

## Bible Study Guide

PASTORATE

April 3, 2013

### Lectionary Readings

Psalms 118; Acts 10:34–43; **Colossians 3:1–4**; Luke 24:1–10

### Background

Colossians is one of the shorter letters of Paul, and yet it presents one of the grandest visions of Jesus in the New Testament. Central to this portrayal is a challenge to the church to be a community centered on and marked by Christ rather than Caesar, to demonstrate an alternative way of living in the face of the Empire—a way of living that is beautiful and contagious on the one hand, and yet subversive on the other.

The first part of Paul's letter is an extended introduction (1:1–2:5): thanksgiving (1:1–8); prayer (1:9–23); and a synopsis of Paul's ministry and message (1:24–2:5). The thematic statement for the entire letter is 2:6–7, which speaks of the goal of Christian maturity. After addressing the threat that Judaism poses to such growth (2:8–23), Paul moves to challenge the Colossian church to pursue maturity based solely on their union with Jesus Christ (3:1–4:6). In other words, being a part of a new creation in Christ enables believers to perform a new morality. If they are truly a part of the kingdom Jesus inaugurated with his resurrection, then they must live accordingly.

### Colossians 3:1–4

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

### Commentary

These four verses provide the basis for Paul's later moral exhortations. Because the Colossians are united with Christ, then they can and must live accordingly, not as part of this evil age, but as part of the age to come.

*Seek* is better translated *keep seeking*, which parallels the main point of this letter: "just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him" (2:6). The path to maturity is not found in the attempts at holiness mentioned in 2:8–23 (rituals, festival observances, regulations, etc.), but in seeking *the things that are above*, which is spelled out as the place *where Christ is*, that is, *seated at the right hand of God* (an allusion to Ps 110). All of these descriptions point to the place of heaven, where Christ is ruling, that is, the place where God's will is done. Being heavenly minded does not mean living in the clouds. The Colossians, rather, are to seek the rule of Christ, God's will done on earth. This command is a close equivalent to "seek first the kingdom of God" (Matt 6:33), but here it is linked to Christ's resurrection and the believer's union with him.

Again, *set your minds* is better translated *keep thinking about*, which expands what it means *to seek*. Central to Christian living is “the renewing of the mind” (Rom 12:2), a deliberate focus on how one’s life should take on the character of Jesus. *The things that are above* are now contrasted with *things that are on earth*, which not only looks back to the requirements of Judaism mentioned in 2:16–23, but points forward to Paul’s command to put to death evil behaviors (3:5–9). The distinction between these two here is **not** between the spiritual and the physical, but between God’s will and things that oppose God’s will; the contrast is ethical in nature.

In verses 3–4, Paul speaks of our standing with Christ as past, present, and future. First, in the past *you have died*. In other words, because you have died with Christ, you no longer belong to the old order of things. Second, in the present *your life is hidden with Christ in God*. It might be difficult to see or understand, but currently they are united with Christ. The age to come has already dawned with Christ, and so they belong to it. But the old age still surrounds them, so their lives are in this sense *hidden*. Third, in the future *you also will be revealed with him in glory*. This completes Paul’s description of a Christian’s status: with Christ, one has died, is risen, and will appear in glory. This is the tension of the Christian life. We find ourselves living in one world, yet citizens of another because of our union with Christ. This perspective is the foundation for building genuine holiness. Because of this new reality, we are to keep seeking the realities of the new age, a world where Christ is King and his will is done.

### Discussion Questions

1. What questions did this passage raise in your mind?
2. Which part of this passage convicts you the most? Why?
3. Which part of this passage inspires you the most? Why?
4. What part of this passage is difficult to understand?
5. How can this passage do damage or cause confusion when people interpret *the things that are above* as “spiritual things” and the *things that on earth* as “physical things”?
6. Without the foundation of 3:1–4, Paul’s appeals to holiness (3:5—4:6) turn Christian living into duty, drudgery, obligation, and lifeless rule-following. How can we keep our pursuit of holiness free from such legalistic trappings?
7. What did you learn about God from this passage?
8. Regardless of where your faith is at right now, if you were to apply what we learned about God to something in your life this week, what would that be?

### The Collect of the Day

O God, whose blessed Son made himself known to his disciples in the breaking of bread: Open the eyes of our faith, that we may behold him in all his redeeming work; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. *Amen*.