

“Living with the Ascended Christ”
Colossians 3:1-4
Rev. Mark Cushman
May 21, 2023 • Sunday Morning Sermon

We will be looking at Colossians 3:1-4 in our study. Before I get to this study. My friend of 46 years, Pastor Harry Lloyd Reeder, was supposed to be giving the study from Romans 8:12-17 titled, *Adoption; the Sons of God* and then a study from Zechariah 11 titled *The Lord is My Shepherd*, he is in a much different place. He is now worshiping by sight only as we worship by faith, but it leaves us with heavy hearts. Harry and I were very different than each other and that's why in the past 17 to 18 years, I had so appreciated working with him because I've learned so much. He has been such a blessing. I've not always agreed with him. He's probably not always agreed with me but we had such a wonderful relationship. Countless times, I had gone home from work and said something like this to my wife, 'If I'm ever a senior pastor again and I was a pastor for 20 years over in Georgia, I think I will do it the way Harry did it and does it at Briarwood.' Many times I've said that because he was such a practical model of leadership, such a wonderful model of devotion, such an encouraging spirit, he ran circles around most of us on staff, such an energetic leader who loved the Lord Jesus Christ and in times of terrific loss like this, as in all circumstances, it's very tough and hard.

In the 46 years I knew Harry we interacted a number of times and I was always learning as he always focused on the truth from Scripture. That's where I want to start in this study, because we are always involved in a constant conversation with ourselves. We talk to ourself all the time and make interpretations of whatever is going on around us. For instance, if you walk out the door in the morning, it's pouring down rain and you're a farmer, that's a great day, but if you're planning to go on a picnic, that's a bummer – ‘what a tough day!’ We do that about everything. We constantly make interpretations of things and I know a few times in life more important to do that than a time of terrific loss, a time of pain, a time of heartache and trouble.

What we tell ourselves is really important, and we can think about that regarding Pastor Reeder to us and the Scripture refers to death as an enemy. It's dreadful. It's lamentable, but not always to God. In Psalm 116:15 it says, *[15] Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of His saints.* This encompasses whatever circumstances. To us, death seems often random and senseless, but not to God in His providential care. After losing his children and his property, Job said this in Job 1:21, *[21] And he said, “Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.”* Centuries later, King David would reflect on his own origins and his relationship with God in Psalm 139:16, when he said, *[16] Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.*

This past Thursday it was no surprise to God that Harry was going to step into the arms of Jesus. It wasn't a shock to God, although it was to us. We didn't anticipate something like that but God was at work when he called Pastor Reeder home. To us also, death may seem terrifying and lonely. Many times, we'll speculate about what will be the circumstances when that time comes for me, but apparently not for God. On ascension day this week at 10:01 a.m. on Dunnavant Valley Road, Jesus fulfilled His promise to Pastor Reeder from John 14:3 when He said *[3] And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself,*

that where I am you may be also. What an encouraging moment that Jesus was there to meet him and take him to be with Himself.

Al Mohler, the president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, titled his tribute to Pastor Reeder, in *World* magazine this way; *Taken so suddenly, missed so greatly but safe with Jesus.* What a picture; *safe with Jesus.* We know the truth about Harry and I think if he were here today, he'd say, "Okay, enough about me. Let's talk to these folks." What is the truth about you? What are you telling yourself? How are you interpreting these events and really all the events of your life; the good ones, as well as the bad ones, the easy and the difficult.

In this study, I want us to gain our lesson from the first four verses of Colossians 3. The Apostle Paul writes under the inspiration of the Spirit, Colossians 3:1-4 that says [1] *If then 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 things that are above, not on 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 appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.*

I'm going to divided into three parts and make it as clear as I can because here I think we find for a Christian one our new position as a Christian, two our new responsibilities as a Christian, and then three our new reality as a Christian. This is what Paul is aiming at. Have you ever met someone who may seem very unimpressive at first and you may not even have much regard for them. They don't touch you as somebody particularly great or will accomplish much yet as you get to know them or perhaps watch their life develop over many years, you're kind of blown away with what they ultimately do and how God uses them. I'm speaking specifically of Christians.

