

New Every Morning

Colossians 3:1-4

Rev. Brett Shoemaker ~ May 7, 2023 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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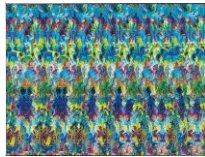
¹ So, if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on the things that are above, not on the things that are on earth, ³ for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory (Colossians 3:1-4, NRSV)

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Lord, we open our hands to you to receive what you offer. We open our hearts to let you fill our lives. Let my words and our thoughts lead somehow to a message you intend for us. Amen.

[Magic Eye image of a lamb is displayed on the screen]¹

No, we are not having technical difficulties. This image is here on purpose. During the 9:00 service, I handed this out on paper to the children, and asked if they could see the three-dimensional image in the picture. These pictures are called Magic Eye. They work when you get your eyes to diverge or move away from each other while you're staring at the image. For some people, it works right away. For others, the exercise ends in frustration.



So, of course, I'm curious. How many of you can see the image on the screen? What is it? Was it immediate or did it take some time and some focus? All right. Hold that thought.

Four short verses of Paul to start off the third chapter in Colossians. The theme is focusing, or setting our minds or hearts, on Christ – on things *above*. You might recognize this as part of a common thread that runs throughout the Bible – not just the New Testament, but the Scriptures that come before as well. The idea of making God our focus is nothing new, and has become the centerpiece for any act in a Christian's life including

reading Scripture, fasting, praying, meditating, even serving others. We focus on Christ.

The Psalms is really a book of songs from people who are putting their eyes on the Lord. The entire book begins like this: *Blessed is the one whose delight is in the Law of the Lord. He meditates on it day and night.*²

And later, after trouble comes even with all that Bible reading, God stops the Psalmist and says: *Be still...and know that I am God.*³ Put your eyes back on me!

Through Jeremiah the prophet, God says, *I will give them a heart to know me...they will return to me with their whole heart.*⁴

At a low point, Jonah said, *When I had lost all hope, I turned my thoughts once more to the Lord.*⁵

The writer of Hebrews says it clearly, as if Paul could've written it: *Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and the perfecter of our faith.*⁶

To the Philippian church, Paul writes: *Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.*⁷

But perhaps Jesus said it best when he said, *where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*⁸ The things that we put foremost on our minds will be the engine that drives our longings and desires, and eventually, our actions.

Of course! It's a great idea. But have you ever tried to do it? Have you ever woken up in the morning and said, "Today, my eyes are going to be fixed on Jesus all day." I've tried it. On my best day my record is about 9:30 in the morning. It's like trying to read straight through the Bible. I've never made it past Exodus.

It could be that the method I'm using is all wrong. I'm still trying to see this exercise of *setting my eyes on things*

¹ *Magic Eye*. N.E. Thing Enterprises. Kansas City, 1993.

² Psalm 1:1-2

³ Psalm 46:10

⁴ Jeremiah 24:7

⁵ Jonah 2:7

⁶ Hebrews 12:1-2

⁷ Philippians 4:8

⁸ Matthew 6:21

above as a product of my own determined will instead of trusting God's spirit within me.

At the beginning of the Magic Eye Book, there are instructions with several methods for how to see the three-dimensional image. In all of the methods, they eventually lead to the need to see *through* the photo, not at the designs on the surface. Almost everyone who takes the time to sit patiently and wait for that to happen sees the picture eventually. Some don't. It's not a perfect analogy. It's almost as if our own effort gets in the way of allowing the picture to come forth.

I think we're dealing with something similar here. It's so hard to see past our earthly efforts into to allow how Christ sees US to come into focus, which might surprise us and change everything.

Our passage opens: *If you have been raised with Christ...* (A few verses earlier Paul says: *if you have died with Christ...*) Our lives are so woven together with Christ that it is Christ that is working everything *through* us. We cannot see our lives as separate from what Christ is doing. It's easy to get lost here, but stay with me. Listen to what Paul tells the Galatians (2:20), such a good parallel to these words to the Colossians: *I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who lives but Christ who lives in me. For the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loves me and gave himself up for me.*⁹

This is a good place for a DEEP BREATH. I think Paul meant for this passage to be a bit of a pause between two very different sections of this letter. Up to this point, we have looked at depth and theology and ideas centering around the place of Christ above all. Following these verses will be full of practical ways we can live the life that naturally flows out of Christ's promises. But for now, we just breathe and rest...and practice looking into his eyes.

So many of these new Colossian Christians wanted to *add* to what Jesus did by bringing their religious background, their family lineage, the things they had done – circumcision, sacrifices, keeping the Sabbath, following the rules. Paul wasn't having it. So, he brought to them a new formula:

Jesus + Nothing = Everything. (This was especially true for the Galatians, as well as other churches he pastored, too).

