

Pursuing the Heavenly

Colossians 3:1-4

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Let's turn in our Bibles to Colossians chapter 3, and we'll be considering verses 1 through to verse 4 this morning.

The Word of God reads, "If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory."

Let's come before the Lord and ask His help as we look at His Word. Father in heaven, we pray that this morning You would be our vision, that we would see Christ only as we approach the Word of God. I pray, Father, that You would send Your Holy Spirit to grant grace to us as we hear the Word of the Lord, that You would give us understanding of Your truth and He would take the Word of God and apply it specifically to each one here this morning. And I pray, Lord, for myself, that You would send the Spirit to enable and to empower me, that I might preach Your Word faithfully, that the Lord Jesus may be exalted, and that we would see the wondrous truths that are pertaining to Christ and ourselves in Your Word. Father, I pray, Lord, that You would revolutionize the way we think and live and behave in this world, that the truth of Jesus would so penetrate our hearts that we would rise from this place, Lord, changed, moved, renewed in our vision and in our pursuit after God. And we ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

Just to recap from last week, we considered the subject of legalism, looking at Colossians 2 verses 16 to 23, and we considered the dangers of legalism and how it manifests. Essentially, legalism is going about and hedging God's law. It's basically saying God's Word is not sufficient for our life and for our godliness, so we must set fences about the law of God to make sure that people don't violate God's law. And this is what the Pharisees essentially had done, and this was part of the error that was threatening the church at Colossae. They had these teachers coming in, saying, "Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle," but they proved only to be the traditions and the teachings and the doctrines of men, and not the teachings of the Word of God and of the truth of Christ. And so, Paul warns against

legalism and its dangers, and he warns about having our acceptance not in the things that we do but in the things that have been done for us in Christ. And this is the ground of our acceptance before God.

But we were careful to note last week that we don't think that legalism is keeping God's law, and legalism is not pursuing God. Legalism is not living a life that is serious and after the pursuit of God. That's not what legalism is. It's important to recognize that because we don't want to fall for the trap that any meticulous care to apply God's Word to our lives and to live godly in this present age is legalism. It is not legalism. And if we concluded that in the last sermon, we'd come into very serious trouble at this point because we are right now commanded twice to pursue the things which are above. And as we go on from this passage, we will find in the coming weeks that what Paul is going to do is unfold to us what it looks like to seek God and how it involves the putting off and the putting on, and the denying of self and the bearing of the cross, essentially, and living a life that is holy and dedicated to Christ. And so, it's very important that we don't fall for that trap in verses 16 to 23 and then have to make apologies as we go into chapter 3.

But that's what we want to consider today. So, we were careful to note that. But when I think of these verses here that are before us, I'm encouraged by the illustration of a pilgrim. Because a pilgrim is one that describes a seeker, one that describes someone whose mind is set on the place of his destination. You see, a pilgrim, the Bible mentions, is one who is a sojourner or one who is passing through a land or a country or a city with the intention of going to his desired destination. And when I think of the word "seeking" and when I think of the word "setting our mind upon things that are above," I catch the image of a man who is on a pilgrimage, and that he's passing through this life, but his mind is not set on the city that he is in but set to the heavenly city which is above. He is someone who is not taken in by the surroundings around him but is taken up to something else, something greater, something beyond his present. And I think that's very important to keep in mind, and we'll refer to a pilgrim as we go on.

But as a pilgrim passes through a town, for example, he may settle there, he may even have work there, he may even be refreshed by the people in that town. He may be invited to eat at their dinner tables, he may be the recipient of great hospitality. But one thing the pilgrim recognizes is that the town that he is visiting is not his final dwelling place. He's aware of that. He knows that he is passing only through. And this image will help us realize and help us apply these truths to our lives as we look at the Scripture together.

But not everything a pilgrim encounters on his way is evil. You see, we live in this world as pilgrims that are passing through, seeking a heavenly country. But not everything that the pilgrim encounters in this life or in the life of the towns and cities that he passes through is evil. Many of those things are good things. There are refreshments, the hospitality, all the things he receives, the accommodation – all positive, good. He should enjoy them, he should make the most of them. But what we understand about the pilgrim is that if those things become what he seeks after, if those things become the things that he sets his mind upon, then we know that the very good things that were to help him on his journey actually end up becoming a hindrance to his journey. And this is exactly what Paul is trying to bring out here for our understanding today.