In 1989, I attended the 17th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America. It was my eighth assembly, and it was held in La Mirada, California. That's in Southern California. It's the only time the General Assembly has met in California and it was hosted by Biola, the Bible Institute of Los Angeles, which is a private college. We don't do this anymore like that but all the commissioners were invited to stay in the college dorms. I was living in Georgia at the time and Southern California was a long way away. None of our elders from the church were able to attend so I went by myself and I remember not having a roommate assigned, so I just kind of tossed my hat into the into the pool and I was assigned a roommate. I remember when I met him. I was sitting in the room as he came in and he was tall, lanky, shy and very intellectual, kind of what we call a geek. He was a geek who pastored a church and he also taught seminary classes. He told me during the course of our short introductory conversation that he wasn't going to teach much longer because he wanted to go plant a church. Through the rest of that day, I was stunned with what happened because there was a steady stream of people that started dropping by the room and they would talk to him about things. They would ask him questions, seek his counsel and would pray with him.

I was watching these people come and go, and there weren't many people lining up on my side of the room. I begin to think, 'Who is this guy?' Finally, after everybody left and things settled down, we were talking some more and I said, "Where are you planning to plant a church?" He said, 'In New York City.' I remember thinking, "Poor guy, I hope he knows what he's getting into in New York City." I was rooming with Tim Keller who I'd never met before and God would use in a remarkable way to plant a very successful church planting ministry in New York City. He's been influential as Pastor Reeder heads throughout the PCA and in many parts of the world.

I reflect on Keller's background from very humble means being a pastor in Hopewell, Virginia and I reflect on Pastor Reeder's somewhat small and limited background, preaching at a little Baptist church at the foot of Lookout Mountain as a friend of his had invited me to come to his church. It was absolutely a wonderful interaction. I even asked him if we could do some premarital counseling with him because Leslie and I were getting ready to get married and the preacher that had talked to us didn't have much to say, but Harry did.

Two things struck me listening to Harry preach back in his late twenties was that he had this incredible deep voice. It was such a magnificent voice as deep and bellowing, even in this small little church sanctuary, he really commanded attention. The second thing was how Christ centered were his sermons, and it seemed like he was just always talking about the Gospel of Christ, of Christ's work on the cross, of Christ's accomplishments, of Christ's righteousness and the imputation of that righteousness to us. It was always all about Jesus.

I had grown up in churches that were Christian and Christ was talked about but most of the time church worship services were just kind of moralistic nagging, like 'you need to get in there and be a better person. You don't need embarrassed Jesus.' Harry's sermons were so different because it was centered on the Gospel, the power of Christ, the love of Christ, the grace of Christ and His ability to love us, forgive us, walk with us and never give up on us and I remember being touched by that. It was fascinating to watch Harry, as with Keller, the humble beginnings as a young pastor in his late twenties blossom into such a wonderful ministry as he went to Pinelands in Florida, then to Christ Covenant and now to Briarwood Presbyterian for the past 24 years.

In a way, I take that as kind of a parable of the Christian life for all of us, because in some ways, most of us have pretty humble beginnings as a Christian. I mean, it's not flashy, it's not dynamic. Perhaps we walk the aisle of a church and gave our life to Christ, or perhaps we just knelt at our bed at night and opened our heart to the Lord. We didn't know what to say, but we said apparently what was sufficient, expressing a heart of repentance and a desire for Jesus to come into our life. My wife's experience was her brother who led her to the Lord so perhaps another family member or a friend that leads us to Christ. Perhaps you were walking on the beach and some campus outreach guy tracked you down and shared the Gospel with you.

Usually those are fairly humble beginnings but it would be very sad if we kept it right there. Because some people see that kind of humble beginning and skeptics may say, 'well, Mark, you finally got some religion, you finally got religious. But, you know, it's just like any other religion. All of them are the same. You believe in a god. You get a rule book. You start gathering on a regular basis with some other people like you, and then you start feeling guilty about the past and you stopped having a good time and that's not for me' as the skeptic would say. It's sad.

I think sometimes even Christians kind of interpret their Christian experience that way and it's very sad because nothing could be farther from the truth, especially when you reflect on what is said in Colossians 3. As Paul was teaching through Colossians 1 and 2, building up to Colossians 3 says 'who that we who were spiritually dead have been made alive.' Meaning we who were judicially condemned, have been forgiven, that we who were supernaturally oppressed, have seen our enemies disarmed and defeated, that we who were under the tyranny of all kinds of manmade rules and demands and expectations have been set free. In fact, Paul goes beyond that whereas we might say, at the beginning I received Christ, and that's fine. That's Biblical language, but Paul says, 'No, you were raised with Christ. You didn't just receive Christ. This is far more supernatural than you possibly imagine.'