As soon as we add something to the equation and think that it gives us more in God's eyes, then we've missed

the Gospel message. At that point, we'll walk away sad, like the rich young ruler that was told he needed to give everything he owned away to the poor to follow Jesus. He brought his obedience to the commandments (and proud of it) and also his wealth, and Jesus said: *You don't need it!* **Everything** has been accomplished on the cross. You don't need it. Most of us have something in our lives that we feel if we stopped doing it, we'd lose some part of what God has offered to us. We don't need those things. Or we've been told that we *need* to do something or stop doing something. We don't need those things, either. Don't let your pastor, or your friend, or your parent, or the rest of the world tell you that you need to do something different to receive ALL the promises of God.

I'm so grateful that we're beginning a journey of partnership with Young Life. Young Life for me in High School was so important for me in High School. I learned a lot in church. But this simple, gospel message to students, wrapped in relationships with adults who care – that's where Young Life has always excelled.

It's only *out of gratitude* for the promise of salvation, joy, freedom, presence of Jesus walking with us, and so much more that we begin to live in a *new way*, naturally!

Even in this passage, we are tempted because of the way we are wired, to look for the thing we have to *do* here. We *want* a method we can try to “set our minds on things above,” to get a hold on this Christian life. Most of would love black and white instructions. Jesus just gives us himself...a relationship that keeps us guessing...and living a great adventure of joy along the way.

When Paul tells us we should not have our minds on things of this earth, he doesn't mean I can't think about a good blended chai, or a round of golf, a nice dinner with my wife, or a day with my daughter. Those aren't just earthly, selfish things that I should put out of my mind. If I go down that road, again, I've missed the point. Also, it probably means I didn't hear the Lorie Sprinkle's powerful message last week that invited me into freedom from thinking along those lines.

No! The “earthly things” Paul's talking about if we follow from the end of Chapter 2 are all of the rules and regulations and restrictions we put on ourselves as (in Paul's words) “self-imposed piety”. It becomes a religion of shoulds and shouldn'ts. That's where the previous passage left off.

⁹ Galatians 2:20

So, let's stay true to the end of Chapter 2. It has a nice ring to it, doesn't it?

Stay true to chapter 2

And chapter 3 can make you free...

(After Chapter 4, that's it, no more...okay, really I'm done now)

Paul says IF we have been raised with Christ. But you could just as accurately say SINCE you have been raised with Christ. In reality, Jesus has already done that work, so our status has changed. But the nuanced word IF is a way of asking the Colossians and asking you and I if we are *experiencing* and *realizing* the gift of being raised with Christ. This isn't just a nice thing to add to our lives to make our lives better. We die with Christ. The result is being raised completely new with our eyes on Christ, full of life and gratitude.

Remember: Jesus did not come to turn bad boys and girls into good boys and girls...Jesus came to bring life to dead things...and that includes us.

Jesus said, *I have come (why?) that you might have life, AND that you might have it abundantly!*

Music is a great example. I know people that have received Christ as savior at some point in their lives, then felt they could no longer listen to music that wasn't explicitly Christian. But music, as with everything we do, has the power to lead us toward Christ or lead us away, regardless.

Christian music, because of the message, can certainly open us up to the life Christ offers. I was on my way to a funeral several years ago, and the song "Grace Wins" by Matthew West came on, and I was so moved in that moment that I framed everything I was *going* to say at that funeral around the theme of grace that wins even in the face of death.

But then, just the other day, I was drive through the Clarksburg vineyards and the song "Africa" came on by Toto, "I bless the rains down in Africa..." The sun was shining but it started to rain a bit. In that moment, I was grateful for the time I got to spend in Africa, and for the connections so many in our church continue to make in Ethiopia and Kenya and around the continent. A team of you are going there soon! But, mostly, I was just experiencing life and joy in that moment. Then *Sweet Home Alabama* came on and I was just embarrassing myself, singing along.

(Even as I was working on this, my daughters were downstairs, and I was enjoying listening them play

guitar and sing all kinds of Harry Styles and Taylor Swift songs together. So good.)

To be sure, there are songs and messages in music today that are not life-giving, and even glorify violence or sexuality or substance abuse in a way that does not seem to be living out of Christ's promises.

The same is true of all areas of life. Some things are obvious that take our eyes completely off of the things above. And some things very clearly steer our eyes back onto Christ. And for the gray areas, we have each other. We should all have a trusted friend that loves the Lord that we can ask: is the light of Christ shining through this action or these words or this relationship?

