

## Finally Home: What Heaven Means for Earth

### Things Above

Colossians 3:1-4

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<sup>1</sup> *If then 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 appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.* Colossians 3:1-4 (ESV)

C.S. Lewis, in his book *Mere Christianity*, captures the essence of what we are going to talk about over the next six weeks as it relates to Heaven:

“If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The Apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think about the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth ‘thrown in’; aim at earth and you will get neither.”<sup>1</sup>

Do you see Lewis’ point? He is identifying that there is something powerful and transformative in the biblical consideration of heaven as we live on earth. Talking, thinking, and learning about heaven does something to us now. The Bible talks about heaven, the after-life, and the future more often than you probably even realize. And it serves the purpose of motivating God’s people to live differently.

A biblical understanding of heaven should inform our suffering, our crying, and our funerals. It should affect the songs we sing, the way we worship, how we share the gospel, and how we think about missions. A biblical theology of heaven should change the way we see injustice, sinful actions, and genocide. It should change how we pray, what we pray about, and what we love. In fact, I don’t think it would be an understatement to say that what you think of heaven directly impacts how you live.

The goal for this series is for you to answer this question: “If heaven is like that, how should I live now?”

You have probably heard the statement, “They are so heavenly-minded that they are no earthly good.” That can be true. But I fear that we have over-corrected with statements like that. I would argue that many of us are so earthly-minded that we are no heavenly-good. Or as Lewis put it: “Aim at heaven and you get earth thrown in; aim at earth and you get neither.”

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York: Collier Books, 1960), 118. As cited in Randy Alcorn, *Heaven*, (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2004), 21.

## Why This Series?

For the next six weeks we are going to study the subject of heaven by looking at key ideas and themes such as glory, resurrected bodies, the new heavens and earth, perfection, and godliness. I hope that by the time we are finished, you'll not only know more about heaven, but you'll also have a greater passion to follow Jesus. Or maybe this will be the series when you actually come to know Jesus in a personal way.

I've chosen to examine this subject and six unique texts about heaven for a number of reasons:

### **1. Most people believe in heaven but know little about it.**

If you were take a quick survey of people at work, in your neighborhood, or in your extended family, most of them would say that they believe in heaven. A Lifeway Research poll conducted two years ago found that two thirds (67 percent) of Americans believe that heaven is a real place, while 45 percent also believe that there are many ways to get to heaven.<sup>2</sup>

### **2. There is cultural interest in heaven.**

A few months ago it dawned on me how many books and movies had recently been released dealing with heaven or near-death experiences. For example: *Heaven is for Real* (2013) and *Miracles from Heaven* (2015) made it into the theaters. Books include *Imagine Heaven*, *Proof of Heaven*, *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, and *90 minutes in Heaven*. In fact, it struck me as odd, and I wonder what it means, that dystopian movies and near- death-experience movies are both popular at the same time. Our culture seems to be fascinated both with a world where everything has fallen apart and with a world where everything is perfect.

### **3. Many Christians do not see the important connection between heaven and earth.**

I would guess that many who call themselves Christians rarely think about heaven unless it is at a funeral. And I would guess that even more think that heaven and earth are two realms of living that have little to do with one another. I'm sure that most of us know the part of the Lord's prayer that says, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," but do we really know what that means in our lives?

### **4. There are many misunderstandings related to what heaven will be like.**

If we took a survey just among our own church, there would be a wide range of ideas as to what heaven is going to be like. For example, where will we live in heaven or on earth? Will we eat and drink? Will we be married? Will we know one another? What has happened to those who have already died? Why is the resurrection important? What will we do in heaven? These and many other questions are important to think about when considering heaven.

### **5. In the midst of an increasingly post-Christian culture, it is good to be reminded where our real citizenship lies.**

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<sup>2</sup> <http://lifewayresearch.com/2014/10/28/americans-believe-in-heaven-hell-and-a-little-bit-of-heresy/>

In the midst of the “Hall of Faith” in Hebrews 11, the writer makes a very important statement about the orientation of those who live and walked by faith:

*<sup>13</sup> These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. <sup>14</sup> For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. <sup>15</sup> If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. <sup>16</sup> But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city. Hebrews 11:13–16 (ESV)*

And a heavenly mindset was a central part of the apostle Paul’s encouragement to stand firm in obedience and righteousness in the midst of a sinful and deceptive world.

