

SEEKING HEAVENLY THINGS

Colossians 3:1-4

Intro: When we come to chapter 3 in Paul's letter to the church at

Colosse, we come to the major division between the first part of the epistle, and the second part. As most of us have recognized, or have been told, the first part is doctrinal; the second part is practical. This was characteristic of Paul's teaching. But you can also see the distinction between the doctrinal and the practical among all of the writers of Scripture. It may occur even in a single verse, as it often does in the Psalms. For example, when Habakkuk was contrasting the living God with idols, he said, "For the Lord is in his holy temple." That is a statement of doctrine. But then he went on to say, "Let all the earth keep silence before Him" (Hab. 2:20). That is the practical application of the doctrine. There are hundreds, possibly thousands, of illustration like this to show the relationship between doctrine, or teaching, and the practical, or the application of the doctrine.

We had an illustration of the relationship between doctrine and the practical application of the doctrine in Colossians 2:6. "As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord" is a statement of fact, or doctrine. "So walk ye in him" is the application of the doctrine. There is no point in talking to a person about walking in Christ if they have not received Him as their Savior and Lord. So doctrine is very important, but how that doctrine is to be translated into life is just as important.

I am not saying that only doctrine is given in the first parts of Paul's epistles, nor that you just find practical teaching in the latter part. But I am saying that the doctrines of Scripture are the foundation of the practical instructions that we have in the Word of God. In addition we all need to know that nobody but a true child of God can expect to live in obedience to the Bible.

But now let me make another point before we get to our text, a point which Jerry Bridges touched on in his messages at Family Camp. And that is the difference between **γνώσις** as compared with the same word with the preposition **ἐπί** attached to the front of it. I think he was using the verb forms to point out of the difference that the preposition **ἐπί** makes in the word. To put **ἐπί** on the basic word **γνώσις** which makes it **ἐπίγνωσις** makes the knowledge "a deeper and more intimate knowledge and acquaintance," according to one commentator (Trench, p. 285). And

then he continued by saying,

It is bringing me better acquainted with a thing I knew before; a more exact viewing of an object that I saw I saw before afar off.

That little portion of knowledge which we had here shall be much improved, our eye shall be raised to see the same things more strongly and clearly (*Ibid.*)

Lightfoot, another dependable commentator, says that ἐπιγνώις, especially when used of God or Christ, speaks of the perfection of knowledge, which none of us can actually attain in this life, but this must be our goal. We must always be seeking to understand the teaching of Scripture, whether doctrinal or practical, in a deeper, clearer, and with greater effect upon our lives. And this will call for meditation and prayer on our part.

Paul used this larger word in his prayer in Colossians 1 two times. The first is in the expression in Col. 1:9 “with the knowledge of His will,” and the second is in verse 10 where he spoke of “the knowledge of God.” To “be filled with the knowledge of His will,” God’s will, “in all wisdom and spiritual understanding” is to reach a state of great spiritual maturity. The same can be said of the statement, “increasing in the knowing of God,” these statements which we find in Paul’s prayer at the beginning. And what is important for us to see as we approach any part of Colossians (or any other book of the Bible) is that this was Paul’s prayer to God for the Colossian believers, which means that God is the One Who has to do this for us. But we need to read the Bible, and we need to pray before we read, and while we are reading, and after we read. There is not a doctrine in Scripture, or any practical exhortation, but what we can understand it better, and love it more, and live it out in daily experience.

I have known people who weren’t even Christians who knew a great deal about the Bible. Let me give you an example.

I finished my university training up at the University of British Columbia. I took a course in philosophy from one of the greatest teachers I ever had through my college years. Reportedly he was a communist. I never had that confirmed, but that was the talk about him on campus. But one day he surprised me (and I am sure other members of the class) by giving one of the best, most thorough, description of the book of Romans that I had ever heard. He went from chapter 1 through chapter 16 and never missed a point. But to him it was not the Word of God; it was just the Apostle Paul’s religious philosophy. What I heard from him still amazes me. I

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don't think that the Apostle Paul would have objected to anything that he said. However, he was not convicted by what he knew of Romans. He made no application of what he taught either to himself or to any of us in the class.