Then, in all things, we can pray! So much of keeping our eyes on Christ is just prayer. Talking to God throughout the day, realizing that Christ walks with us, whether we get answers or not.

One more thing I want to highlight in this passage isn't a word, but a punctuation mark. I discovered again the difference a comma can make. It can completely change the context. You might not think it could make much of a difference, but it really does. Here's one example among many:

"Let's eat, Grampa!"

You don't want to take the comma out of this sentence. ["Let's eat Grampa!"]

It completely changes it.

In our passage you'll find several commas.

But one of them only appears in a few translations. *Seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.*

Many translations don't have the comma so that it reads *where Christ is seated at the right hand of God*. The impression is that he is up there, looking down here, watching to make sure we are doing everything right. Later translations put in the comma to say that, while it's true, Christ is seated at the right hand, One with the Father, that our perspective should be from "where Christ is." We should be reading, praying, and living with the perspective of Christ, from where he has shown us he also is, in us and among us, offering himself in love to us.

Experience tells me that choosing to follow Jesus is not something that just happens once. A life woven together with Christ means that the opportunity is

NEW EVERY MORNING. Every morning we have a new opportunity to say, “Jesus, I choose to follow you no matter what, wherever that may take me today.”

Many scholars call Colossians a theology of the “already, but not yet”. We have not yet experienced the fullness of eternity and redemption. That will only come when Christ returns or when we pass on from this life. Great hope in that. This is what Paul means when he says our lives are “hidden” in Christ. Our status has changed, and we are new creations, but God is still working out his purposes in us, so that what we will become is not yet fully known.

But in the meantime, we *already* get a taste of the glory of Christ within us as we fix our eyes on things above. There’s great joy in that. We can experience a bit of heaven even now, and we are reminded of what Christ is promising us forever.

I was reminded of this image as I sat and sat, staring at the words in this passage. And like Magic Eye, what began to emerge isn’t what we are supposed to *do* in setting our eyes on things above. When we look long with our eyes on Christ, we discover an incredible, sacrificial love. It’s realizing that Christ is...and was...and always will be...setting his eyes of love...upon us.

In this Magic Eye, the image that emerges is not what you expect. A lamb. Everyone expected something different from the Messiah. A lion? A warrior? Maybe. But not a gentle animal associated with sacrifice! We often think of qualities of power and might before we think of qualities of forgiveness, humility, and tenderness. But this is what we find when set our eyes on things above. And when we do this consistently, God’s love becomes *new every single morning*. We can be amazed and grateful. We can die and rise with Christ every day. This is the good news of the gospel.

Amen.

I want to invite us to the Lord’s table with a devotional that meant a lot to me at the Men and Boys retreat last weekend. Only a few of you got up early to hike to the cross that morning. Half of you weren’t even invited on the retreat. Sorry about that. Anyway...worth repeating.

A short hike up from the camp stood on a hill overlooking a peaceful valley where the morning fog near the ocean was beginning to lift and make its way through the trees and into the cold morning air. Dan Baumgartner, a pastor from one of the other churches, shared first about how much we can learn about God

from looking out over creation. You can see power, and order, and beauty, and intentionality.

But what you can’t learn from looking at creation is how God feels about *us*. To know this, you have to turn around, and look up at the cross right behind that view. The cross is our symbol of what God went through to show the most amazing love for you and for me. *This* is how we know how God feels about us. To receive the gift of this meal we are admitting that nothing in ourselves makes us worthy. That means everyone is invited. If you want to set your mind on Christ this morning, this is a great way to start. Through this table we discover the way Christ feels about us!

The Next Step

A Resource for Life Groups and/or Personal Application

1. Read Colossians 3:1-4 again. What stands out to you?
2. Scan the verses Paul writes just before (2:20-23) and just after (3:5-11). How does this week’s passage (3:1-4) serve as a transition between these two sections of Paul’s letter to the church in Colossae?
3. What does it look like in your own life when you set your mind on things above?
4. Paul’s encouragement that your life is hidden with Christ in God is a bit mysterious. What do you think this phrase means?
5. Paul’s theology in Colossians about Christ’s Kingdom and redemption is often summed up in the phrase “already and not yet”. What do you look forward to most about Christ’s promises in eternity (the not yet)? Which of those promises can we begin to experience right now (already)?
6. Could it be true that Christ has set his mind and heart on us? If so, how does that impact what we see when we set our minds on Christ?
7. What is one way you want to set your mind on Christ this week?

Table to Table

A Question for Kids and Their Parents to Answer Together

When we focus on Jesus together, what kinds of things in the world do we see differently? What is one way we can put our minds on Jesus more as a family?