*<sup>17</sup> Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. <sup>18</sup> For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. <sup>19</sup> Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. <sup>20</sup> But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>21</sup> who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. <sup>1</sup> Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved. Philippians 3:17–4:1 (ESV)*

Therefore, my hope and prayer for this series is not just that you will know more about heaven. You will learn more, I promise. However, I also promise that I will not be able to answer all your questions. My ultimate desire is to help you understand how your life should be shaped by the reality of heaven. I hope that some of you put your faith in Jesus and become a Christian during this series. And I also pray that those of you who are Christians will see the strategic and transformative value of being “heavenly-minded.” I want you to be able to answer this question: “If heaven is like that, how should I live right now?”

### **Seeking and Setting Our Minds Upon on Things Above**

Our text this morning is one of the most important passages as it relates to a heavenly mindset. The apostle Paul was writing to a church wrestling with significant spiritual issues. There was some form of false teaching that was creating havoc in the church. It contained elements of mysticism, legalism, and sensuality (see Colossians 2), and it likely was a combination of Judaism and some form of local folk belief.<sup>3</sup> The church was struggling under this errant teaching, and Paul wrote in order to highlight the centrality and the supremacy of Christ.<sup>4</sup>

Colossians 3:1-4 contains some phrases that are thematically parallel to each other. I’ve color coded the key phrases so that you can see them more clearly.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Crossway Bibles, The ESV Study Bible (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2290.

<sup>4</sup> For the sermon series on Colossians see: <http://www.yourchurch.com/sermon/living-with-jesus-at-the-center/>

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Dustin Crowe for this helpful layout.

<sup>1</sup> *If then 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 appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.* Colossians 3:1–4 (ESV)

This text has elements of position, promise, and practice which are critical aspects of what it means to have a different kind of mindset a heavenly mindset. Let's look at each of these.

### **1. Position**

As is so often the case with the apostle Paul, he starts with a person's spiritual position. Everything flows out of this foundation. What you seek after, set your mind upon, and what hope you have for the future are entirely dependent on this issue of spiritual position. That is why 3:1 begins with the word "if."

So let me say from the outset that what follows in this text is entirely conditional. We will see this over and over in our study. The Bible is very clear: Heaven is not guaranteed for everyone, and not everyone has a heavenly mindset. Heaven as a future destination, and living in light of heaven is dependent on what you have done with Jesus. Here is how Jesus stated this truth:

<sup>6</sup> *Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6)*

By coming to Jesus and putting one's trust in Jesus, a person is united to Christ in His death and resurrection. When you put your faith in Jesus, His death becomes your death, and His life becomes your life. There is a spiritual union between you and Jesus that defines who you are and your future. Jesus described it to Nicodemus as being born again (John 3).

Now we see this union in four phrases in verses 1-4:

- *"you have been raised with Christ" (3:1)*
- *"for you have died" (3:3)*
- *"your life is hidden with Christ in God" (3:3)*
- *"who is your life" (3:4)*

All of these phrases are unpacking the new identity that belongs to the Christian. By coming to faith in Christ, there is a new spiritual reality that has taken over. That is why Paul uses phrases like "hidden with Christ" and "who is your life" in verses 3-4. To have died with Christ and to be raised with Christ means that our lives are so dependent upon Him and so linked to His that we have everything we need "in Him." We are in Him, our lives are in Him, and He is our life. Jesus doesn't just provide life; He is our life!

Why does this matter? Why talk about this union? There are three reasons:

- 1) Without being united to Christ, there is no forgiveness, no redemption, and no everlasting life in heaven.

- 2) Jesus is the center of the gospel, and He is the center of everlasting life in heaven. You cannot be excited about heaven without being excited about Jesus. Heaven would not be heaven without Jesus being there.
- 3) Union with Jesus becomes the basis for a change of mindset even now. Positional realities in the Bible affect how we live because they change what we see, what we love, what we seek and what we do.

