (GNB “keep your minds fixed”).<sup>8</sup>  $\phi\tau\omega\epsilon\tau\omega$  means not merely to think but to have a settled way of understanding, to hold an opinion, to maintain an attitude (Rom. 8:5; 14:6; 1 Cor. 13:11; 2 Cor. 13:11; Phil. 2:2, 5; 3:19). The fuller phrase  $\tau\alpha\ \tau\iota\nu\omega\ \phi\tau\omega\epsilon\tau\omega$  is well known in the sense “take someone’s side,

---

BAGD W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979)

NEB New English Bible

REB Revised English Bible

NIV New International Bible

GNB Good News Bible

<sup>8</sup> NEB’s “let your thoughts dwell” and JB/NJB’s “let your thoughts be” are not strong enough.

espouse someone's cause" (BAGD s.v. φρονέω 2). This underscores the point, therefore, that what is commended is not an apocalyptic or mystical preoccupation with the furniture of heaven, as 3:1 could be taken to imply (that might have conceded the ground already contested in 2:18 and 23), but a cast of mind, a settled way of looking at things, a sustained devotion to and enactment of a life cause.

The alternatives are posed simply and starkly. There is an orientation and manner of living which is firmly rooted to the ground (cf. Phil. 3:19: οἱ τὰ ἐπίγεια φρονοῦντες), which looks no higher than satisfaction of physical appetites and social manipulation, however much it may be dressed up in fine phrases and high sentiments. This was probably the charge brought against the adherents to the Colossian "philosophy" in 2:23, and it is equally polemical here: their claim to participate in the worship of heaven in fact betrayed a very earthbound perspective, not least in its practical outworkings (2:20–23). The alternative commended is not to abandon a heavenly perspective, but to maintain one which results in a less earthly outcome, to foster and follow a way of living and of practicing religion which always and again takes its starting point from the true reality (Christ, 3:1, 3–4) in heaven (τὰ ἄνω).<sup>9</sup> It is the latter alone which the Colossian Christians should cherish and seek to live from. The key, once again then, is recognition of the crucial turn of events and transformation of perception of reality effected by Christ's death and resurrection; it is this Christ-perspective which should mark out the Colossian Christians' heavenly spirituality and enable them to see through the alternative spirituality of the Colossian philosophy.

**3:3 ἀπεθάνετε γὰρ καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν κέκρυπται σὺν τῷ Χριστῷ ἐν τῷ θεῷ.** The importance of gaining firm hold on this new perspective is so important that Paul and Timothy restate the point afresh, summing up once again the twofold consequence of the Colossian believers' identification with Christ. "You died!" "With Christ" (2:20) is not included here, though clearly implied, in order that the point can be made in all its starkness. Here again there is, of course, no suggestion that a literal death has taken place (other than Christ's). The aorist is simply a powerful metaphor for the fact that when they believed in Christ in baptism they were putting their previous way of life to death and having it buried out of sight. Consequently, it should no longer be a factor in their new way of life. They have been freed by that one act to live a quite different kind of life, determined not by their old fears and loyalties but by their new and primary loyalty to Christ and by the enabling which comes from on high (1:11, 29). The fact that no irreversible change has taken place (begun but not completed) is sufficiently indicated by the exhortations which

---

BAGD W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979)

<sup>9</sup> Levison 99–100 sees τὰ ἄνω as an allusion to paradise and the angelic host; but that would give too much ground to the practitioners of "angel worship" (2:18, 23) and ignores the obvious emphasis on Christ as the focus of τὰ ἄνω (3:1, 3–4). Nor is there any clear warning against spiritual elitism as such (pace Levison 102); unlike Romans and 1 John 2:19–20, there is no emphasis on "all who" or "you all."

immediately follow (3:5). The rhetorical character of the bare aorist formulation here, as also at the beginning of chapters 6, 7, and 8 of Romans, needs to be recognized. Its object is to ensure that the change of perspective marked by conversion-initiation is final and fixed. Nevertheless, throughout this section the balance between past act, ongoing outworking, and future completion is maintained (cf. Lona 179–89; Wedderburn, *Baptism* 75–76).