But we will consider these verses together one by one, and I want us to consider, firstly, the realities that are here in the passage that ultimately make us pilgrims, make us who we are today. Now, in verse 1 to verse 4, we see some certain realities presented to us concerning ourselves and concerning Christ. And I want to begin by looking at these passages and looking at them in light of what it says concerning Christ. I think this is the best way to understand this passage. There's so much in it, but just to be able to have a summarized understanding of it, I want us to look at that.

Look at verse 1. It says, "If you then were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory." And immediately, we're confronted by these words: Christ, Christ, Christ. Christ is here everywhere in this passage. He is the one who is raised. It says that we were raised with Christ, meaning Christ Himself was raised. He's the one who is currently sitting, so He was raised, He is sitting there at the right hand of God. But also, He's presented to us as the one who is coming, who will make an appearing, as it were, in the world at His second coming.

It speaks to us of Christ as the one who was a victor in His resurrection over sin and over death and over hell. But it also speaks to us as Christ as the one who is currently sitting at the right hand of the Father, having completed His work of redemption but continues to intercede for us there at the right hand of God, a position of rule, a position of intercession. The Bible speaks of the right hand of God. But also, it presents us as one that is going to be fully manifested, that when Christ comes, the word is He will appear, He will be manifested, which means there's a sense in which Christ is not yet fully manifested to the world in all His glory, which is yet to come.

It also refers to Christ as the one who is in God. It says we are raised

with Christ, sitting on the right hand of the Father. Look at verse 3: "Your life is hidden with Christ in God." And it shows that Christ is there in God, meaning He's united there with the Father in His eternal unity between Father and Son. But also, there's another word as well that refers to Christ here, that gives us insight into the realities that are true of Christ, and that is that Christ is the one who is described as our life. He's described as the one who is our life.

You see, this passage is not about us necessarily; it begins with the realities that concern Christ. And this is where we need to begin: that Christ is the one who is raised, He is the one who is now sitting, and He is the one who is appearing. He is the one who is our life, and He is the one who is in union with God. The reason why that is very significant to understand as we look at this passage is because everything that concerns us first concerns Christ, meaning all the realities that are true of us are only true of us because they are first true of Jesus Christ.

You see, the believer is known as one who is in Christ, meaning that everything that we receive from God, we receive in Him. It is our union with Christ that gives to us all the blessings of God that are in Christ Jesus, as the Scripture points out. And so, it's very significant to understand that because Christ is alive, we are alive. And this is what it says there now in Colossians 3:1, "If you then were risen with Christ." And so, when it starts concerning us, we see this word "with" appear, which refers to our union with Him. And it says, "If you were then risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is sitting on the right hand of God."

Now, if you drop down to verse 3, "For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." And then down to verse 4, what does it say there? "When Christ, who is our life, appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory." You see, our raising from the dead with spiritual new life, our having been hidden and now still hidden with Christ in God, and our future appearing and manifestation of the glory that shall be revealed in us are all connected with this word "with," which shows that all that we receive is in co-union with Christ.

This means that you and I are not independent of Christ in any way, and it's so important to realize this because legalism is the very thing that Paul was dealing with just prior to this, and this follows straight on. Legalism is living a life that's ultimately independent of the person and work of Christ and of the power of the Holy Spirit to live out the Christian life. It is trusting in our own selves, not within that which God has given to us in Christ Jesus. And what Paul is reminding them, as he has done throughout this whole epistle, is that everything that we have is because of our union with Christ, and everything that we are and everything that we will be is because of Him.

Now, what does it mean to be hidden with Christ in God? I mean, that is a mind-boggling statement that I think needs some explanation. It says there in verse 3, "For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." These words are definitely spiritual; they're spiritual realities, and this is not talking about a physical hiding place necessarily, but what it's referring to is this union, but more than that, this sense of hiddenness from sight. That's what the word "to be hidden" means: to be hidden from sight or to be laid up in store and hidden from the eyes, as it were.

And I thought to myself, what does it mean that our life is hidden with Christ in God? And looking at what commentators said and other people had to say about this, it became increasingly clear that the Christian is one who is not yet fully revealed. You see, Paul mentions this word "hidden" in connection with the fact that we have died, and then he goes on to talk about our appearing. And it's important to look at those words together: this hiddenness and this appearing, this manifestation.

And what Paul is referring to here is that the Christian's life is not yet fully revealed; it is not yet fully made clear to the world, and it's not yet fully even made clear sometimes to our own selves. And what that simply means is that our life, the life that we now live, in one sense, is a spiritual mystery to which the world themselves look on and do not comprehend, to which we ourselves sometimes look on and wonder at this life that we now live.

