

The Things Above

Introduction. Ambition drives many people. It is a key emotion that humans experience. If an ambitious person is ambitious for the right goals, it rubs off on you. Down throughout history, evil ambition really fails to accomplish very much. Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar and Napoleon were some of the greatest rulers to have ever sat on a throne. But their demise was great too. These men were certainly ambitious, but their energy was directed in evil ways, and their end was destruction. We are going to look at another kind of ambition, a holy ambition.

In Colossians 1-2, the apostle has refuted both the doctrinal and practical errors of the false teachers and, in the course of doing this, has given a profound exposition of the significance of Jesus Christ. Starting in the third chapter, he exhorts his readers to give outward expression in daily living to their deep conversion in Christ.

The opening verses of chapter 3 sustain close connection with the closing verses of chapter 2, where the apostle reminded the Colossians that ascetic regulations are of no real value in restraining the flesh. The only remedy for sinful passions is found in our obedience to Christ. The opening verses of the third chapter, representing the positive counterpart of those verses, teach that our death with Christ, in a sense, involves a participation also in His resurrection. Because these four verses point to the Christian's union with Christ as the root principle of our whole Christian life, they are worthy of our brief study.

I. *The Reminder*

- A. "If" is probably better translated "since." The verb for "risen" actually means "to be co-resurrected." It is an accomplished fact. Christians spiritually enter into Christ's death and resurrection when they are baptized. The people of God have a spiritual "death and resurrection" very similar to the "death and resurrection" which the prodigal son experienced and of which Christ had to undergo (Luke 15:24).
- B. In baptism the Christian dies and rises again (Romans 6:1-7). As the waters close over him, it is as if he was buried in death; as he emerges from the waters, it is like being resurrected to a new life (Galatians 2:20; 6:14).
- C. Ephesians 2:1, 6 states that we are dead in our trespasses and sins. But when we are obedient to Christ, we are released from sin. When we arise to walk in a new life, we must be imitators of Christ (2 Timothy 2:11).
- D. Because of not knowing what scripture says, or not applying it properly, many are intimidated into thinking they need something more

than Him alone to live as a Christian. They fall prey to false philosophy, legalism, mysticism or asceticism.

II. ***The Responsibility***

- A. Paul used the word "seek" which stresses a careful and persistent pursuit of a goal. The word is indicative of continuous action. Preoccupation with the eternal realities that are ours in Christ is to be the pattern of the Christian's life. Paul commands that a preoccupation with God's purposes, plans and provisions should govern earthly responses.
- B. "The things above" are the spiritual, higher exalted principles as opposed to carnal principles (Colossians 3:10-11; Romans 8:1-8; 1 Corinthians 2:16; Philippians 2:5). A good example of these principles can be found in 2 Peter 1:5-11.
- C. To "set your affection on things above" is to desire and to strive for heavenly affairs and principles. It is to see to it that one's interests are constantly centered in Christ, that one's attitudes, ambitions and whole outlook on life are molded by Christ's relationship to the Christian, and that one's allegiance to Him takes precedence over all earthly allegiances (Romans 6:11-19).
 - 1. This, of course, does not mean withdrawal from all the activities of this world to engage only in contemplation of eternity and heaven.
 - 2. The verses that follow make it quite clear that Paul expected Christians to maintain normal relationships in this world. But faithful Christians will see everything against the background of eternity.
 - a) The Christian's whole disposition should orient itself toward heaven, where Christ is, just as a compass orients itself toward the north.
 - b) Such heavenly values dominating the mind produce godly behavior. Sin will be conquered and humility, a sacrificial spirit and hope will result.
- D. The "things on the earth" are not all evil, though some of them are. Even things harmless in themselves become harmful if permitted to take the place that should be reserved for the "things above." Here "things on the earth" may be understood to include wealth, worldly honor, power, pleasures and the like. To make such things the goal of life and the subject of preoccupation is unworthy of those who have been raised with Christ and look forward to sharing in His eternal glory.

III. ***The Resource***

- A. One motive for seeking and setting the mind on the things above is the Christian's union with Christ in His death and resurrection (2:20;

- 3:1). Verse 3 repeats and summarizes this theme. Since we have died with Christ, all that is alien to Him should be alien to us.
- B. The Christian's resource is none other than the One in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Colossians 2:3). Jesus told the accusers at His trial that He would, from now on, be seated at the right hand of the power of God (Luke 22:69).
 - C. In the book of Acts, there are three instances which speak of the exaltation of Christ (2:33; 5:31; 7:56). The scriptures state this elsewhere as well (Ephesians 1:20; Hebrews 1:3; 8:1; 1 Peter 3:22).
 - D. Because of Christ's coronation and exaltation to the Father's right hand, He is the fountain of blessing for His people (John 14:13-14; 15:16; 16:23-24, 26).

IV. **The Reason**

- A. Death with Christ (2:20) is followed by resurrection with Christ (3:1), and so our lives are indeed "hidden with Christ in God." When a man was buried, the Greeks commonly spoke of him as being hidden in the earth; but the Christian had died a spiritual death in baptism, and he is not hidden in the earth but hidden in Christ.
 - 1. Furthermore, another sense in which the Christian has died is that the penalty for sin has been paid. The wages of sin is death, so we must die (Romans 6:23).
 - 2. By our union with Jesus Christ, we die the required death in Him, thus the penalty is paid and sin has no claim against us (2 Corinthians 5:21).
- B. When you sink under the water, you disappear to the world. You rise again, but you rise only to God. The world henceforth knows nothing of your life, and, as a consequence, your new life must know nothing of the world.
 - 1. Considering this notion a bit deeper, our new life in Christ is concealed from the world. Non-Christians are unable to grasp the full import of the Christian's new life (1 Corinthians 2:14).
 - 2. The false teachers troubling the Colossians could not grasp the truth that the Colossians had already gained transcendent spiritual knowledge and life, and thus had no need of their false teaching.

V. **The Revelation**

- A. Christ does not merely give life; He is life. He is, quite literally, the essence of our lives. Paul told the Corinthians that the life of Jesus was manifested in his body (2 Corinthians 4:10; Philippians 1:21). It is He who gives us life and nurtures it by our fellowship with Him (Romans 8:10).

- B. "Appears" emphasizes the open display of Christ at His coming. When Christ is thus manifested, Christians also "will appear with him in glory." Then the world that persecutes Christians will be blinded with the dazzling majesty of His return. On that day, it will become apparent who really belongs to the Lord (2 Timothy 2:19).
- C. One of the great themes of the New Testament is that of suffering and glory. Christ was a suffering Servant who went up into glory (John 17:5). Now we are "suffering servants" who will go up into glory as well (Romans 8:18; 1 Peter 5:4; 1 John 2:28; 3:2).

Conclusion. We are called to be a peculiar people (2 Timothy 1:7-9; 1 Peter 2:9; 5:10; Colossians 1:13). This is a heavenly calling (Hebrews 3:1). In closing, consider Paul's prayer in 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12. I trust that if you are here and are interested in this heavenly calling and if you have not accepted the gospel of Christ, that you will present yourself as one who believes in Christ and is ready to obey the gospel of the Lord, and that you will add these fine characteristics that belong to the Christian life.