

Horsley Evangelical Church (www.horsleyec.org.uk)

Minister Rev Ken McIntosh 28th March 2021

Colossians 3:1-4 Too Heavenly Minded?

Our passage this morning is quite well known in Paul's letter to the Colossians. These are wonderful verses, but they are also verses of *transition*. They move us on from the largely doctrinal part of the letter into the second half which is much more practical. After 3:4 Paul addresses the subject of Christian behaviour in a long series of exhortations to do with practical Christian living. But our verses this morning form the bridge between these two halves of the letter. Christian doctrine is important, indeed it is vital if we are ever to understand what God has done for us in the Lord Jesus Christ. But in the Bible, Christian doctrine always prepares us for Christian behaviour as we learn to serve Christ and live for him.

In these verses this morning, Paul speaks about **the Christian's new identity**. He is at pains throughout this letter to remind the Colossians of who they are, their new identity and status in Christ. But in these verses Paul also speaks of **the Christian's new longing**. We long for him who first loved us. We long to see him, our Lord and Saviour, and to be with him in heaven and in glory.

So let's look at these two headings today *within* these verses. Let's think first of **the Christian's new identity**. How are we to think of ourselves? Who are we? This is an important question for anyone to consider because self-understanding affects the way we think and the way we behave.

The great answer Paul gives in these verses is that the Christian is someone who has been *raised with Christ*. We see that in verse 1. **Read verse 1**. Who are we? The Christian is someone who has been *raised with Christ*. You may remember back to last week and how Paul told the Christians at Colosse that they had *died with Christ* (2:20). We are those who *died with Christ*, but we have also been *raised with Christ*. Both truths remind us of the glorious fact that the Christian has been joined to our Lord Jesus. We have been gloriously and eternally united with him.

We died with Christ to the basic principles of this world (2:20). We no longer belong to what Paul calls the dominion of darkness (1:13). We no longer belong to a world which is basically in rebellion against God. We no longer live as those who are at enmity against God. For in Christ, we died to this world, its sinful behaviour, its controlling powers and its useless rules for getting right with God.

But we have also been *raised with Christ*. Next Easter Sunday morning we shall have a special focus on the fact that our Lord Jesus Christ was raised from the dead to an endless and glorious life. But Paul says here that united to him, we have too been raised from the dead. But what does that mean? Let me suggest three things. First of all it means that we have been given *a new life*. And the essence of this new life is that we now live in fellowship with God and with his Son Jesus Christ.

Just as our Lord Jesus was given new life from the dead, so the Christian, united to Christ, has been given new life. Once we were spiritually dead in trespasses and sins, but now in Christ the Christian has been made spiritually alive. We are alive to God. The old barrier of our sins has been taken away and dealt with by our Saviour. And now we have been given a new life - in fellowship with our God and Saviour. We share his life. See how in this passage today Paul links our new life with both God and Christ. **Read verse 3**. We cannot think of ourselves now in our new life apart from being with Christ and in fellowship with God. See that link again in verse 4. **Read verse 4**. And so our new life is - *Christ!*

The Christian who has been raised with Christ has been given a new life. And we cannot think of ourselves now apart from Christ. The old analogy is a good one - about the new life that a wife

receives after she is married. Once she is married to her husband, her life is no longer being single but being married to her husband. She is one with him and her new life is bound up with her new relationship with her husband. And so it is with the Christian and Christ - only in a far more wonderful and profound way.

But then secondly, being raised with Christ means that *we have a new power*. We now know something of the power of God in our lives. Other Scriptures tell us that the power that raised Jesus from the dead also raised us. It took the same power that raised Christ from the dead to raise us spiritually from the dead. And it is only the power of God that can do that. It took the same power which raised Christ from the dead to rescue us from the dominion of darkness and put us into the kingdom of light. It took the power of God. But just as the risen Lord Jesus knew a new power in his resurrection life, so too will we, even now. And that new power is given to us in the person of the Holy Spirit who lives within us.

One day that same power will transform these lowly bodies to be like the glorious body of our Lord Jesus. But even now, before that happens, the Christian experiences a new power to change the way we live. When we come to 3:5 onwards, the new behaviour that Paul outlines for the Christian will only happen because of the power that God has given us in the person of the Holy Spirit. Being raised with Christ means that we know a new power to help us live. And Paul has mentioned this before. [Read 1:10,11](#).

But being raised with Christ has a third aspect to it. We have *a new life*, and we know *a new power* at work within us, but the Christian also has *a new hope*. And this new hope is focused on the grace and the honour which God will give *us* when his Son returns. For we shall share in the exaltation of the Lord Jesus.

This exaltation was all part of our Lord being raised from the dead. Christ was given a new life, a new power and a new honour. Paul speaks famously about this in the second chapter of his letter to the Philippians. As our Lord Jesus was raised from the dead, he was exalted to the highest position and given a name that is above every name. Our Lord Jesus was glorified. But because we are united to Christ, the Christian will also share in his glorious and exalted position.

See how Paul describes this exalted position of Christ in verse 1. Where is Christ? He is seated at the right hand of God (1). It is the position of supreme honour. When our Lord was raised from the dead he was exalted. Exalted to the right hand of God. He is seated at the right hand of the Father.

But what does Paul then tell us in verse 4 about *our* future position. [Read verse 4](#). Since we are united with Christ and because we have been raised with Christ, we too will share in his glory. And other Scriptures remind us of this same fact. All he has, the Lord Jesus will share with his Bride. We shall all share in his glory one day and reign with him. It's all part of being raised with him.

Now Paul reminds the Colossians that at the moment all this is hidden. [Read verse 3](#). What we shall be one day has not yet been made known. Our life at the moment is *hidden* with Christ in God. Just as no one sees the Lord Jesus as he truly is at the moment - his life is hidden until his glorious returns, so too our life.

