

MAKING THE CHRIST CONNECTIONS

VI. “Connected to Heaven”

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Colossians 3:1-17

INTRODUCTION

In the small Montana town where I grew up, I had an aunt, the mother of my favorite cousin, who used to attend every funeral she possibly could. There were two funeral homes in town, and she would read the obituaries and mark her calendar to attend the scheduled services for people she never knew, sometimes able to get in on two, one at each funeral home. My mother says my aunt would sit in the back and shed copious tears for these strangers. I have no idea why she did this, but to use my brother’s expression, “She was a connoisseur of pure grief, unadulterated by relationships.”

While I doubt there was anything healthy in what my aunt was doing, funerals can be good for our soul-health. Likewise, it is good for us to spend time with those facing death, for this has the benefit of focusing our hearts and values upon what is most important, what is eternal, remembering our own mortality. I’m sure you’ve felt it in the loss of someone you love. Suddenly much of the stuff occupying so much of our lives is seen for its trivial nature— that new car felt we needed, the vacation we’d set our hopes on, even our popularity with others. As Christians, when we focus upon the eternal, it changes a lot of our values. It is also a powerful deterrent to our baser instincts and temptations. In light of heaven, we are able to give-up that temptation to get even, that jealousy, that anger, or the temptation to sexual immorality.

This is what is behind our text, *Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things* (3:2). Or, as some other translations put it, *Let heaven fill your thoughts*. Certainly it is possible to be, as they say, “so heavenly minded we are of no earthly good.” That speaks of being out-of-touch with reality and breeds contempt or indifference to things of this world. But the Bible actually encourages us to set our hearts and minds on heaven in order to live well in the here-and-now, with expanded horizons, and lives filled with noble purpose. And most of us don’t think near enough about heaven. Let’s look at what Paul is teaching here and appreciate the importance of being heavenly minded.

HEAVENLY FOCUS

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. (Col 3:1-4)

Colossians, as in most of Paul’s letters, begins with basic principles of the faith (doctrine) are laid down followed by a practical application section. Our text marks the beginning of “the practice” section. “Since, then...” connects to what has gone on in the previous two chapters. An

alternative translation would be “therefore.” This is where Paul brings it all together, letting us know exactly how this should affect our living— here’s what it means for your living.

Paul reiterates an important truth taught by Jesus and expanded on in Paul’s letters, that right now, in this life, we live in the power of Christ’s resurrection life. This is an extremely important truth for us to understand, yet it is difficult to get a hold of. I think we would all agree that the resurrection of Jesus from the dead was powerful. In it, He overcame death and all the powers of darkness. His resurrection body was eternal, could not be harmed or destroyed. It was perfect. While that is not true now of our physical bodies, it is true of us spiritually when we come to Christ. How is this?

A pastor was giving a children’s sermon, and asked the children what they had to do to get to heaven. One little boy offered, “Well first you gotta die.” That’s not what the pastor was looking for, but it was a clear statement of the obvious. To be resurrected, first we have to die.

Our text declares that the reason we can live in resurrection life is that we’ve died. Verse 3 says, *For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.* When we surrender our lives to Jesus, it is a kind of crucifixion of our old selves, our old sin-bent nature. That’s why Paul says in Gal. 2:20,

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

So, through faith, trusting completely in Jesus, we offer ourselves totally to Him. In so doing, we enter into His saving death, where all the sin that condemned us is taken away. Then, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are raised to new life— resurrection life. Christians are not people who will one day be resurrected. We are already walking in resurrection life, spiritually. We have eternal life right now. Thus, only our bodies die at the end of our life in this world. Our spirits are already alive and continue on into heaven.

Now, if you had a dramatic conversion, you don’t need much explanation of this. You knew your life was messed up, ruined beyond hope. Then you met Jesus and surrendered your life to Him. The transformation was like night and day. You were in bondage to sin and evil, and suddenly you were free. Before you had no interest in spiritual things, now you have an insatiable appetite for God. You felt guilty before, condemned for all your many sins, and now you feel clean and know you are right with God. You had hoped to get into heaven, now you know you are saved.

