

The Facts of Life

Colossians: Christ Above All

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Bible Text: Colossians 3:1-4
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Our passage this evening comes from Colossians 3:1-4. Colossians 3 and beginning to read at verse 1.

1 If therefore you have been raised up together with Christ, keep on seeking the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Keep setting your minds on the things above, not on the things on the earth. 3 For you have died, and your life has been hidden away with Christ in God. 4 When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

You've probably had that experience of eating a warm or hot slice of pizza and you bite through the crust obviously and that comes very well, but the cheese, you've taken your bite and you pull away from it but not everything has been severed on that cheese and the whole cheese on that whole slice just comes off with that one bite. Now, that's like Paul's epistles, they're like pizza cheese, they just come at you and all of them stick together. It's all connected. You notice in chapter 3 of Colossians, verse 1, the little "therefore," "If therefore you were raised up together with Christ," and that little "therefore" tells you it's based on something that comes before that "therefore," and so on. It links up with what's previous and you keep crawling up the context and you notice chapter 2, verse 16 begins with a "therefore," and chapter 2, verse 6 begins with a "therefore," and before that Paul was concerned about the steadfastness of their faith and so we said chapter 2, verse 6, "So therefore as you've received Christ Jesus the Lord, go on walking in him, stay the course," and then he says in verses 8 to 15, "because Christ is really all you need. He satisfies every possible need you may have." So in verse 16, chapter 2, verse 16, "Therefore don't let anyone pass judgment on you in a lot of this religious nitpicking and so on and, therefore," chapter 3, verse 1, "if you've been raised up with Christ, keep on seeking the things that are above." So it's all connected, in fact, if you sneak and cheat and read ahead you notice in chapter 3, verse 5 and verse 12, you have two more "therefores." So it's all connected. It's like pizza cheese and it all comes off, you might say, at once.

Now, when Paul gets to chapter 3, verse 1, though, he sort of reaches a kind of a summary point so though it's all connected, it's sort of like he reaches a place where he's

going to draw a semi-conclusion, you might say, so we stop with that tonight and look at 3:1-4 as to what he's saying here and what is he saying? Well, he's saying, "You must let the facts of life control your life." That's the thrust of these verses; what are those facts, what are the facts of life.

First of all, it's the fact of victory, verses 1 and 2, "If therefore you've been raised up with Christ, keep on seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Keep on setting your minds on the things above, not on the things upon the earth." Now, he recognizes the reality right off the bat, he says, "If therefore you've been raised up together with Christ." Now the "if" there is an if as, and he means "if as is the case." There is no doubt in that "if." It almost could be translated "since." It's the same sort of thing as you have up in chapter 2, verse 20, "if you died with Christ." It's "if you died with Christ," as you did, and now in 3:1, "if therefore you were raised up with Christ," and you have been, that's the idea, recognizing a reality.

You remember back in chapter 2, verse 12 perhaps, that Paul was talking about the baptism of these Colossian believers as signifying their union with Christ, that is, that in their baptism, they were placed in the tomb with Christ and in their baptism they were also raised up with Christ; they are so connected to Christ that what happened to Christ happens to them. They died and they were raised up to walk in newness of life as Christ died and was raised. There was a time when it could be said as in Ephesians 2:12, "you were without Christ," but 1 Corinthians 1:9, Paul would say, "God is faithful through whom you were called," that is brought, drawn, "to the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." Now, that word "fellowship" is the word "communion," brought into communion with Jesus, and sometimes we talk of this as union or communion with Christ.

You are so linked to Christ that as he died, you too have died, in one sense, and you have risen again to walk in new resurrection power, in newness of life, and Paul says, "Now that's the case, and if that's the case, then keep on seeking the things that are above," verse 2, "keep on setting your mind on the things above, not on the things on the earth." Now, we have to nail down some definitions here because if we talk about things above and things on the earth, we're just going to go off into space if we don't define those things. You know, we'll say, "Oh, well, things above, that's spiritual things, so things on the earth, those are material things, and of course, if we start talking about material things, then we'll talk about the terrible materialism that we all have and especially at this time of year, the commercialization of Christmas and so on. And of course, it was really bad because I even noticed that before Halloween, some stores had Christmas things out. They even desecrate Halloween now in the cause of Christmas." You can go on and on ranting and raving about materialism and commercialism and go home smug and happy because we've railed against materialism and things of the earth. Don't think that's what's exactly the concern here.

