

THE NEED FOR CHRISTIANS TO BE HEAVENLY MINDED
COLOSSIANS 3:1-4

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Writing in *The Wall Street Journal* several years ago (6/15/2004), Harvard professor Samuel Huntington argued, “**Statistics say America is not only a religious nation but also a Christian one. Up to 85% of Americans identify themselves as Christians. ...America is a predominantly Christian nation with a secular government.**” In further support of his case Professor Huntington cited Supreme Court decisions from 1811, 1892, and 1931 in which justices declared that the US is a Christian nation.

More recent surveys show that this Christian majority is shrinking. The Pew Research company claims that now only two-thirds of American adults identify as Christians. Still this is a significant majority.

If the United States is somehow a Christian nation, we might legitimately wonder why abortion is the law of the land, why marriage between people of the same gender is legal throughout the country, why drug abuse is such a problem, and why the institution of the family is so threatened. How can these things be in a country where most people claim to be Christians in some way?

The surveys which Christian pollster George Barna has taken over the last couple of decades show that the beliefs and values of Americans who identify themselves as born-again Christians are all too similar to those of unbelievers. Barna also claims that fewer than one in ten born-again Christians have what he describes as a Biblical worldview that impacts their decisions and behaviors. How is this problem to be corrected?

I would suggest that we must develop more heavenly minded Christians. That is the Apostle Paul’s concern in the passage before us this morning. His thoughts are just as relevant today as they were in the first century.

We have reached the halfway point in our study of Paul’s letter to the Colossians. As is true of many of the epistles of Paul, the first part of the book emphasizes doctrines and beliefs while the second half stresses practical application. Paul has been seeking in the first half to counter false teachers who were misleading the Christians who lived in a small town in western Asia Minor. He has touched on basics of the Christian faith with a strong emphasis on the sovereignty of Christ. Now he is going to move toward practical applications of these doctrines.

The first four verses of #3 serve as a transition into this new section. The author summarizes the implications of the first part of the book and moves his readers toward applying them in their individual lives. Let's see what he has to say that is relevant to us.

I.

First, in vv. 1 & 2 we find THE EXHORTATION TO BE HEAVENLY-MINDED. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE EXHORTATION TO BE HEAVENLY-MINDED) The exhortation is repeated twice in these two verses. It is stated in slightly different ways. First, in v. 1 the Apostle Paul writes, **"If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God."** The original Greek grammar used here implies that his readers have been raised with Christ. So it could be translated as **"Since then you have been raised with Christ..."**

Heaven and the abode of God are associated in the Bible with the direction "up." The disciples saw Jesus ascend into heaven. They heard two angels tell them that that in the same way in which He was taken up into heaven, He would return eventually to earth. In the Book of Revelation the Apostle John would later see the new Jerusalem descend out of heaven to rest upon the earth. Thus the abode of God and Christ was associated with "the things above."

The false teachers at Colossae were also seeking things above. They were looking for visions and were seeking contact with angels and spiritual beings. But Paul is urging Christians to focus specifically on the place where Christ is.

Paul encourages his readers, and us, to **"seek the things that are above."** He uses a present tense verb of command. That indicates ongoing action. The apostle is not talking about a one time commitment. He is talking about a regular, ongoing activity. So we could translate this part of the verse, as some Bible versions have it, **"...keep seeking the things that are above."** The fact that he has to encourage Christians to engage in this activity suggests that it is not automatic and natural. It will take work and discipline.

For the purpose of additional emphasis and added explanation Paul restates the command in v. 2. He says, **"Set your minds on things that are above..."** Again he uses a present tense verb of command, implying ongoing action and regular activity. This verb specifically calls for mental activity. But he is not calling just for theoretical, abstract, imaginative thinking. He is calling for a commitment of the will.

By way of contrast he adds, **"...not on the things that are on earth."** Paul is not saying that the physical earth is bad. He just finished #2 by criticizing the heretics at Colossae for their extreme asceticism. The false teachers there were apparently saying that matter is inherently evil. Therefore the earth and our physical bodies are bad. What we should do is buffet the body and deny the body its wants in order to free the human spirit to focus on God and the realm of the spirits. Paul said that such thinking is wrong. It is not from God. The human body is the temple of God. It is to be treated with respect and care.

Instead Paul is seemingly talking about the moral and philosophical ways of being that are too often characteristic of life on earth in contrast to the priorities of heaven. It is the kind of thinking which characterizes the false teachers at Colossae. It is the kind of thinking we find too often in the world around us.