However, for many, their conversion was not this dramatic. They grew up in a Christian home and in the church, so when they received Christ as Lord and Savior they were already living much of the life of faith. Their lives weren’t totally messed up with sin, so the transformation may not have seemed as startling as death and resurrection. Nevertheless, that is what happens.

While at times, we may experience the thrill and surging energy of this resurrection life, most of us don’t experience all the time. Most days you may neither feel nor look resurrected. And, if you’re like me, you may not always act like you have resurrection life moving within you. Paul acknowledges that when he says, right now, *your life is now hidden with Christ in God.* It isn’t in

the open yet. We don't know the full extent of what it is like, but we look to Jesus. But, in verse 4, he says, *When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.* At that point, we will see the full extent of what this resurrection life is all about.

So, what do we do when we don't feel very resurrected? Paul gets real specific here, giving us commands in the imperative: "set your hearts on things above"(1) and "set your minds on things above"(2). This refers to our affections and our thinking. They need to be on Christ and heaven—the eternal. To a large degree, our lives are determined by our focus.

There is a sense in which where our hearts are set determines what we are alive to. We've all had the experience of talking with someone who is merely carrying on a polite conversation with you, and then you get on a subject they are *really* passionate about and they come alive. There is energy, sparkle, wonderful aspects of personality you hardly knew were in them. When we were spending a month in England a few years ago on a vacation exchange, we observed the reserve of the English. Sometimes it seemed more a shyness. Generally they seemed reluctant to initiate any conversation with a stranger. But, if you passed an Englishman walking a dog and made a complimentary comment about their dog, the results were amazing. Usually, they would become quite animated—wonderfully alive to you—speaking of their beloved dog.

Paul, by giving this "set your hearts" and "set your minds" in the form of an imperative command, is suggesting we cultivate this resurrection life by focusing on it—setting our hearts and minds on that rather than on merely earthly things. And, we can understand that as well, for we see it in practice in other areas of our lives. When I went to my first church, just out of seminary, in Southern Ohio, I knew absolutely nothing about gardening. But I was in a church full of farmers, so I felt a faint stirring within to at least grow some vegetables. There was no garden plot at the manse, but half a block down the street there was an elderly lady that had a large garden plot she no longer wanted to plant. I made arrangements with her to put her garden plot to use. I bought books and began reading all I could so I wouldn't look too foolish. I became quite obsessed with gardening once I set my heart and my mind in that direction. I was mucking out cow stalls to get manure for my garden, making compost, rescuing worms from the street and sidewalks after a rain to add to my compost pile and garden. Here was something I was absolutely dead to before. Varieties of tomatoes, the problem of potato bugs, and the dangers of a late frost would get no rise of life from me in a conversation. Now I was alive to all of that, eager to learn and share what I knew.

Paul is telling us, if we are to live well for God, we need to do some setting of our minds and hearts upon the life Christ offers us—and it will get its ultimate expression in heaven. Never reduce your life to just the here and now. Don't get so immersed in this life, shuffling along tuned only to the values of this world so that you never look up. You are created for so much more. God has in mind to make you like Christ and to reign with Him for all of eternity.

In the remainder of our Scripture, Paul fleshes out further implications of this resurrection life. In a series of more imperative commands, he talks about putting to death and ridding ourselves of all that belongs to the old sinful nature.

PUT TO DEATH

Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. (Col 3:5-11)

With, *you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self*, Paul begins to develop the metaphor of taking off old filthy clothes and then in verse 12 he begins to tell us what kind of clothes to put on. That is an effective image.

I can remember working in hot humid weather in Ohio with fiberglass insulation. As you cut it, the fibers go everywhere. It is in your clothes, hair, itching your skin. Of course, the more you sweat, the worse it gets. What joy at the end of the day to strip off those awful, itchy, dirty clothes and step into the shower to get clean, and then put on something clean.

Paul lists some pretty disgusting clothes here: *sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry*. Then he adds some more: *anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips*, along with lying. Get rid of that stuff— that pile of dirty, smelly clothes. Christ has something beautiful for you to wear, which we'll get to in a moment.