So what is it? Well, the things above are not obviously Cool Whip and meringue and nice fluffy stuff, we'll get back to that, but they have to do with where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Okay and we'll come back to that. Just hold that. What about the

things on the earth? The things that are on the earth, what's that? Well, the same phrase occurs in chapter 3, verse 5 where Paul will say, "put to death therefore the members," so he means bodily, your bodily parts, "that are upon the earth." I don't think that the phrase in chapter 3, verse 5, really relates directly to what's in chapter 3, verse 2. There Paul is talking about your bodily parts that do things, engage in certain sins that are upon the earth and so on, but I don't think that chapter 3, verse 5, really connects directly with the phrase, "the things upon the earth," in verse 2. I think that it's better, along with some interpreters, including Calvin, to look at "the things that are upon the earth" in verse 2 in light of the preceding context.

And what does that do? Well, "the things that are upon the earth," then seem to refer to the teaching and the religion that was being foisted by certain teachers on the Colossian believers. They were making the attempt. Now, we allude at the different aspects of this kind of teaching and it's difficult to pin down, sort of like picking up a watermelon seed, because there seem to be so many facets of it and that sort of thing, but we can sum it up perhaps this way: what was this teaching that was being foisted on the Colossian believers? Well, for one element, it seemed to have to do with extra-additives. In chapter 2, verse 11, Paul mentions circumcision, apparently he wouldn't have mentioned it unless that was a problem that the false teachers were purveying and probably they were saying, "Well, it's okay to be a Christian," but they were probably saying something like, "If you want to be a really really committed Christian of course you need to be circumcised." And really committed Christians are ones that have surgery and so on. The extra-additives, not just Jesus but Jesus plus, so that seems to be an element of the teaching.

Then the second element is that they were preoccupied with placating invisible spiritual powers, the ones that were called the elemental spirits of the universe; hostile, evil powers and how do we pacify them and so on, and it was so taken up with that.

A third element in the teaching was this never-ending checklist of religious rigamarole. You have it in chapter 2, verses 16 and 17 and verse 21. Do this. Don't do that. Celebrate this, etc. Get that on your calendar, all of that sort of thing was in there as well.

And then there was a fourth thing and what we might call an element of mystical paganism in which they had, they allegedly had visions and in the vision that they had, perhaps in the temple, pagan temple or whatever, God apparently revealed to them certain things that they were to teach and pass on, certain things like worshiping angels and beseeching apparently good angels to be protectors against the hostile evil demonic spirits and all that sort of thing. Worshiping angels, idolatrous kinds of things.

So that whole package then, all of those elements, seem to be, I would suggest, "the things upon the earth. The things upon the earth" is Paul's shorthand for this whole package of religious baloney that the Colossians had been subjected to and he's saying, "Don't seek that. Don't set your mind on it, rather set your mind on things above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God."

Now, this is where the fact of victory comes in. How do we appreciate what he says there about "seeking the things that are above"? Let's rip that apart a little bit. What are "the things that are above"? What do those have to do with? Well, they have to do with Christ's resurrection, "If then you have been raised up together with Christ." Then you notice it has to do with Christ's ascension because he's at the right hand of God. And it has to do with what we might call his session, "session" means "sitting." Sitting, seated at the right hand of God. This is the sort of thing that you say you believe every Sunday morning, every Lord's day morning in the Apostles Creed, "On the third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and he sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty." Those are the things above.

Now, how do we unpack that? Well, you notice where did Paul get this? Well, actually he got it from Psalm 110:1 probably where David has that text in which he begins the Psalm and he says, "Yahweh says to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies the stool of your feet." That's where he gets it. You notice in that you've got a person, "my Lord," you've got a posture, "sits," and you've got a place, "at my right hand," and all of that is here in verse 1.