In Philippians #3 the apostle used very similar terminology. Listen to what he says (PHILIPPIANS 3:18) in vv. 18 & 19 of Philippians #3: **“For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. (PHILIPPIANS 3:19) Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.”**

With what are earthly things associated? Unbelievers, whose god, the text literally says, is their stomach. Self-centeredness is the focal point of this earthly way of being. It leads to shameful ways of being that are contrary to God’s moral code. But at the heart of this earthly way of being is self. It is a way of thinking and acting that revolves around me and what I want. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Ptolemy was a second century mathematician and astronomer who lived in Alexandria, Egypt. He taught that the earth was the center of the universe and that all of the planets revolve around it. Such was the thinking of mankind for the many centuries which followed. It was Copernicus who lived in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries who correctly taught that it is the sun which is the center of our planetary system, around which the planets actually revolve.

So it is that much of humanity around us thinks that we are the center of the universe and that that life should revolve around us. The Bible tells us that the Son of God is actually the center of the universe around which life ultimately revolves. He should have the central place in our lives.

The things of the earth upon which we are not to set our minds would include pleasure and honor and power and self-fulfillment and popularity and wealth. These things are not wrong in and of themselves. Godly people are often blessed with them. The error is setting our minds on these things, making the pursuit of them central to our life, making them the center of the universe.

Jack Benny told a story about a run-in with a robber. Supposedly he was walking down the street one day when a guy stuck a gun in his ribs and yelled, “Your money or your life!” Jack Benny, in his characteristic fashion, had a long pause. The impatient robber barked, “Well, what’s it going to be?” Jack replied, “Don’t rush me! I’m thinking!” That undue emphasis on materialism is an earthly way of being.

An earthly way of being also is reflected in doubt and anxiety and discouragement and fear and jealousy and the desire for revenge. Earthly things remove God from the equation of life. Jesus said, **“Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”** Our treasure is in heaven. That is where our minds should be directed.

In practical terms setting our minds on the things above means applying God's perspective to our priorities, our values, our circumstances, our goals, and our emotions. The world around us will supply us with an earthly perspective that reflects the absence of God. We will get it from TV, from an educational curriculum that excludes God, from our coworkers, from neighbors, from the news media, and sometimes from family members. Our own emotional feelings of jealousy and anger and loneliness and discouragement will tempt us to turn away from a heavenly perspective.

How can we stay heavenly minded? That comes from being informed about, and reminded of, God's perspective on life, which is found in His Word, the Bible. We need to keep returning to Bible study. That means regular devotions. Our personal Bible reading can be augmented by Bible studies, by listening to Christian radio, by reading Christian books, by watching Christian podcasts, and by fellowship with Christian friends. We also need to pray regularly.

Christian columnist Cal Thomas says that he likes to read his Bible and the newspaper first thing in the morning so that he can get both sides of the issues of the day. That's not a bad perspective. We need to work at being heavenly minded. The key ingredient is a regular intake of God's Word.

II.

The Apostle Paul also provides us with THE REASONS TO BE HEAVENLY-MINDED. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE REASONS TO BE HEAVENLY-MINDED) I find six of these reasons from v. 1 and vv. 3-4.

A.

From v. 1 we find first that CHRISTIANS HAVE BEEN RAISED WITH CHRIST. (I. THE REASONS... A. CHRISTIANS HAVE BEEN RAISED...) He begins v. 1 with the clause, **"If then you have been raised up with Christ..."** I pointed out a moment ago that the writer assumes that this is the case. He is writing to Christians, who have all been raised with Christ.

Back in #2 v. 12 Paul spoke of believers **"having been buried with him [Christ] in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead."** Water baptism is a picture of what has happened spiritually. Chapter 2 v. 12 mentions that it is faith which is the key responsibility.

In both passages this being raised with Christ is seen as a past event. It is associated with the time in our lives when we put our faith in Christ. This being raised with Christ means that we share in His resurrection life. We are no longer subject to eternal death. We are guaranteed a home in heaven. We have eternal life now. We have heavenly power available to us now. Therefore we should be heavenly minded. We should work at setting our minds on the things above.

B.

Secondly, we should be heavenly minded because CHRIST IS AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD. (II. A. B. CHRIST IS AT THE...) Paul also points that out in v. 1. Historically to be at someone's right hand meant to be in their favored position. Still today we speak of someone being another's right hand man. In early Bible days the blessing of a father upon his favorite son was passed on by placing his right hand on the son. Jacob's son Benjamin was given a name that means "son of my right hand." In the royal courts of ancient days the position of greatest honor was at the king's right side.

