

“The Power of Hope”
Colossians 2:1-4
October 30, 2016

INTRODUCTION:

Today’s passage marks a transition that occurs in most of Paul’s epistles, a transition to the practical implications of what he has been saying. Paul is neither overly theoretical—dealing exclusively with ideas—nor moralistic—just telling people what to do. He teaches the doctrines of the faith and then follows those up with application that concerns appropriate behavior and conduct that follows from these doctrines. He has been teaching the doctrine of sanctification by faith, specifically rejecting any notion of a second blessing view of sanctification. We grow as Christians not by embracing and keeping the right rules or through some spiritualized experience, but through seeing Jesus and growing in our trust and confidence in him. In a word, we look upward, not inward in order to grow.

Today’s passage is situated at the beginning of Paul’s application section, and it focuses on the power of hope to change our lives. Hope is a great source of energy and motivation. Hope for the prize is what keeps the athlete engaged in the hard training required for excellence. Hope for the flourishing of their children is what keeps parents going through the hard times of child-rearing. When hope is lost, all motivation is lost, and it is a deathlike experience. For the Christian, our hope is not some Pollyannaish vagueness about things working out in the end. Rather, Christian hope is focused on Jesus, specifically on the ascension of Jesus. When Paul tells us to seek the things that are above, he is not telling us to spend our hours speculating and dreaming about heaven. He is telling us to live our lives in light of the ascension of Jesus, by which Jesus is **“seated at the right hand of God.”**

The ascension is the neglected event in the life of Jesus. The church has significant celebrations of the birth of Jesus, the death and resurrection of Jesus, but not so much the ascension of Jesus. Did you know that there is an Ascension Day celebration on the ecclesiastical calendar? Do you know when Ascension Day occurs? You could probably figure it out if you know the Bible. According to Acts 1:3, Jesus ascended forty days after his resurrection. So Ascension Day is 40 days after Easter Sunday. The ascension of Jesus gives us hope, and this hope forms the basis of our growth as Christians.

I. The Present Reign of Jesus

Paul says that we are to **“seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.”** The word “seated” has become the basis

for a theological doctrine known as the “heavenly session” of Christ. The word “session” comes from a Latin word that means “sitting.” Jesus is seated at the right hand of God, not to rest, but to rule. The Bible portrays the ascended Jesus in various postures. Several passages speak of him as standing (Acts 7:56; Rev. 1:1-16; 14:1). When someone is standing, they are poised for action. The ascended Jesus is ready to act quickly to come to the aid of his people and to accomplish his purposes on their behalf. Revelation 2:1 speaks of the ascended Christ as walking among his people. Revelation 19:11-16 portrays the ascended Christ as riding to battle in order to conquer his enemies. These various postures simply describe what the ascended Jesus is doing today, and these are the things we are to set our minds upon.

So let’s do what Paul tells us here. Let’s set out minds on the ascension of Jesus. Think first about this as Jesus’ victory following the sufferings of his life and death. The Dutch reformer Herman Witsius wrote this of Jesus’ ascension.

Having valiantly and successfully overthrown his enemies, he should be carried in a triumphal chariot, and amidst the shrieks of devils, and the acclamations of angels, amidst the amazement of the wicked, and the choruses of the faithful, make a glorious and joyful entry, not into a capital like that of Rome, but into the heavenly Jerusalem, and the temple not made with hands, there to enjoy a delightful rest after the long travail of his soul.

What is Jesus doing in heaven? There are two specific activities he is engaged in on our behalf. First, Jesus is praying for us, particularly for our forgiveness in the face of Satan’s accusations against us. The current work of Jesus is portrayed in the work of the high priest in the Old Testament tabernacle. On the Day of Atonement, that priest would take the blood of the sacrificial lamb and sprinkle it on the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies. That was the very throne room of God, the one place on earth God chose to make his dwelling. Though we might be concerned to escape the bad feelings that accompany our sin, a much greater concern is to satisfy God’s justice with regard to our sins. The blood of the sacrificial animal looked forward to the satisfaction of sin that would come through the blood of Jesus. It is so reassuring to us when we remember that satisfaction for our sins has been made by God himself. If there is something that is important for the well-being of your infant son or daughter, you don’t leave that in their hands, but take care of it yourself. Just as you don’t send your one-year old to the grocery store to shop for the family’s food for the coming week, God has taken care of our forgiveness himself in order to make sure it is taken care of. So now when Satan comes forward to accuse us, an activity which Revelation 12:10 says he engages in day and night, God has a ready answer in the blood of Jesus shed for the satisfaction of sin. And the proof is right there, stopping the mouth of Satan and guaranteeing our forgiveness in the only place where that really matters, heaven itself.

But that is not all the ascended, reigning Jesus is doing. In addition to interceding for us, he is intervening for us as well. He is the absolute ruler of the universe, and he exercises his rule on behalf of his people. I am not sure what's going to happen in our November 8 election, nor in the time following that election. But I am sure that Jesus will be on his throne and will be in absolute control of events. And I am sure, too, that he is directing all events for the good of his people, whom he loves.

II. The Present Duty of Jesus' People

In light of Jesus' present reign, our duty is to **“Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth”** (v. 2). This command is often misunderstood to mean that Christians are to think as little as possible about the mundane matters associated with life on the earth, and that we are to focus our greatest energy and thoughts on the spiritual things of the life to come. This has led to the criticism that some Christians are too heavenly minded to be any earthly good. But I don't think this verse means this at all. I like the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: “Christ...does not lead man in a religious flight from this world to other worlds beyond, rather, he gives him back to the earth as its loyal son.” In other words, when we set our minds on things above, we are made more, not less, useful in this life.