Jesus, of course, took up Psalm 110:1 in conflict with the Pharisees in a debate with them. You can read about it in Matthew 22. You recall perhaps that Jesus posed questions of the Pharisees one day, "The Messiah, the Christ, whose Son is he?" "Well, he's the son of David." "Okay, descendant of David. Well, if that's the case," Jesus says, "how come David in the Psalm, Psalm 110, calls him Lord because he says," I know the usual translation is "the Lord said to my Lord," which is a little bit...the first "Lord" is Yahweh, it's the covenant name. "Yahweh says to my Lord," and this is David, the writer of the Psalm speaking, "sit at my right hand." Now Jesus' argument was, "If you say that the Messiah is the son of David, why is it that David when he spoke of him called him 'my Lord'? If he's his son, why did he speak of him as his sovereign?" It's not that Jesus didn't think that the Messiah was not the son or descendant of David, but he's trying to get the Pharisees to realize, "You know, there's a paradox in the Messiah, in his person. He's not just a descendant of David, he's much more. He's not just David's descendant, he's David's deity. He's not just David's son, he's David's sovereign. You need to rethink and flesh out your view of the Messiah."

So Jesus spoke of the person of a Messiah particularly in that text. Paul picks up here in verse 1 on the posture and on the place. "Keep seeking the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God." It's interesting, "seated," Christ is sitting. That's a posture. He's not pacing. He is not in anguish. He is not wringing his hands. He sits. That's important, that posture. That's what kings do, they sit and they rule. It's a way of speaking of the calm rule of the Messiah. And he's at the right hand of God. What does that place mean? The right hand of God is Bible speak for the place of supreme power and authority in the universe. That's where Jesus is.

He has already conquered then, as chapter 2, verse 15 speaks of his conquest and victory at the cross. Christ has already conquered and he's already enthroned. He is now reigning already. It's the mop up work that yet remains but he already rules and there is a certain

settledness that's supposed to ooze into the pores of your soul if you really realize that truth and, of course, you know that oftentimes it's this truth that does settle and stabilize Christ's servants in their pressures.

Charles Colson tells of a time in one of the Cuban prisons that he visited, it was a remote prison; there were a lot of people apparently in the world, myself included, that didn't know anything about it. It was so dark and remote, most people weren't even aware of it and he said it was built with huge circular cell blocks. It was built in the 1930s under the Batista regime. Someone asked Batista why he built such a huge prison and he said, "Well, don't worry, someone will come along and we'll be able to fill it up." And sure enough, Fidel Castro eventually came along and he filled it up.

Well, one of the fellows who was in prison, incarcerated in this prison, was a fellow by the name of Armando Valladares. He ended up spending 22 years in this place where he underwent torture and psychological abuse and so on for 22 years before 1983 when he was able to be released and so on. But Valladares told Colson that in the early days after he had been incarcerated there and so on, he used to hear prisoners, fellow Christians, Valladares was an anti-Communist and also a Christian and that's why he was put in the slammer, but he would hear prisoners, fellow Christians, being taken out by the firing squad and the executions always took place at night. And there was this dark silence that was broken by a triumphant shout, "Viva Cristo Rey! Long live Christ the King!" and then gunfire and then silence. But they changed the routine after a while. They began gagging the prisoners because their triumphant victorious defiance of Christ's kingship rattled the killers.

But that's a fact of victory. Christ already rules. He's at the place of supreme power and authority in the universe. Keep setting your mind on that. Jesus reigns. He's already won. That's a fact of victory.

Now, secondly, there's the fact of security here. You notice that Paul says in verse 3, "For you have died in union with Christ." The idea is, "and your life has been hidden away with Christ in God." Now, that's kind of a paradox, isn't it? "For you have died," and I think the connection here is, "Don't be setting your minds on the things on the earth, don't be setting your minds," if I'm correct and that's Paul's shorthand for all this packaging of weird religious and wrong, twisted religious teaching that's coming to Colossae, "Don't keep setting your mind on that for you have died, your relation to that sort of falsehood has been terminated, and your life has been hidden away with Christ in God. Those things have no grip on you anymore." But it's kind of a paradox, isn't it? "You've died," and then in the next breath he says, "and your life." You're dead but you're living. You've died, in one sense, but your life has been hidden away with Christ in God.