You have been raised with Christ right now in coming to Christ. When you prayed that prayer, you didn't just get religion, you got resurrected and it's much different. Alexander Maclaren made an interesting comment in preparation for this. He says, 'Often the resurrection is just seen as what happened to Jesus on Easter Sunday' and that's what happened. Jesus was resurrected. Or we might think that's just what will happen to us believers when we die and Jesus returns – we will be resurrected from the grave. In fact, everyone will come out of the graves, the good to eternal life, the evil to eternal judgment as it says in John 5. Here in Colossians we're speaking not of Jesus' resurrection but ours at the end, but Maclaren went on to make an interesting point. He said, 'We're speaking of the resurrection, which is a pattern of life in this life for all of us.' The resurrection becomes kind of a supernatural pattern of life that God draws out of us and works through us. We aren't just saved; we are resurrected to life. We are born again. This is a wonderful, dramatic way of saying I just didn't receive Christ, I've been resurrected.

There is a wonderful story in John 11 when Jesus is preparing to bring Lazarus out of the grave. As the story goes Lazarus had died some four days before, they were good friends with Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha and when Jesus shows up four days later, they fuss at Him about not being there on time. Then there is that dramatic moment when Jesus is looking around and He sees all those people weeping and He weeps. I'm glad I serve a Savior who weeps and understands the hurt, the pain, and difficulty of this world. Jesus then commands Lazarus to come forth from the grave, and Lazarus comes out with the burial cloth still on him. It's a magnificent picture, but in reality, that's your testimony right now. That's what's happened to you. If you can say I know the Lord Jesus as my Lord and Savior, you have been brought from death into life. In the Colossians text the Apostle Paul wants us to come to grips with that. I believe on this occasion where we've had a brother step into the Lord's presence, what a time to reflect on what happened to him and what will happen to us when He returns. That's my new position. I'm raised with Christ right now.

Secondly, my new responsibility is we are with Christ. Paul says, 'You've been raised with Christ' and we now need to tell ourselves the truth about that. In Colossians, the Christians in the city of Colossae were beset by all kinds of dangers of relapsing back into their paganism. They were tempted by all kinds of gross sensuality. They struggled with demands to conform to all kinds of manmade rules. Christianity was being encumbered in their walk with Christ by all kinds of legalisms and Paul wrote back to them in Colossians 2:23, that says, *[23] These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.*

Sometimes we Christians can slide into seeing our walk with the Lord as nothing more than a bunch of burdensome rules and regulations. I wish I had time to elaborate more on the context of what Paul is speaking about but we must be very careful of that. William Hendrickson in his commentary on this passage says, "Paul reminds these Colossians (1) that there is no material cure to a spiritual ill, (2) that neglect of the body will never heal the soul's sickness but will aggravate it, (3) that heaven-born individuals cannot gain satisfaction from earth-born remedies (pills, harsh disciplines, religious activities)."

That's what Paul is saying here, is you were raised with Christ and he gives us the assignment that we need as Christians to change our focus. We need to look in a different direction than the world around us. One of the problems we run into is we begin to say, "I'm better than the world around us, so I'm okay" and that's a very deadly and dangerous perspective.

Paul says, "Let's change our perspective" and do two things. Number one which we find in Colossians 3:1 is to seek the things that are above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Charles Ellicott, in writing on this, says, "The allusion is emphatic. Heaven is to us, in itself, a vague expression of unknown bliss. (Here, however), it is made definite to the Christian by the thought of Christ in His glorified humanity, there enthroned in majesty." He's basically saying that so often we humans think of heaven in a such an ephemeral, vague way.

I've had discussions with non-Christians who've told me point blank, 'I don't have any interest in going to heaven. I don't want to float around on a bunch of clouds and play musical instruments.' Someone as literally said that to me. They don't grasp that Paul is giving us a tangible place where Jesus is in the throne room of heaven beside His Heavenly Father and that's where Harry is, in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. It's a very tangible location that we are aiming at. Paul says, 'Let's fix our thoughts on that.' I'm just a temporary ambassador on this earth. I'm not going to be here forever. I'll be standing there someday and I need to fix my eyes on that. Matthew Henry said it like this; "We must mind the concerns of another world more than the concerns of this. We must make heaven our scope and aim, seek the favor of God above, keep up our communion with the upper world by faith, and hope and holy love." Paul is advocating that we seek constantly to be devoted to the Lord Jesus Christ, where He lives and what He's doing in the perspective of Him right now. Let that become our chief desire. Turn our eyes literally to heaven and let Jesus work and focus on Him.