The Christian, as a pilgrim, is one who cannot really be made proper sense of. People can't always make proper sense of the Christian: why does he live the way he lives, why does he do the things that he does, what motivates him? Well, the Bible teaches us that you died, and the life that you live is a life that is hidden with Christ in God. The idea is that you died, and your life was buried with Christ, as it were, in God, meaning that your life that you now live, you live it with Christ. I mean, "For I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless, I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me. And the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me." What does that mean, Paul? Well, we don't know exactly what that entirely means. It means that Christ lives His life through us, but is it I, or is it Christ? Well, it's a life hidden with Christ in God.

I love the idea of the Russian nesting dolls, where you open one, and you get the other one out, and the other one out. It's kind of like that: our life is tucked away, hidden with Christ in God. And even though we are living this life as we are, and we're living for the glory of God, and we're living for the kingdom of God, and we go through this life, our life is essentially

veiled in its complete understanding to the world and to those around us. But everything that the Christian endeavors to do, which is to be like Jesus Christ, will one day be fully manifested before all. That when Jesus Christ returns, we will appear with Him in glory, which means that the life which we now live will be manifested to be as Christ's life lived in us, now then fully revealed to be known to the world and to ourselves.

It was Lightfoot who said this: "The veil which now shrouds your higher life from others will then be withdrawn. The world, which now persecutes, despises, and ignores, now will then be blinded with the dazzling glory of the revelation." And so, it is Christ who is our life, and He is the one that we are hidden with in the Bible. It speaks about sinners hiding from God. You know, Adam and Eve hid from the presence of the Lord when they sinned against God. In the book of Revelation, they say, "Hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb." And sinners hide from God, but the believer, the opposite has happened to him. He's been taken and hidden with Christ in God, not hiding from God, now brought into an intimate, true, spiritual, mystical union with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, with Christ in God.

Now, these are the realities that have made us who we are today. These are the realities that we must comprehend if we would ever understand what it means to seek those things which are above, to set our minds upon things which are above. You see, these realities affirm to us the very truth that we have been translated from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of His dear Son. These are the realities that show us that we live for another world to come, that there is a day of appearing, there's a day of manifestation, there's a day when the glory of God will be revealed to us in Christ, and we shall be revealed in Him and manifested.

You see, the pilgrim looks beyond because he's had something now that he has not yet fully received. He has entered into something now that is yet to be fully manifest. He's partakers of a kingdom now that shall be manifested in the day to come in full glory. He's part of a family now where he will enjoy perfect and sweet communion and union then. And so, everything that we share now, we share in part, but then we shall know and be known even as Christ, as we are known. And the idea is that the Scripture presents that God has done something to us in Christ that affects our entire vision, and henceforth, we are pilgrims. We are people that do not live in this life.

And Paul wants to make this clear to the people, so when he comes to these exhortations, they realize that these are only basic responsibilities for those realities which we have been partakers of. And look with me then in verse 1 and verse 2. It says, "If you then were raised with Christ, seek

those things which are above, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things of the earth." This language reminds me entirely of that verse in Ephesians 2:6 that we are seated with Christ Jesus in heavenly places. And the truth that Paul's bringing out here is that you're all here seated today in Harrington Park, but you're actually seated in heaven in Christ Jesus as well. And so, this is like, "Well, what does that mean? What does that look like?" Well, this is the point: these are certain realities that should govern the way you live today, that when you live in Harrington Park, you live ultimately in Christ Jesus.

So, this is the point he's trying to bring out: you're here, but you're also part of another world. And so, he begins by saying that if you have been risen with Christ, what is our responsibility? What is our duty? Well, he begins by saying, "seek the things which are above." Now, the word "seek" is in the imperative and present, meaning you keep on seeking. It's a command that we keep on seeking after, that we keep on pursuing, that you and I keep on persevering and searching and inquiring and making our endeavor the upward things. That's what it literally means, the things which are above. You see, the Christian is commanded to have a disposition of heart and of life that is on a pursuit, if I could say, a heavenly pursuit.

He is not one that is encouraged to pursue the things below, but the disposition of his heart and the ultimate desire of his longing should be the pursuit of things that are heavenward, that are heavenly, that are eternal. And so, this is a command. He commands us to seek those things which are above. But secondly, he goes on to command us in verse number two, which says, "Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth." And so, he talks about our disposition of heart, that we are to be a people that pursue God, pursue His truth, pursue His Word, pursue the things that are heavenly. But he also says you need to set your mind upon, which is a little bit different but essentially parallel.