The other side of this death (with Christ), already stated in 3:1, is now restated in a variant formulation: “your life has been hidden with Christ in God.” The thought once again is probably apocalyptic in character, as the next verse surely confirms.<sup>10</sup> The undisputed Paulines do not use the verb κρύπτω (though they do use the related adjective); but the theme of hiddenness has been a feature earlier in the letter, where the compounds ἀποκρύπτω and ἀπόκρυφος were used (1:26; 2:3). The “hiddenness” in mind here is therefore probably the hiddenness of the divine mystery (1:26) and of “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (2:3; cf. Moule, *Colossians and Philemon* 112). That is to say, it refers to a hidden reality, what is not perceived by those who have not yet been let into the secret and so is meaningless or folly to them, but the reality that is actually determining the outworkings of history and is the true source of wisdom and knowledge (cf. 1 Cor. 2:6–16). As in both 1:26–27 and 2:2–3, the hidden reality focuses in Christ. It is because the Colossian believers are “with Christ” (see 2:12) that they share in this true reality in its hiddenness; and because Christ is bound up with God (“in God”) they, too, are caught up in the ultimate determiner of all things. The perfect tense as usual indicates a continuing state which is the result of a past action (parallel in effect to the perfects in Rom. 6:5; Gal. 2:19; 6:14). “In God” is an unusual Pauline formulation (only in 1 Thes. 1:1 and 2 Thes. 1:1; cf. Eph. 3:9), but its christological weight is wholly of a piece with the Wisdom christology of the hymn in 1:15–20.

The main thrust, however, is again not toward some visionary or mystical preoccupation with what human eyes may or may not see on a journey to heaven. The concern is wholly practical and everyday-lifeish and focuses on their “life” (cf. Lincoln, *Paradise* 128; *pace* Grässer 161–66, who can only see different structures of thought that strain against each other). This, too, is not an invitation to understand “life” in mystical or apocalyptic terms, “whether in the body or out of the body I do not know” (2 Cor. 12:2–3). Rather, the “life” in view is that of Rom. 6:4, 10–11; 14:8; 2 Cor. 4:10–12; 5:15; 13:4; Gal. 2:19–20; and Phil. 1:21. That is to say, it is a life lived from day to day within the world of every day, but lived out of a hidden resource (Rom. 6:4; 2 Cor. 4:10–11; 13:4), a still center with Christ in God (Phil. 1:21), lived for God and his Christ (Rom. 6:10–11; 14:8; 2 Cor. 5:15), a life lived by faith in the Son of God (Gal. 2:19–20). Paul and Timothy were evidently wholly confident that this perspective, this hidden resource, would provide all the wisdom needed to cope with the challenges and problems of daily living.

**3:4** ὅταν ὁ Χριστὸς φανερωθῇ, ἡ ζωὴ ἡμῶν, τότε καὶ ὑμεῖς σὺν αὐτῷ φανερωθήσεσθε ἐν δόξῃ. The other side of the thought of apocalyptic hiddenness is an apocalyptic unveiling. As also characteristic of Jewish apocalyptic, this unveiling is eschatological; it reveals what will happen at the end of time. In this case the content of the eschatological revelation is given in the well-

<sup>10</sup> Zeilinger, *Erstgeboren* 94–115; Gnilka, *Kolosserbrief* 174–75; Lincoln, *Paradise* 129; Wedderburn, *Theology* 52–53; Levison; Wolter 168–69. The category of “mysticism,” as invoked by Dibelius, *Kolosser*, *Epheser*, *Philemon* 40, is likely to be more misleading here (see p. 202 above).

established Christian tradition of Christ's parousia (his second coming; e.g., Mark 13:26; Acts 3:19–21; 1 Cor. 15:22; 1 Thes. 4:15–17). Whether the present writers shared this expectation with the same intensity as the earlier Christians is not clear (though see on 1:24 and 3:6); the present formulation could be read either way. That the parousia is mentioned only here in Colossians is also of ambiguous significance, since so many of the items included in the Pauline letters were determined by the circumstances addressed (see also O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* 168–69). The important point, however, is the assurance to the Colossian Christians that if they live out of the perspective and resource just spoken of (3:1–3), they will be vindicated in the parousia. Despite the present hiddenness of their "life," which might make their attitudes and actions in their present living somewhat bewildering to onlookers, they could nevertheless be confident that Christ, the focus of their life, would demonstrate to all the rightness of the choice they had made in baptism.