This is the background for one of the most important verses in the Old Testament. (PSALM 110:1) Psalm 110 is a psalm written by David. The first verse says, **"The Lord says to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.'"** If David is the king, who is his lord who has yet another Lord? It is the Messiah, God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ's Lord is God the Father. Jesus Christ and the New Testament writers refer to this verse as many as 33 times to point to the sovereignty and deity of Christ. Paul refers to it here in our verse.

The false teachers at Colossae apparently claimed that Christ was just one of a number of spiritual beings who stood between God and the earth. Paul says, "No! This is One who has a favored position over every created spiritual being. This is One who has sovereignty. This is One who sits at the right hand of the Heavenly Father." By virtue of our faith in Him we have become part of Him, and He has become part of us.

(EPHESIANS 2:6) In Ephesians 2:6 the Bible says that **"[God] raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus."** Sometimes New Testament writers use a past tense verb to describe a future certainty. We haven't actually been raised up with Christ yet and put in heaven. We are still upon the earth. But that is certain to happen in the future. That could be the meaning of Ephesians 2:6. Or Paul could be saying that by virtue of our close identification with Jesus we have, in some kind of spiritual sense, been put in heaven with Him.

In either case the truth is that our future destiny is heaven. The One who has obtained this destiny for us is there now. He is at the right hand of God the Father. This is a position of power and influence. It is a position from which Christ can help us and use us and protect us here on earth. Because He has this position, we need to be heavenly minded. One way this heavenly mindedness should be reflected is in prayer. If our Lord has this position of sovereignty, and if He is indeed closely related to us, we need to spend time talking to Him. He is in a position to do something about the problems and opportunities that we see in life around us.

C.

The third reason that we are to be heavenly minded is contained in v. 3: CHRISTIANS HAVE DIED. (II. A. B. C. CHRISTIANS HAVE DIED) The use of the past tense verb suggests that this happened at the time of salvation.

In what sense have Christians died? In #2 v. 20 Paul said that Christians died to the elementary principles of the world. I pointed out there that the reference was apparently to evil spiritual forces. "Died" in this context seems to mean that the connection was broken.

In #2 v. 11 Paul said that in Christ **"you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ..."** In that context the reference seemed to be to the death of Christ. We died with Christ by virtue of our trust in Him. Therefore there was a removal of the body of the flesh. Death here seems to mean a separation from the sin nature. We still have that sin nature. But its absolute power is cut off. We are not bound to it.

(ROMANS 6:4) In Romans #6 vv. 4-6 the apostle used similar terminology. He wrote, **"We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. (ROMANS 6:5) For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. (ROMANS 6:6) We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin..."** So we have been freed from our bondage to sin because we have died with Christ. Therefore it is possible to be heavenly minded, and we should be heavenly minded.

Darryl Strawberry (DARRYL STRAWBERRY) was a baseball star in the eighties and nineties, first with the Mets and then with the Yankees. He was involved in World Series wins with both teams and was selected as an All-Star eight years in a row. In his personal life he was a mess. He was arrested for drug offenses and failure to pay child support. He was suspended from baseball three times for substance abuse. He was divorced twice.

But then he met Jesus, and his life turned around. Journalist Bernard Goldberg went to interview him at his house after that. He was struck by the lack of baseball memorabilia in the place. There was no visible evidence that he had ever played baseball. Strawberry told Goldberg that "the old Strawberry had to die." He explained that both the addict and the self-centered celebrity had to be replaced by a new man, by a man who had dedicated his life to restoring people whose lives are threatened by the same kind of destructive temptations which he faced. He and his wife now head an organization called "Strawberry Ministries."

D.

The third reason why we should be heavenly-minded is that Christians have died. The fourth reason is that CHRISTIANS ARE HIDDEN WITH CHRIST. (II. B. C. D. CHRISTIANS ARE HIDDEN WITH CHRIST) That reason is also found in v. 3. Paul says that our **"life is hidden with Christ in God."** The original Greek verb is *krypto*. Have you heard that word used in recent years? What is cryptocurrency? It is hidden currency. It is a medium of exchange which does not have a physical form.

The exact imagery that Paul was seeking to convey to his readers is a bit unclear. A biblical scholar by the name of F. F. Bruce says that there was a common pagan belief that a person's life was bound up with some external object. An archer might have a sentimental bow that he hid away in his attic. If something happened to that bow, he might fear that something terrible was going to happen to him. There are somewhat similar superstitions that some have today. A baseball player might have a favorite bat. If it gets broken, he fears that he won't get hits.

When I was in college, there was a Buddhist from Thailand in the room next to mine. One day he lost a little Buddha figure. He was all upset about it. He was fearful that something terrible was going to happen to him because he lost his Buddha. His security was bound up in that religious object.