So what does this command mean when it tells us to set our minds on things that are above instead of earthly things? I think it means at least two things. First, it means that we are to interpret all the events of this life in light of the present reign of Jesus. Our eyes are to be fixed on the reign of our Great High Priest, Jesus, seeing all things on the earth through that lens. Let me give a cycling analogy. When riding a bicycle, there is a tendency to focus your attention on the danger represented by the cars behind you, something you have absolutely no control over. But the thing you do have control of is your bicycle and where it goes. If you become overly concerned about the cars behind you, it is easy to lose your focus on the road ahead of you, with the result that you could run off the road and end up crashing your bike. In seeking to control something you cannot control, you lose control of the one thing you can and should control, with bad results. Don't we often do the same in our lives? We see all kinds of threats that we really can't control (and they are many). You can't control other people. But how much effort do we exert attempting to control a spouse, a co-worker, a friend, a child? You can't control much about your own health, the length of your life or whether or not your job will be there in ten years. You can't control whether you will lose your hair when you get older. But the one thing that does lie within your power is to trust and submit yourself to the ascended and reigning Jesus. And if you do that, it will bring freedom and it will bring growth and maturity. So when Paul is telling us to set our minds on things above rather than things on the earth, he is telling us, in effect, not to look at the cars behind us, the many things we

can't control, but to look instead at the one who controls all things and to submit to that control. As Dick Lucas summarizes this, "The Colossians were not to lose their freedom by submitting to the new teachers. On the contrary they were to find and keep their freedom by submission to the rule of Christ."

A second, and related, thing this means is that we are to guard our hearts from becoming overly dominated by the cares of this world. Do you remember how Jesus said in the parable of the soils how the soil with thorns and weeds choked out the good seed? His application of that was that the seed of God's word can be choked out by the cares of this world. There are abundant and unavoidable cares in this world. There are children to be raised and cared for, jobs to be attended to, a multitude of possessions to be cared for, and bills to pay, plans to make, houses to clean and meals to cook. Paul doesn't intend that we should stop attending to these things. It would be unloving and irresponsible to do so. What he does intend is that we should never lose sight of our ascended Lord in the performing of these many duties. In light of Jesus' reign, we can rejoice over every pleasant task we do because it points to greater joys when we finally see Jesus. Every pleasant relationship on earth points to the fulfillment of all relationships when we see Jesus. Every pleasant meal we eat points to the great feast of heaven. What's more, we can also rejoice in every unpleasant duty that falls to us because we know that it is temporary. Jesus will both put an end to it, and also use the trial it is to us to perform this duty to be an instrument of good in our lives.

Allow me a crude analogy. If you take a piece of meat and hold it in front of a dog's nose, that dog will follow the meat wherever it goes. Wave it back and forth, and the dog's head will shake from side to side as he follows intently every move of the meat. Move it up and down, and the dog's head will nod up and down with the meat. You can't distract the dog because he is intent on eating that meat. Paul is telling us that this is the kind of single-minded intensity with which we should look at the ascended, reigning Jesus.

III. The Future Glory of Jesus and His People

Our hope stems from the fact that our lives are full of glory. There is a sense in which our glory is both present and future. The present aspect is that **"your life is hidden with Christ in God"** (v. 3). Since Jesus is in heaven, there is a sense in which we are already there too. But notice that it is "hidden" from sight. When the world looks at the church, our glory is hidden to them. All they see, very often, is a weak and frail church. The real power and glory, it is often thought, lies with earthly power.

But Paul reminds us that the glory inherent with us already will one day be revealed. **"When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."** He is speaking of the second coming of Christ. The first

coming of Christ was marked by humiliation. His arrival was missed by almost everyone because poor people don't attract much notice, and Jesus was born into poverty. His entire life was marked by such poverty. But his second coming will be entirely different. No one will miss it, and it will be full of glory. Jesus spoke of his return like this: **“The tribes of the earth ...will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other”** (Matt. 24:30-31). In another letter, Paul describes it like this: **“For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God”** (1 Thess. 4:16).

When a head of state makes a state visit to our nation's capital, there is great pageantry and glory. There is usually a formal dinner at the White House complete with the finest foods, formal dress, abundant and skilled servers and numerous VIPs present. No expense is spared to make it a glorious evening. How much more will it be the case when the true King of the Earth comes to take his rightful place! I have always been stirred by J. R. Tolkien's portrayal of just such an event in his third book of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Throughout the story, emphasis is given to the fact that a man would sit on Gondor's throne and the race of men would reign once more. When it finally happens, there is great glory and celebration. Such will it be for Jesus' people when he returns in glory. Man was always intended to exercise dominion on the earth, and now Jesus comes to do so. And since we are joined into union with him by faith, it will be our glory as well as his.

CONCLUSION:

Let me mention one application in closing. The ascension of Jesus is a great help to us in our evangelism because it helps us learn to listen to others. I think most Christians misunderstand the nature of evangelism, thinking of it as memorizing a gospel outline with some illustrations, and then looking for opportunities to shoe horn that into conversations, whether or not people want to hear it. Have you ever noticed how Jesus didn't do that? Instead, he often just asked questions and listened. And people wanted to talk to him. Why don't we listen more? Why do those having political arguments not listen, but just talk past one another? Why do Christians do the same in their evangelism? I think it's because we don't understand the ascension of Jesus. We don't listen because we are unwilling to give power to others. It feels so good to state our views because we like having power. To listen gives power and honor to others, and the ascension gives us the theological framework to do so. We can give up power because Jesus is ruling. That is our hope. Let it dominate your life.