Ο Χριστός is used five times in these four verses (three in the "with Christ" formulation). Here, the fourth time, a pronoun would have been more natural, so the repeated use of the name is obviously deliberate (Lightfoot 208). We could translate "this Christ," indicating both the reference to the "Christ" just spoken of and the suggestion that the name retains something of its character as a title.

Paul does not normally use φανερόω in reference to the parousia, but the verb does belong to Christian tradition in this connection (1 Pet. 5:4; 1 John 2:28; 3:2). This probably made it preferable to its near synonym ἀποκαλύπτω ("reveal"), which is the "classic" apocalyptic term and is used of revelation at the end of time by Paul (Rom. 8:18; 1 Cor. 3:13; 2 Thes. 2:3, 6, 8), but not of Christ's appearing (so only in Luke 17:30). That "hidden" versus "open" (κρυπτός, φανερός) is also the more natural antithesis (Deut. 29:29; Mark 4:22/Luke 8:17; Rom. 2:28–29; 1 Cor. 14:25) confirms that the motivation here is to draw out the contrast between present hiddenness (3:3) and future visibility (cf. P.-G. Müller, *EDNT* 3.413–14).

The identification (not just association) of Christ with the (real) life of believers ("who is our life") might seem at first a bold step beyond what has been said. But it is one of Paul's ways of emphasizing the centrality of Christ for believers, the way everything which gives the Christian meaning and identity focuses on Christ (cf. 1:27; also 1 Cor. 1:30; Eph. 2:14; 1 Tim. 1:1). Here it is simply the obverse of the "with Christ" formulation of 2:12, 20 and 3:1 and confirms that what is in view is an identification between Christ and believers which in practice amounts to the complete submission of the believers' selves to Christ as their Lord (cf. Aletti, *Épître aux Colossiens* 221). As in Gal. 2:19–20 and Phil. 1:21, the motif highlights the extent to which such a strong-minded person as Paul saw himself as nothing else but slave and agent of Christ. He could not imagine that it might be otherwise for his converts. Similarly Ignatius (*Ephesians* 3:2; *Magnesians* 1:2; *Smyrnaeans* 4:1). It should be noted that implications of both security and authority are bound up in the thought.

The final clause is a restatement, in terms appropriate to the flow of thought, of the Christian expectation that the climax and completion of the process of salvation would be its extension to the whole person, body included (Rom. 8:11, 23), and that the template of the resurrection body

was already given in the resurrection of Christ (1 Cor. 15:45–49; Phil. 3:21). The formulation is not quite like anything else in the New Testament (the closest parallels are 1 Thes. 4:17 and 1 John 3:2), but that simply indicates that the conceptual portrayal of the end of time had not become fixed and allowed a variety of metaphors, which, like Paul's metaphors of salvation, overlapped and were not mutually consistent in all respects. The underlying motif, however, is the thought of restoration of the divine image, as intended in the initial creation of humanity, and of the risen Christ as the “firstborn” who gives the family image to the rest of the new humanity (see on 1:18 and 3:10).

Here, then, we can speak of Adam christology. It is implicit in the echo of Ps. 110:1 (3:1), which elsewhere in the New Testament is merged with Ps. 8:6 to give the picture of the exalted Christ as the one who fulfills the original intention in the creation of Adam (particularly 1 Cor. 15:25–27; Eph. 1:20–22; Heb. 1:13–2:8). And it is certainly present in the thought that this becoming like Christ involves a transformation into the heavenly glory (Rom. 5:2; 8:18, 21; 9:23; 1 Cor. 2:7; 1 Thes. 2:12; cf. Mark 12:25; 1 Pet. 5:1, 4), since the glory in view is both the glory Adam lost (Rom. 3:23) and the glory which is now Christ's (Rom. 8:17, 29–30; 2 Cor. 3:18; Phil. 3:21; 2 Thes. 2:14; Heb. 2:10; see also on 1:11 and 27). The scope of this Adam christology is neatly spanned by the three “with Christ” formulations of 3:1–4, covering as they do the three tenses of salvation: “raised with Christ” (past), “hidden with Christ” (present), “revealed with Christ” (future). This is the confidence which the Colossian believers can cherish despite the “hiddenness” of their present lives: that the work of glorification already begun in them has already been completed in Christ as a guarantee of its completion also in them.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: William B. Eerdmans Publishing; Paternoster Press, 1996), 202–209.