That was evidence to me that it is possible to know a lot about the Bible without having it change our lives – even as Christians. How often do we pray over our Bible reading? How often do we take some verse which we have memorized, and specifically ask the Lord to make the truth of that verse more influential in our lives? Do those of us who teach interrupt our study from time to time asking the Lord to make what we are studying clearer to our own hearts? Does the truth of Scripture ever make you drop to your knees in prayer like it does Jerry Bridges? How often do tears of gratitude run down your cheeks as you read some portion of Scripture which causes you to pour out your heart to the Lord in prayer, or in thanksgiving?

One of the commentaries that I read at Family Camp thinking about this morning's message indicated that in the first verses of Colossians 1 the Apostle Paul was trying to get something going, trying to stir the hearts of his readers into action concerning the wonderful truths that he had been writing about, truths which were under attack by false teachers, and yet truths that are irreplaceable. He wasn't teaching just to have them go on in the same way that they had been living. He knew that our strongest defense against our enemy is a heart filled with love for God, and an equal love for the Word of God.

Paul started what is chapter 3 of Colossians in our Bibles with a most amazing statement concerning every true child of God. The "if" here ought to be translated *since*! Anyone who was not raised with Christ cannot possibly be a Christian. So Paul was addressing himself to true believers and reminding of them of their union with Christ in His resurrection. Can we read a statement like this without being moved in the depths of our being at such a statement? Probably some of you are like I am, you have memorized these four verses, but it never has gotten through to you heart that the apostle Paul was saying what he said. We have been raised together with Christ.

In verse 3 Paul said, "Ye are dead." A better translation would be simply, *ye died*. When did we die? We were "crucified with Christ" (Gal. 2:20). We died when He died. We were raised when He was raised. And now

that He is seated at the right hand of the Father, the place of total acceptance, of honor, and of delight. Have we ever really asked God to help us to understand what this all is to mean to us in our daily lives?

You see, going back to Paul's prayer for the Colossians in chapter 1, we see that he prayed that they would "be filled with the knowledge of His will," God's will, "in all wisdom and spiritual understanding (Col. 1:9). Remember what the word knowledge means here. It is not just to know the fact of our relationship with Christ, but it is that this fact might become clearer to us, so that our hearts would be filled with praise to God, and the truth would have a more transforming effect in our lives.

We can have a lot of knowledge about the facts that are revealed for us in Scripture without having that knowledge cause praise to arise from our hearts, and then for it to transform our lives according to the will of God. Paul was not thinking of the will of God in the way that we so often think of the will of God, that is, shall I go here or there, or do this or that, but he was thinking of the source of this life and the object of this life. The source is hidden from the eyes of men, and even from our own eyes. It is a life "hidden with Christ in God." The source cannot be seen, but the evidence of the life can be seen. It is "with Christ in God." It is a holy life, separated from sin and the world. It is a Christ-like life. This is the whole purpose of our salvation, that we might be made like the Lord Jesus Christ.

And according to verse 4 all of this should cause us to look forward to that time, "when Christ, who is our life, shall appear." That which is now hidden, is going to be "manifested." And when He is manifested, we will be "manifested." "In glory" is sometimes referred to as heaven, but here it not a place, but a condition – glorified!

Verse 4 of Colossians 3 is Paul's version of what the Apostle John wrote in 1 John 3:2:

2 Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.

And the verb which Paul used two times in Col. 4:4 for "appear" is the same word that the Apostle John used for "appear" two times in 1 John 3:2.

When Christ's manifests who He is when He comes for us, then we will

be manifested as what we are, the children of God, made like the Lord Jesus Christ. “In glory” means *glorified!!*

We are in union with Christ. We were joined with Him in His death because His death was for us, to put away our sins and to make us righteous in God’s sight. We continue to be united to Christ in His resurrection. We are seated with Him in the heavenlies, and He is our life. The reason that Christians can be what they are is because of their union with Christ. It is because of your union with Christ and my union with Christ. And it is only because He is Who He is that we can be what we are, or what we should be. So the purpose of our salvation is glorification. Glorification is holiness accomplished. Glorification is being made like Christ.