One, we could argue, refers to our goal, our pursuit, and our vision. The second one deals with what happens in here, in relationship to the vision that we have over there. It means to occupy your thoughts with things above. That's what the idea is, setting your mind. It's occupying your thoughts or having your mind inclined towards heavenly things, things that are above. As one man said, "You must not only seek heaven, you must also think heaven." You see, the Christian on his pilgrimage must not only know that that is his destination and that that is his ultimate goal, but as he steps through life and steps through life, he must deliberately give his mind to spiritual and heavenly realities. He must set his mind upon those things that are heavenly, those things which are above, the inclinations of our hearts and our thoughts.

Now, let me just make a quick comment here before we get to some practical application, and that is this: Paul is not suggesting here, in any way, shape, or form, that we live a life separate from our earthly responsibilities. He is not encouraging some kind of monasticism here and saying that your mind should never think of anything like what you're going to have for breakfast or whether or not you should wake up and go to work tomorrow because they're earthly things. I just want to make that clear because that is contrary to what's actually going to come in this epistle, where Paul is going to teach us how to live in the church, how to live in our homes, how to live for God's glory, and live a heavenly life in our practical duties here on earth.

So, he's not encouraging this lifestyle of having an absent-mindedness from earthly realities. The setting of our minds upon things above is not encouraging some kind of monastic lifestyle. Rather, he's telling us to view everything earthly in light of the heavenly. Essentially, as you walk on your pilgrimage, do not lose sight of what you are here for, and that these things that you encounter are means to ends and not ends in and of themselves. That's a very important thing to comprehend.

For many people, they think, "I cannot live for Jesus and live in the world. I need to somehow go to a mountain to live for Jesus." You can live for Jesus in your workplace, you can live for Jesus in your home, you can live for Jesus wherever you are. In fact, the Gospel is meant to permeate every part of our lives, that we show ourselves to be under the wisdom of God in the earthly things, if I could say, in the things which are part of the life that we now live. So, we have to just think about that. We're thinking in light of God's coming, in light of the judgment, in light of heaven, in light of our destination, and we're viewing everything in this life in light of that. We're not losing our marbles, if I could say. It's very important to know.

But what does it mean? What do these things mean? What does it mean to seek after God? What does that look like? You know, when I think about what it looks like, I think of people that seek after all kinds of things in this life, and I can think of three main things that come to mind. Firstly, it's one who seeks after something gives that thing time. Secondly, he gives that thing value, meaning it costs him something to follow after the thing that he's seeking. And thirdly, it involves a sense of exertion and labor.

You know, when you think of people in this world that are pursuing things in life, you'll find that those three things are true in all their pursuits. There's a sense of an obsession, if I could say, or there's a sense of this: it takes up every moment of their day. It could be, for example, it could be even something like work. Let's say, even though we're looking at it in a lot of biblical ways, but let's look at it in a negative light, where we could give every moment, every minute, every ounce of our attention to work. We can't

switch off at night, we can't go home and do things that we need to do with our families, we can't come to church and worship the Lord because we're occupied in our thoughts. Our hearts are pursuing greater, more money, more popularity in the workplace, a higher position, if I could say.

And so, you can see this: it takes time, it costs, it gives, there's this energy that is given to this, there's this study, this exploration. Someone who's trying to make a discovery or a new invention will spend hours researching, studying, and there will be this sense of, "I want to know this, I want to learn of this, I want to understand this," and I'm going to put that extra time in, that extra effort in, every spare moment to understand these things. You see, one who is seeking is not coasting. He is one who is pursuing, and the pursuit of whatever he's pursuing takes up his time, takes up his energy, takes up his thought life.

Now, when God encourages us in the text of Scripture here to seek after Him, He wants us to do exactly the same thing, but not concerning things that are in this earth, but things concerning heaven. God wants us to be occupied with thoughts of Himself, God wants us to be occupied with thoughts of Christ and of His kingdom. He wants us to be occupied with thoughts concerning the conversion of the lost. He wants us to be occupied with thoughts concerning our own living in holiness and living in righteousness and in godliness. He wants us to be occupied with the importance of understanding our place in prayer, in our place in praising God, and our place in the Word of God.

When God encourages us in the text here and commands us to pursue Him and to seek Him, what He wants us to do is have mind, body, and soul engaged in the purposes of His kingdom, not engaged in other things at the expense of the purposes of His kingdom and of His glory. And the Bible says here that if you have then been risen with Christ, if this is true of you, as it was true of the Colossians, God expects us to pursue Him and to pursue the things of God with all of our being. This is what the text of Scripture encourages us to do.