We are good at being devoted. We can easily to be devoted to all kinds of things. Years ago, we lived in Macon, Georgia, and one of the elders in our church was a superior court judge. He was kind of a stern guy and I was very young. One day I had to go over to his house to take something to him and he invited me in and we sat there and chatted for a while. Before I left, he had a little glimmer in his eye and he said, 'You want to see my Georgia room?' I said, "I beg your pardon?" He repeated what he said and I agreed to see it. He ushered me in to this little office that was filled with memorabilia from the University of Georgia. He was a graduate, both of the law school, as well as the undergraduate school, and he loved the University of Georgia. That little room was packed with things from that University. I don't know how much money he spent on the helmets, balls, pennants, flags, and it had all kinds of pictures. I can promise you, it had nothing in there that said anything good about Georgia Tech where my son went, except maybe a picture or two of Georgia beating Georgia Tech. But this man was truly devoted.

Don't go trash your Alabama room or your Auburn room. That's not my point but we know about devotion. We are devoted to things. We're devoted to our job. We're devoted to our spouse. We're devoted to our children and Paul is saying we need with equal passion to be devoted to the living Christ, who is in heaven, who is waiting to bring us to Himself. It's very tangible. It's not vague at all in this passage. Harry is now in direct contact with He who is seated in that throne room. Seek the things that are above. In a sense as other translations say in this verse 'to set your heart on' not just seek for things.

Secondly, in Colossians 3:2, we're called to set our minds on the thing above. It's one thing to have your emotions stirred in a wonderful worship service like this, and you go out of here pumped because you've heard your favorite song, played by a wonderful orchestra and sung by a beautiful choir and Paul says, that's important, but we should also set your minds on things, not on earthly things. The mind is the center of our rational thought. We are called to take control, to capture our thoughts, focus our intellect, contemplate the elements of the Gospel of the Scriptures, and what it says about Christ in where He is.

Some of you right now may be having a hard time. You're beginning to get hungry and you're having a hard time focusing your thoughts, but in our relationship with Christ, may that never be the case. In fact, Paul says in II Corinthians 10:5, *[5] We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.* That's part of our responsibility. This living Christ who will call us home one day, who called Harry home this week is calling us to take every thought captive to Him. In our society, our minds are being bombarded by ungodliness, by worldliness much more than our minds are wired for and perhaps much more than has ever happened in human history – through the media, the Internet, through social interactions and through a variety of exposures that our heart and minds have on a regular basis. We need to be extra diligent to focus. Where? Paul says not on earthly things.

In Philippians 4:8 Paul says, *[8] Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.* When we're exposed to our brother standing in the presence of the Lord Jesus, we remind ourselves we'll be there. Our initial resurrection, so to speak, when we come to Christ, will be fulfilled in our relationship with Christ ultimately, and our intellect needs to be pointed in the right direction.

It's interesting about that command to set your mind on things above for Paul is not talking or calling for simple meditation. He's calling us to use our brains. In other words, the Bible doesn't promote or endorse emptying our minds. Some religions teach that, but Christianity doesn't. Some say that you should contemplate nothing at times, and that's really healing or whatever. But that is dangerous because our sinful nature is so likely to be induced and tempted to go the wrong direction. Actually, this passage is not calling us to abandon all earthly things, not at all, because we have to interact in the world. We have to interact with non-Christian friends, non-Christian ideas, and we have to see non-Christian behavior. We can't isolate ourselves. This is not a call to become a monk in some monastery on a hillside in the wilderness. It's not a call to separate ourselves from a human culture, but it's a call to focus in the right direction and that's very important.

Some people say that Christians sometimes can be so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good and I think unfortunately, there have been some like that. Perhaps, like I said, those who have isolated themselves from the culture, but I would argue what Paul would say in response to that is, 'no, no, no, no.' It's likely only those Christians who are the most heavenly minded will do the most worldly good. I'll use Paul as an example. It's indeed, as we focus on Christ, as we focus on heaven, as we set our hearts and minds on that, that's the way God will use us. Let the truth of Christ from the throne room of God fill our minds with Scripture and all kinds of good things, good books, films that are redemptive, not the overwhelming rubbish that runs over our lives every day. That's our new responsible reality. We have the position we've been raised with Christ. We have our responsibility to focus in the right direction.