Nobody can completely understand these truths, but we need to know them, and know them more completely and assuredly as long as we are in this world. I hope you can see that the Apostle Paul in these verses is describing what the Christian life looks like behind the scene.

But now we are ready for the first part, and that is the Christian life as it looks like day by day. We don’t just take this behind-the-scene-picture and say that we can fold our arms, sit down, and wait for the Lord to come. Now there is work for us to do. But let us remember the secret of our strength and our ability to please God. It is our union with Christ in God. And, as far as our living is concerned, “it is God which worketh in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13).

Well, what is God going to be dealing with in our lives from day to day? Paul describes it here as two things:

- 1) “Seek those things which are above,” according to verse 1.
- 2) “Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth,” according to verse 2.

Well, you would probably ask me if you had the opportunity, what are “the things which are above”? And my answer would be that we need to read the last part of the verse: “where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God.”

The thing above are the things of Christ, both where He is, and Who He is. Where is he? He is seated on the right hand of God. This should immediately speak to us of Christ’s perfect acceptance with God. He is

the only person in the universe whose right it is to be there. The Father is, and always has been, infinitely pleased with the Lord Jesus both in Who He is and what He has done. And remember that it is Who Christ is which has given the Father total delight in what the Lord Jesus has done. And by what He has done I am thinking primarily about our Lord's death on the Cross. His primary purpose on the Cross was to do the will of the Father, and it is by that outworking of the Father's will at Calvary that you and I are saved. So the things which are above are the things of Christ, the character of Christ, His godliness, His holiness.

What does it mean to seek? It means to be looking for something with the intention of finding it and possessing it. And it means to put forth all of the necessary effort to obtain our objective.

And it is in Greek what it is in English, a present, active, imperative. So this is not just a suggestion, but it is a command of something that we are always to be doing.

What are we to think about here? We are to think about what the Lord said for us to do in Matthew 11:29,

Take My yoke upon you, **and learn of Me**, for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.

The Savior said, "Learn of Me." How do we do that? Where are we going to find Him. Let Him answer that question which He did in John 5:39 where we read that He said,

Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of Me.

The place to find the Lord Jesus Christ is in the Bible. Find Him among the prophets. Find Him in types. Find Him in the Gospels. Find Him in the epistles. And find Him as the Lamb in the book of the Revelation.

Paul here has given us the most wonderful assignment that it is possible for any person to have, but only Christians will be interested in it, and maybe not even all of them. We are to live in our Bibles day in and day out seeking to learn all we can about the Lord Jesus Christ. And the Holy Spirit has been given to us to help us in our search. Learn of Him because He is like God the Father want you and me to be. Every time you pick up this book, look for the Lord Jesus. Remember that Paul gave this as a divine command, and he told us to do it every day of our lives. When God calls us home, may He find us with our Bibles open learning all we can about our Lord Jesus.

But what about the second command in our text? Find it in our text in verse 2. (Read it.)

This is another commandment, and it is expressed as something that every believer is to do all of the time. Lightfoot distinguishes between these first two commandments when he said, “You must not only *seek* heaven; you must also *think* heaven.” I would improve upon that statement by saying that we not only need to *seek* Christ, but we must learn to *think* Christ.

The word that the Apostle Paul used here also indicates to set our affection on things above is to use our minds to do it eagerly and earnestly and intensively.

Some time ago someone gave me an article written by Cal Thomas who is not only a syndicated columnist, but he is a genuine Christian. The article is entitled, “Christians should keep eyes on heaven.” He brings out in his article that since Christians have, as he stated it, emerged from their churches into the political arena,” all of the wickedness that they have opposed has gotten worse, not better. He quoted a statement from C. S. Lewis who said, “If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next.”

But the Bible has the right answer for those who have been raised with Christ, we need to seek Him and do it so faithfully that we will always be thinking about Him. Then we will discover in the process that with all of that attention given to Christ, the Holy Spirit will slowly but surely be making us like our beloved Savior. And this is what brings the blessing of God.