Now, what's the import of this? Well, I think the import of it is that in Christ's victory and reign, because he sits and reigns at God's right hand, because of that, you also have your security. Your life is hidden away. To be hidden is, for one thing, to be out of view. That's secrecy. And it can also mean to be out of reach. That's security. I think that's probably the primary emphasis that Paul has in mind here, this emphasis of security.

You might say, "Where did Paul get this idea and so on?" Well, it's all through the Scriptures. For instance, Psalm 27 in the Old Testament where David says, "For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble." There's that hiddenness in the sense of security and protection. "For he will hide me in his shelter." Actually, that word "shelter" may well be a word that means "lair, l-a-i-r." It's referring to a lion's lair. "Yahweh will hide me in his lair in the day of trouble." Do you think anybody in their right mind is going to come looking for you if they've got to deal with a lion in his lair and you're there? It's quite an interesting image there, but that's this idea of hiddenness and shelter and protection.

Here the focus is on where Christ is and where is Christ? Well, Christ is at the place of supreme power and authority in the universe, he's at the right hand of God and your life is hidden with him there and so it is perfectly safe in spite of all the dangers and the difficulties and the threats that you may face. It was the case, interesting situation in the end of WWII. It was 1945. Berlin was being overrun by Soviet troops and Gert Buchwald who was a teacher, lived in suburban Berlin, and he was concerned because, well, some of the Soviet troops were paying back the Germans for what the German troops had done in the Soviet Union and so on, and they were afraid. One time, that certain afternoon, there were some women soldiers of the Red Army came by to Buchwald's apartment and he said they seemed to be just transfixed and magnetized, drawn like a magnet to his wife's clothes so they took all of her clothes that they wanted and they left.

So Buchwald burnt all the rest of his wife's clothes and then that evening, there were some Russian men, Soviet troops that came by. They were drunk and they were hollering, "Frau! Frau!" Well, no one had to tell him what they wanted his wife for. Buchwald had a couple days growth of beard on his face, his hair was messed up, he looked kind of unruly and so he thought he may have looked a little older than he really was and he said to them, he smiled at them and he spread his hands and he said, "Frau caput!" And they seemed to get the message that his wife had died. So they wanted, of course, to check out his apartment to rummage whatever they could get so Buchwald spread out, relaxed on the sofa and they went through his apartment and they took a pair of his suspenders and left and then Buchwald got up off his sofa and bolted the door and then he slid the sofa aside and he opened up a 3 x 3 foot hole that he had dug in the cement floor and lifted his wife, Elsa, out of that. It was in that hiding place where she spent every night over the next several weeks.

There was security, there was a hidden place in the midst of all the dangers and Paul is implying here, there is a sense in the midst of all the fragility of your life and all the ups and downs of it and all the uncertainties of it, there is a security in that your life is hidden away with Christ in God. That's the fact of security. Now, we have to be careful, don't we here, we have to be careful that we don't claim too much or make a false claim when we say this, but you're totally secure in his hand. That does not mean that you won't get Alzheimer's or Parkinson's. It doesn't mean that you won't lose your job. It doesn't mean that you'll never need surgery, or that your spouse will never abandon you, or that you'll never stand at the grave of one of your children who pre-deceases you. It doesn't mean all

that but it means that your life is at the right hand of God, out of the reach of every marauder that would do you ultimate harm and it's in the keeping of Jesus who sits there holding it fast in his nail-scarred hand. That's the fact of security.

Then Paul says, there's also the fact of destiny. Look at verse 4, "When Christ appears, who is your life, then you also will appear with him in glory." Now, you might say...it's interesting how he puts that, isn't it? Christ, who is your life. Now, where did Paul get that? Oh, he might have gotten it at the end of Deuteronomy 30:19-20 when Moses was pressing the covenant upon the people of Israel and he said to them, Deuteronomy 30:19 and following, "Life and death I have set before you and you must choose life in order that you may live, you and your seed, to love Yahweh your God, to listen to his voice, and to cling to him, for he is your life and length of days." That's the Old Testament. Do you think that's legalistic and awful? No, no, don't think so. That's quite lively, isn't it? Do you see what Moses is saying? What is life all about? He says it's about loving Yahweh your God, listening to his voice, and clinging to him. That's life. Then he goes on to say, "for he," Yahweh himself, "for he is your life and length of days," and Paul says, "Christ, who is your life."