Remember what motivates us to give up this filth— setting our minds and hearts on things above. The great mathematician and theologian, Pascal, wrote, “To render passion harmless let us behave as though we had only a week to live.” Think about it. If you knew you were to stand before Christ in heaven next week (or make it tomorrow), doesn't that take the wind out of the sails of temptation? Maybe you're tempted to get even with someone who has hurt you. You are presented with the perfect chance to do serious damage to their reputation. Then you remember that tomorrow you must give account before the Master for every word spoken, every deed done. Jesus will look you in the eye and say, “Couldn't you trust me? I told you vengeance is mine, I will repay. Why did you think you needed to even the score?” Here's someone else tempted to visit that porn site but then the thought comes, tomorrow I stand before the Lord. All the put-downs, the anger, the jealousies, the sexual immorality lose their power in the light of the eternal. Suddenly we feel more inclined to love, pay attention to the needy, shun our self-absorbed lives, our obsession with things, in exchange for something that will bless us for all of eternity.

The ability to delay gratification of a desire in order to achieve something of greater value is a mark of maturity. You see it in little children. The younger, more immature they are, the less they are able to delay what they want in order to have something better. “Help mommy pick up your toys and we'll go to McDonald's for lunch next week,” probably won't work for a three-year-old. But, a promise of McDonald's as soon as we're finished probably will work. As children grow, their success depends upon being able to say no to the immediate to achieve a

greater goal: to study when we don't feel like it so they can be prepared for college and a career; working hard in the weight room and at practice to win the big game. As adults we plan and save for future goals, denying ourselves something in the present to gain something greater.

As a society, we seem to be less and less willing to wait for anything. We want it now! We don't wait to save for it, we buy it on credit. Self-denial is out. Why wait until marriage for sex? We want it now. But in so doing we miss something far greater, better, richer. Heaven is the ultimate in delayed gratification. Denial of the self here, saying no to sin here, giving our lives for the what costs us personally but benefits God's kingdom, will all be abundantly rewarded in heaven God promises. We would do well to think more of eternal rewards. Maybe I have enough money to buy a new plasma TV or a jet ski, but then I think, "Perhaps it would be smarter to invest that in something of eternal value— like lives for the kingdom of God. I'm not saying it is wrong to have a plasma TV or jet ski— but we'll be asking more of those questions of ourselves if we let heaven fill our thoughts.

PUT ON

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. (Col. 3:12-14)

Talk about attractive clothing! Why would we choose anger and slander when we can be clothed in compassion, kindness and love? There needs to be a lot of "bearing with each other" and forgiving grievances whenever we live in close relationship with people. When you have trouble forgiving others for their offenses against you, Paul says, "Remember how the Lord forgave you." He expects the same grace from us toward others.

He goes on to develop this in the context of the body of Christ as we conclude our Scripture:

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Col 3:15-17)

I don't think that needs any elaboration. Isn't that the way you want to live? That will be the result if we set our hearts and minds on things above, not on things on earth.

CONCLUSION

It is a challenge in our society to keep heaven in our thinking. The fact that we have it so good here certainly works against us. While all of us can think of improvements for our life as we have it now, for the most part in 21st century America we are pretty comfortable. That can take the edge off heaven for us. Remember those Negro spirituals— how heaven was at the forefront of their thinking and living? Christians who live with persecution keep a lively focus upon

heaven. Those suffering in bodies wracked with pain or other disabling conditions think a lot about heaven. As a result, their lives are lived better in the present, with higher ideals, nobler purposes, and greater purity from sin.

For us, it is a matter of continually setting our hearts and minds like an internal compass pointing toward heaven and Christ. Anything that brings us into the presence of Jesus helps this along because His presence is so wonderful that anything that would move us away from that pales in comparison. With that, we can consistently say no to our old sin-natures that have been crucified with Christ and yes to the new life in Christ. In the short-run, sin can look pretty attractive. In the long-run, we know it is a terrible choice.