If that is the idea behind Paul's imagery here, the thought is that our sacred object is Christ Himself who is present with God in heaven. This then would be an assurance of great security. If our life is bound up with Christ, then we don't have to worry about His well being. He is with God the Father in heaven. So we are safe also.

The use of the term "hidden" may also suggest that our identity and true status is not always understood or recognized in the world in which we live. Unbelievers often don't understand what makes us tick. They don't understand why we don't act like other people. We sometimes get abused. But the assurance is that we are ultimately safe and secure because of our identification with Christ. This security ought to motivate us to be heavenly-minded.

E.

An additional reason to be heavenly minded, according to v. 4, is that **CHRIST IS OUR LIFE.** (II. C. D. E. CHRIST IS OUR LIFE) Verse 3 indicated that our life was attached to Christ. Verse 4 says that Christ is our life. Jesus said, **"I am the way, the truth and the life."**

In what sense is Christ our life? He is our Creator. He is our Savior. He is the giver of eternal life. He is our guide. He is the head of the church. He is our judge. He is our source of security. He is our motivation for living. He is the one who provides us with abundant life. If Christ has done all this for us, if He is our life, then we have an obligation to be heavenly minded.

F.

Finally v. 4 tells us that **CHRISTIANS WILL BE REVEALED IN GLORY AT CHRIST'S RETURN.** (II. D. E. F. CHRISTIANS WILL BE REVEALED IN GLORY) **"When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."** That life that is presently hidden with Christ in God will be revealed at some time in the future.

When will this happen? We don't know exactly. But in 1 Thessalonians #4 we are told that at some point Christ will return and snatch up Christians living upon the earth. Dead Christians will also rise bodily to meet the Lord in the air. At this point it seems that we

will receive our resurrection bodies. My interpretation is that a seven year period of tribulation will follow. At the end of that time Christ will return physically to earth, and our identity with Christ will clearly be revealed.

Revelation #19 describes something of what that appearance with Christ will be like. (REVELATION 19:11-12) Beginning in v. 11 we read, **“Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. (REVELATION 19:13-14) He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. And the armies of heaven--- which includes us Christians, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. (REVELATION 19:15) From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty.”** Such will be the return of Christ with His followers.

In light of this Paul writes in Romans #8 (ROMANS 8:18-19), **“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.”** At this future time justice will be accomplished and things will be made right. Our real identity will be revealed. The value of our commitments and our priorities will all be revealed. In view of this we Christians ought to be heavenly minded.

In the summer of 2001 (SHERRON WATKINS) 42 year old Sherron Watkins was appointed to be one of the vice presidents of a little Houston-based company called Enron. She worked under the company's chief financial officer. It soon became apparent to her that the company was involved in questionable accounting practices that were being used to hide the extent of its losses and to give misleading reports to the stockholders and public about its true financial status.

Sherron wrote up a seven page memo in which she accused the company of manipulation and deceit. She called the reported profits of the company “nothing but an elaborate hoax.” She called Enron “a crooked company.” Kenneth Lay, the CEO, received Sherron's memo and had a meeting with her.

The company had a written code of ethics that spoke of respect, integrity, communication, and excellence. In practice the ethics were all about increasing earnings and winning new customers. People who delivered bad news were pushed out of the company. Kenneth Lay insisted that travel arrangements for company personnel be handled by his sister's travel agency, which was not a very good agency. The CEO used the company jet for personal purposes. Unknown to Sherron at the time, Lay had sold 100,000 shares of his stock in the two days before his meeting with Sherron Watkins.

She expected to be fired. She was not. The company soon collapsed. She never did sell her own stock in the company. She was the only one in the corporate hierarchy who came away from the scandal unscathed. What was the difference? She was a Christian woman.

When Sherron began to understand something of what was going on at the company, she did not go to a professor of ethics to get advice. She went to her pastor. He gave some input and encouraged her to attend a Bible study for professional women. She did. Her Sunday school teacher later told a reporter, **“She just believes that she is called to live the truth... I would say that she reacted based on what she simply believed was right. I don’t know that it’s any more complicated than that. People on the outside looking in look for complex motives in Christians. Sometimes we’re puzzled as to why people think it’s such a big deal.”** (*World*, 2/2/2002)
(PROJECTOR OFF)

It seems to me that Sherron Watkins understood something of what it means to be heavenly minded. We need more Christians like her in business and government and education who will set their minds on the things above and not on the things on earth. We need more churches which will be characterized by heavenly-mindedness. To be what God wants us to be here, we need more of us who will keep seeking the things that are above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then we also will appear with Him in glory.