If you've been raised, if you've been a recipient, if you have received resurrection life and God's mercy, if it is true of you, if Christ is your life, the sustainer of your life, the source of your life, if He is the Bread of Life to you, the Water of Life to you, then, my friend, He should be the One with whom you are most enamored, the One who you want to study, the One who you want to search out, the One who you want to pursue, the One whom your affections go after. You see, it says in the Old King James Version, it says, "Set your affections on things above," and that essentially is the kind of meaning that it's saying here: your affections, your heart, your mind, your entire being pursuing God.

This is what God expects us to do, and if these realities are true of us as believers, this should be the way in which we should respond to those things. We should pursue heavenly realities that are consistent with our position and privileges. Let me ask you this question: What does your heart yearn for most in the quietness of your soul, in the stillness of the day, or in an hour that you get?

David said, "As the deer pants after the water brooks, so my soul longs after You, O God" (Psalm 42:1). Yes, he was living as king, ruling a kingdom with servants under him, but his heart was fixed on God. He said, just like that deer that is so thirsty, "My soul thirsts for the living God; when shall I appear before God? I have seen Your glory and power in the sanctuary. All I want to do is come before Your presence and know You, and have You, and know in experience what it means to be hidden with Christ in God. I want that newness of life, that worshipful spirit that comes from that newness of life. I want to know You, God. I want to pursue You, to live a life after You, to follow hard after You."

What is it, brethren, that your heart yearns for most? What are the thoughts that govern your heart and your thought life? The Bible says, as was read to us this morning, that the Gentiles seek after things – not bad things necessarily, like clothing and housing, which are basic essentials and necessities of life – but the problem is that they seek after them as their pursuit. They live for houses, cars, money, and comfort. When Jesus Christ calls us, He calls us to depart from all the things that we love most to love Him supremely. That's why the passage of Scripture says, "You cannot serve two masters. If you hate the one and despise the other, you cannot serve God and money or mammon" (Matthew 6:24).

What God is essentially saying to us is that believers are not those that seek after these things, even though they're good. They don't govern their thought life; those things don't consume their motive and their attention and shape their entire life. What shapes their life is the kingdom of God: "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you" (Matthew 6:33). God says, "Come apart from the things that occupy your thoughts most of the day and come to Me. I will provide."

Even with a good motive, in a sense of anxiety, we can be carried away from the worship of God. We can be carried away from our pursuit of God. The pilgrim can say, "But how am I going to eat tomorrow if I don't do this and do that? I better not worry about that heavenly city; it's too hard to get there, or there are too many hurdles or problems along the road. I better just rest here for a while." But no, his mind is set on things above. He's

pursuing a place, a destination that has been given to him by God, and he won't let the earthly comforts take his affections away from the One who has purchased him. He won't let the things of this life consume his thought life. He won't let the things of this life consume his motivations and the reasons for why he does things. What occupies our heart most? Is it comfort, riches, relationships, or maybe our reputation?

The passage also says that we should lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven, not on earth. Once again, this is the attitude of one who's seeking and pursuing God. As one man said, "Earthly thoughts can never sustain a heavenly walk."

What's your number one wish or prayer? For the Apostle Paul, it was, "Oh, that I might know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable unto His death" (Philippians 3:10). His all-consuming passion was to know Him, to know Him, to know Him.

What does seeking God look like? Well, it began in the kingdom of Judah with Josiah. The kingdom of Judah was far from God, and idolatry reigned in the land. There was an eight-year-old boy, the Bible says, who began to seek the Lord. What did it look like? First, it began with a humbling of himself. He recognized that he hadn't been seeking the Lord, and that the people under his rule hadn't been seeking the Lord. So, what did he do? There was a humble confession and repentance, and then the idols in the land were torn down, the high places removed. All the things that stood in the way of the worship of God were gone. It ended up with the restored worship of the true and living God in that city under King Josiah.

What's it going to look like for us to be a people that seek God? It's going to begin with confession, repentance, the removing of idols, and the restoration of the true worship of God. Where does it begin? Begin where Josiah began: in the Word of God. He got the Book of the Law, read the Word of God, and said, "Oh, boy, we're not living as we ought to live. Let us go and let us seek our God."

I think if the truth be known, brethren, when we sit and consider our hearts, we have to ask ourselves, are we truly, honestly, genuinely pursuing God with all of our hearts, with all of our souls, with all of our strength, with all of our might? Let's pray.