Isn't it a fascinating point that Paul makes here, isn't it? Now, you notice the verb he uses, he talks about, "when Christ appears, who is your life." Now, this verb "appear" is a verb that is kind of a publicity verb. It means "to be made public; to be made open." Sometimes the translation "to be made manifest." That's kind of colorless but sometimes that's used in some translations, it seems. But to, you might say, "to put on display." You know, when Christ is put on display, when everything becomes public and open and revealed and nothing is hidden or secret anymore, "when Christ is put on display, then you also will be put on display with him in glory." That's the fact of destiny. This is talking about Christ's second coming and Paul says, "Then things won't be hidden but they will be openly displayed. Everything will be out there for all to see at Jesus' second coming. He will be put on display and you will be put on display as belonging to him and with him."

You notice this grand inclusion that he makes here in the last part of verse 4, the words "then you also." That's so vintage Jesus, you might say, "then you also." You see, it's not just about Jesus. I know it's talking about his second coming and so on but it's not just about Jesus, it's about his people. You never get Jesus, you might say, you never get Jesus by himself but his people are always connected with him. "Then you also will be put on display with him in glory." We're connected with him.

There was a time when the first go-round when I taught at Reformed Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi, a decision was made among the board of trustees that perhaps one thing that ought to be done is that maybe every month, one of the board of trustees ought to take a faculty member out to lunch. I think the idea was it will juts humanize relations between the faculty and the board and we'll get to know one another a little bit. You know how they would say, "You know, help personal relationships," and that sort of thing.

Well, I don't know if it did, it probably did, but the lunches were good and about every month, one of the board members would be contacting me and I'd go out to lunch with them. Now, there was one fellow, one board member, who took me out to lunch and I remember it fairly well. We went to the University Club. This was up about, I don't know, the 14th or so story of some building downtown and the University Club. Well, and this was not a red and white check, plastic tablecloth place, they did laundry there. There were white cloth tablecloths, there were white cloth napkins, there were waiters who wore white jackets and so on. It was posh. And so there we were in the University Club and, of course, on about the whatever umpteenth floor it was as you look out over the city, you had a nice view of the city and so on. So very very nice.

There I was enjoying all of that and he told me, the board member told me that they often, his company often brought people here because to kind of overcome the stereotype that some people have about Mississippi. He says, "We'll get them up here and they'll say, 'Whoa, this is nice. This is class.'" Because so many people tended to think that, you know, if you're in Mississippi, you probably blubber tobacco juice over the front of your flannel shirt and walk around barefoot. But this made the argument the other way, "No, this is a posh place. This is topnotch."

Now, I was there, though, because Jim was an alum of the University of Mississippi and therefore he was a member of the University Club and so all that I had there that day was because he had access to that place and I was with him so everything that he enjoyed and possessed that day, I also enjoyed because I was with him and that's something of what Paul says, "Then you also will be put on display with him," with Jesus, "in glory." Notice in chapter 1, verse 27, not in the hope of glory but in glory. It will be not just the hope of glory but the experience of glory and what will that involve? I'll have to take shortcuts but it will involve a resurrection body like Jesus, Philippians 3:21. And it will involve a moral likeness to Jesus that is finally complete and you'll be put on display. That's the fact of destiny.

Well, these are the facts. These are the facts of life: victory and security and destiny. And you need to know them and live by them.

Let us pray.

Our Father, we thank you for a sitting Savior, a hidden life, and a glorious appearing. Thank you for these facts of life. And we confess, our God, that there are some aspects of our lives right now that are indeed heavy with days of darkness and there are many days of sadness and days of trouble that any number of us are walking through, but we pray that even then, even in the darkneses of our lives, our lives will be undergirded and buoyed up by the facts of life that don't change. We pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.