Our understanding of heaven needs to begin with this issue of spiritual position because union with Christ is the foundation of everything. To be in Christ means that you have a new identity, a new freedom, a new power, a new status, new affections, new longings, a new future, and a new home. The spiritual position of being united with Christ changes the foundational orientation of a person's life.

## 2. Promise

The second set of parallel statements relate to two promises. A heavenly mindset involves an orientation to two things that are not seen but should be both to be believed. One promise relates to something that has already happened but is not visible. The other promise relates to what is yet to come. The first promise is found in verse one, and the second is found in verse four.

The first promise is: “. . . *where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God*” (Col. 3:1). As we'll see in a moment, this follows the command to “seek those things that are above.” So, it is an explanation of what is “above,” and it relates to the rule and reign of Christ, to His enthronement. Throughout the New Testament, the idea of Christ being seated at the right hand of God is an important theme, occurring three times in the Paul's letters (Rom. 8:34, Eph. 1:20, Col. 3:1), five times in Acts (2:25, 33, 34, 5:31, 7:55, 56), and five times in the book of Hebrews (1:3, 13, 8:1, 10:12, 12:2).

The promise is designed to highlight the powerful rule of Christ, to emphasize His victory over death and sin. It is a statement that speaks to the deity of Christ. And although we didn't see Him ascend into heaven, we are called to believe that He is there — even now — in victory. We are to seek “those things” which are related to this heavenly rule of Jesus.

The second promise is: “*when Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory*” (Col. 3:4). This is a future-oriented promise as it relates to the end of the ages. When Christ returns, the world will know who He really is. Revelation 1:7 tells us that He will come with the clouds and every eye will see Him. He will come in glory. But believers will share in His glory, something that we'll talk more about in the coming weeks.

But the promise here is simply that there is coming a day when what is true of a believer positionally will be completed, and we will perfectly live out our identity in Christ. What is true about Christ now will be true about us then! We will appear with Him in glory. We will be like Him! In the same way that His identity is known, so too the believer's real identity will be fully revealed.

The promise of Christ's rule and the believer's future glorification becomes another key aspect of a heavenly mindset. It establishes who is in charge of the universe, who deserves our complete allegiance, and who is the center of everything: Christ, who is our life! What's more, it establishes that our present

struggle with sin will not last forever, our grief at death has an end, and our cries of “How Long, O Lord!” will not go unanswered.

A heavenly mindset is rooted in the promise of God about what is true about Christ now and what will be true about those who know Christ in the future.

### 3. Practice

The final parallel relates to what Paul is calling these believers to do. The previous two points and their parallel phrases serve as bookends for what Paul commands here. In fact, this is the reason why Paul writes to these believers in the first place. He wants them to not only know something but to do something.

There are two commands in our text: 1) . . . *seek the things that are above*” (v. 1) and 2) “*set your minds on things that are above*” (v. 2). Both are saying nearly the same thing, but in a slightly different way. Both commands are present, active, imperative verbs which means that “seeking” and “setting” need to be continually practiced. Some commentators believe that Paul is addressing what we desire (v. 1) and what we think about (v. 2). That is why the NIV adds the word “heart” in verse 1: “set your heart on things above . . . set your minds on things above.” And why NLT translates these verses as “. . . set your sights on the realities of heaven . . . think about the things of heaven.” So both commands set the direction of either affections or our thinking.

The first command, “to seek,” means to search for, to try to get or to reach for something that is desired. It is the same word used in Matthew 6:33 where Jesus said, “Seek first the kingdom of God.” It is also used in reference to Jesus’ mission to “seek the lost” in Luke 19:10. The idea in Colossians 3 is that the orientation of the heart — what you love — has been set on another realm. That is why verse 1 says, “where Christ is . . .” Followers of Jesus have their hearts set on things that are above. They love another world.

The second command, “set your minds,” is another Greek word which means to direct one’s attention and thought to something. While “to seek” seems to be pointing toward something in regards to affection, “setting your mind” refers to what believers are to do with their minds. The text says that believers are to think about things related to heaven. Is that how you would describe what you think about? Do you think about heaven? Do you think about heavenly things? In your small groups this week, I’d really like you to wrestle with question #2: “Prior to this week, how would you have described the value of thinking about heaven or ‘things above’ in your daily life?”