Finally, we have a new reality and that is you have died, Paul says in this passage. Every Christian starts there. In His death, Christ bore sin's penalty and broke sin's power and when we receive Christ, we are placed in Christ (Ephesians 1:13) and those in Christ die with Him (Romans 8:8-11). Christ is not only died for us by way of substitution, but we died with Him by way of identification. So, when we embrace Christ as we're raised with Christ, we also die with Christ in identification. This terminology is crucial in our new reality. I'll give you an example. I read a story where two sisters loved to party. They were wild and crazy. They led a wild,

immoral lifestyle and about the same time they both came to Christ and their whole perspective changed. Shortly afterwards they received an invitation to a formal party, but they declined with a note saying these words, "We regret that we cannot attend because we recently died." I love that. That's the Biblical definition of dying to Christ, dying in Christ. Dead people don't interact with their surroundings very well, but they sure interact with Christ very well.

Paul paints a dramatically intimate picture in this passage as he says, 'Now your life is hidden with Christ in God.' I wish we could spend the whole sermon on that. Your life is hidden. Did you know that? When you were raised with Christ, you're walking with Him every day, getting bumps, scrapes, difficulties and struggling with the things in life, yet your life is hidden. That's how precious you are to Him, for your life is hidden with Christ in God, which means your life is hidden somewhat from the world, your inner life, your spiritual life. In other words, your non-Christian friends are not going to understand it. They don't see the whole picture. They don't understand life. Your life is therefore also indestructible in the world. If it's hidden with Christ, He's got your back. He has you covered. You'll be okay. If it's hidden with Christ, your life will be ever everlasting, even beyond the world. He will preserve you till He takes you to be with Himself.

There will still come a time when what is hidden will be gloriously revealed. When Jesus returns, we will be part of His glory. I John 3:2 says *[2] Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as he is.* Make no mistake, our dear brother Harry as well as all our friends and family members who've gone before us, who die as children of God, now see Him as He is. They are there with Christ.

On Dunnivant Valley Road when Pastor Reeder was killed, an ambassador returned to his own country, a soldier arrived home, greeted by his forever family. A servant entered into the joy of his Master. A son came to that beautiful home that had been prepared for him by Jesus. A victorious athlete stepped on the award platform. A child jumped into the arms of his Savior and a citizen finally entered his new country. None of that was because of what Harry did. You might say, 'He was an accomplished pastor. He wrote books. He touched many lives, and I could never do that.' But Harry is not there because of what he did, but because of what Christ did for him.

Harry reached out those many years ago and perhaps that humble moment shortly after a funeral he embraced Christ as his Lord and Savior. But this moment brought a profound change in his life and brings it in each one of us so that when we die, an ambassador will return home to his property. When we die, a soldier will arrive home and be greeted by his forever family. When you die, a servant will enter into the joy of his master. A son will come to that beautiful home that has been prepared for him. A victorious athlete will step onto the awards platform. When you die, as a child you will jump into the arms of your Savior and as a citizen, you'll finally enter your new country.

Jesus is ready. Are we? Have we come to Christ? Have we trusted Him as our Savior, repenting of our sin and turning to Him and have said, 'Jesus, I need you'? If we have, do we continue to focus and prepare, knowing that the days could be very short for us? Most of us assume, you know, I've got 20, 30, 40, 50, 70 years, but we don't know and are we ready as the Apostle Paul says to step into His presence? So when we die, be it this afternoon or 50 years from now, are we ready to step into the arms of Jesus?

The day after Harry died, I read in my quiet time why I want to seek the things and set my mind on the things above... because Paul writes in I Corinthians 2:9, *[9] But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love Him"*— I've got a pretty good imagination yet Paul says, 'You don't have enough of an imagination to what God has planned for you, who come to Christ and reach out to Him.' Do it today. Use this as the opportunity of coming to Christ. You can't imagine, none of us can, what He has in store for us. Let's bow our heads and pray.

Prayer:

Father, I thank You so much for your grace, your mercy and each one of us. I thank You that You have worked powerfully in us and blessed us so richly in the ministry of Pastor Reeder. Thank You for working through him but we give You the credit, the glory and the honor. We just ask that You continue to work in us. We don't know how long we have, but we want to use these days as wisely as possible so as You have drawn us to Christ, as You raised us in Christ, help us to set our mind to seek the things above and to set our minds on Christ that we may serve You. Thank You for Your many blessings. Continue to work in and through us for Your glory and we ask this in Jesus' Name, Amen.