Who we truly are, our real identity in Christ, is hidden at the moment. The Christian doesn't look any different to anyone else does he. But that is only because our true identity is hidden. And this glory shall be revealed when our Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven. When he appears, when his glory is revealed to the world, the glory which our heavenly Father will grant *us* will also be made known. God will grant to us a transformation similar to the resurrection he gave to his Son. And we shall appear with him in glory one day. What a hope we have been given therefore!

And so within these verses, Paul is speaking about **the Christian's new identity**. Being raised with Christ we have been given a *new life* in fellowship with God. We can no longer think of

ourselves independently of Christ. Then we have been given a *new power* in the person of the Holy Spirit. And this will be seen in a new lifestyle. But then in Christ we have also received a *new hope*. One day we shall appear with Christ in glory. Not that we shall become divine. Not that we shall ever cease to worship our God and Saviour. We shall never cease to serve him and adore him and praise him. Nevertheless, just as our risen Lord Jesus was exalted and glorified, so too in some mysterious way shall we be lifted up when he returns.

So we have considered **the Christian's new identity** in Christ, but then in this same passage of transition Paul speaks of **the Christian's new longing**. Look again at what Paul says in verses 1, 2. [Read verses 1, 2](#). The word *heart* in verse 1 can also be translated *affections*. Set your affections on things above. But then in verse 2 we are also told to set our minds on things above. The Christian's new identity lead to a new longing. We long to be at home with the Lord.

Now these verses have been misunderstood and twisted by some. You have heard of the saying, "Don't be so heavenly minded that you are no earthly use." So some say that if you really put verses 1 and 2 into practice, if you really set your heart and mind on things above, this will cause you to become disengaged with the present world and retreat into a little world of your own. If you set your affections and mind on things above you will cease to do anything useful in society. You will not play a useful role in society or help people or be a good witness for Christ.

And yet, such a withdrawal from being salt and light in society is not what Paul is suggesting here. The first thing we must say is that when a man or woman does set their hearts and minds on things above, this will make them better servants of God and therefore better servants to humanity.

The more a person thinks about who they are in Christ and what God has promised us in Christ, the closer that person will live to God and the more they will love God and seek to serve him. And there have been *many* examples of this down through the ages. One example is seen the life of William Wilberforce. He became a member of Parliament for Hull back in 1780. And he worked tirelessly for the good of humanity. He was famous of course for his efforts to abolish the slave trade and eventually slavery itself in the British empire. But Wilberforce was involved in many other social works too. He was involved in improving the working conditions within factories in Britain. He was involved in a campaign to give children a better education in reading and personal hygiene. He was involved with the society for the protection of cruelty to animals, and many, many more worthy causes. Yet Wilberforce was a fine Christian who longed for heaven and to be with the Lord Jesus.

He wrote these words in his diary back in 1819 when in the thick of some parliamentary turmoil. "Walked from Hyde Park corner repeating the 119th Psalm in great comfort." Perhaps he knew it off by heart, but as he strolled through Hyde Park he meditated on the word of God and on the longest Psalm of 176 verses. Wilberforce was heavenly minded. But that heavenly mindedness meant he was a lot of earthly use. And this is what we always find in any person who knows what God has done for them. They want to serve the Lord.

But what *did* the apostle Paul mean by these famous words? [Read verses 1, 2 again](#). What are the *earthly things* Paul is talking about here? Taking these verses in context, Paul is referring to the new and strange teaching which was threatening the life of the church in Colosse. These *earthly things* (2) refer to the strict rules about eating and drinking and the keeping of certain days special that some were insisting Christians must keep so as to push along their spiritual lives.

But Paul is saying, "No, do not set your affections and minds on such things. Your heart and mind must be on the Lord Jesus Christ." Note again how Paul describes the Saviour here. He is seated at the right hand of God. And why is he seated? Christ is seated because his work is finished. His work of providing salvation for his people is finished so that we are already righteous before God. There is nothing left for us to do – certainly not in terms of keeping rules and regulations. Our salvation has already been purchased.

Then think again of the heavenly visions that the leading exponent of the new teaching at Colosse claimed to have seen. But if this man truly had seen a vision of heaven, what would he have seen? The man would have caught a vision, as the apostle John did, of the Lord Jesus seated at the right hand of God. Christ would fill his vision and his mind. But instead this man is described by Paul as *a worshipper of angels (2:18)*.

But the Colossians do not need to be taken up with angels or with any other heavenly or supernatural being. For where is the Lord Jesus seated? He is seated the right hand of God. This is the place of supreme honour. There is no need to worship or be concerned with any other spiritual powers. Christ is on the throne. He is reigning at the right hand of the Father.

The Colossian must set their hearts and minds therefore on things above, not on earthly things. And they must remember the patience God requires us to have. The strange teaching claimed to give believers spiritual fullness and spiritual freedom *now* through rules and regulations.

But Paul is saying to us all that we will not know true fullness and freedom until that day when the Saviour returns. **Read verse 4 again.** Therefore you must wait. You cannot have it all now. But it will come. And when it comes, or rather when he comes, you will not be disappointed. But you must wait for that great day when our Lord comes. And in the meantime you must be ready for him.

But finally, we must remember again where these four verses today are heading, for they are there to introduce a new and very practical section of the letter. **Read verse 5a.** Practical Christian living begins by setting our hearts and minds on things above. As we wait, as we look up, as we remember who we are, we must be busy changing our behaviour and serving our Lord in this world.

So let me ask you as we finish today, where are your affections and mind engaged this morning? What do you long for? But then, how do you see yourself? What is your identity? Who or what determines how you will live this week? For the Christian, the answer to all these questions is rooted in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is our life.