I hope that one of the products of this sermon series will be that you will find yourself thinking about and talking about heavenly things more than ever before. I want you to have your hearts and minds stirred for the realm and rule of Christ, for the believer’s inheritance in heavenly places, for the glory of God, for the gift of eternal perfection, and for unending presence of your God. And if you are not a Christian, my prayer for you is that you might be wooed to put your trust in Christ because of what you hear.

You might not realize it, but an orientation toward heaven is all over the New Testament. Let me give you a very quick tour:

<sup>17</sup> From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of **heaven** is at hand.”  
Matthew 4:17 (ESV)

<sup>10</sup> “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>11</sup>  
“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely  
on my account. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in **heaven**, for so they persecuted the  
prophets who were before you. Matthew 5:10–12 (ESV)

<sup>19</sup> “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break  
in and steal, <sup>20</sup> but lay up for yourselves **treasures in heaven**, where neither moth nor rust destroys and  
where thieves do not break in and steal. Matthew 6:19–20 (ESV)

<sup>18</sup> And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not  
prevail against it. <sup>19</sup> I will give you the keys of the kingdom of **heaven**, and whatever you bind on earth  
shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in **heaven**.” Matthew 16:18–  
19 (ESV)

<sup>1</sup> For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a  
house not made with hands, eternal in the **heavens**. <sup>2</sup> For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our  
**heavenly** dwelling, 2 Corinthians 5:1–2 (ESV)

<sup>3</sup> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every  
spiritual blessing in the **heavenly places**... <sup>9</sup> making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his  
purpose, which he set forth in Christ <sup>10</sup> as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things  
in **heaven** and things on earth. Ephesians 1:3, 9–10 (ESV)

<sup>1</sup> Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a **heavenly calling**, consider Jesus, the apostle and high  
priest of our confession, Hebrews 3:1 (ESV)

<sup>3</sup> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us  
to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, <sup>4</sup> to an  
inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in **heaven** for you, 1 Peter 1:3–4 (ESV)

<sup>18</sup> The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his **heavenly kingdom**. To him  
be the glory forever and ever. Amen. 2 Timothy 4:18 (ESV)

Do you see how important heaven is? Do you see the connection between heaven and earth right  
now? Do you see how your affections and your thinking are to be shaped by another world? I want  
you to start thinking, “If heaven is like that, how do I live now?”

## Implications

In light of this passage, let me give you four things to think about by way of application:

**1. Since heaven is such a popular subject, why not ask people what they believe about it?**

I want to challenge you to see that asking someone what they believe about heaven could be a great way to start a conversation about spiritual things. Why not use this series as a motivator to be more concerned about people's eternity? You could even blame me. Just say, "My pastor is doing a series on heaven right now. What do you believe about it?"

**2. Determine over the next six weeks to think about heaven so that you do not just think about things on earth.**

I hope that you'll start reading your Bible through this heaven-oriented lens, and my prayer is that you'll use this series as a good opportunity to fill your mind with new thoughts or maybe old reminders about the importance of heaven.

**3. Consider repenting from having an orientation that is only earthly focused.**

Some of you may be under conviction this morning because the world, with its system, its values, its affections, and its pace may have taken too much ground in your life. Maybe this topic is a bit shocking as to how rare it is for you to think about. Or maybe you just know that you don't think about heaven because you really are not that excited about Jesus.

**4. Realize that seeking things above changes our behavior now.**

If you were to read on in Colossians 3, Paul clearly identifies that a "things above" mindset transforms how we live now. To be heavenly minded means a different behavior even now. People who are oriented toward things above put off sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness. They put away anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk. Instead, they put on kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. They bear with one another and forgive each other. They put on love. And whatever they do, in word or deed, they do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Why? Because while they live on earth, their minds and hearts are set on things above. They know that if you aim at heaven, you get earth thrown in, but if you aim at earth you get neither.

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