

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## Paul's Letter to the Colossians: Christ our life - Colossians 3:1-17

Some time ago a question was raised on a radio programme, What is your life? There are many absorbing subjects which almost take over the lives of men and women in our day. Just think of the hold sport has over the minds of men, old and young alike. Just listen to conversations when travelling on the bus, or listening to people in the street, the topic is football! What a grip it has on the mind! It is their life! With others it may be politics; with another it may be the business world; and so we could go on. It would be worthwhile quietly to sift through and analyse our lives and ask ourselves, what is my life?

This question needs to be faced by all believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. There are legitimate things we must give our minds to; many of us have our homes and our families to occupy much of our time. All areas must, however, pale into nothing as we think of the subject of our talk today, "Christ our life." We will first of all consider Colossians 3:1-4. Just recently I read an exposition of the Epistle to the Colossians in which the writer referred to Colossians 3:1-4 as "a golden paragraph" (Moule, HCG: *Colossian and Philemon studies: lessons in faith and holiness*).

### Risen with Christ

It is obvious that the writer bases Colossians 3:1-4 on the teaching of Colossians 2 in which all believers are regarded as "risen with Christ" (Colossians 2:12) and also "dead with Christ" (Colossians 2:20). Believers have not attained to this through any effort of their own. It is by virtue of their union with Christ. So Colossians 3:1 begins, "If ye then be risen with Christ..." The 'if' does not convey any element of doubt. It may be clearer to read the words, "Since ye then be risen with Christ..." Paul follows on with a call, "seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God." The things above are the spiritual riches and blessings belonging to every believer through Christ and because of His death.

The letter to the Colossians was written to counter wrong teaching which tended to give Christ an inferior place. This will never do! Further down the chapter, in Colossians 3:11, the Apostle writes, "Christ is everything." Do you really believe that? Does He have this place in your heart and life? We all have to confess sadly that other things crowd Him out. What a challenge! No other person or even an angelic being is ever said to be "sitting on the right hand of God" (Colossians 3:1). It belongs to Christ because of who He is. Though He be so great, yet He has won our hearts. What an object to attract the Christian away from things on earth!

Colossians 3:2 carries on the theme; other translations read, "Set your mind on things above, not on things on earth." Much is said in the New Testament letters about the mind. In one place believers are said to have a renewed mind (Ephesians 4:23, Romans 12:2). There is a discipline needed here to set our minds in the right direction, as they are prone to wander. Whatever occupies the mind affects the heart and will alter our behaviour. Let's not focus our attention on things that do not profit, but on things which pay spiritual dividends.

### Hidden with Christ

Moving further down this "golden paragraph" we consider Colossians 3:3. "For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God." Our life is hidden and as yet there is no public display of the glory of Christ. It will not always be so. The chorus of a well known hymn says, "Oh, the crowning day is coming, is coming by and by" (DW Whittle 1840-1901). We are sure of this. In the meantime our faith and our patience are put to the test. There is a telling illustration of this in the Old Testament. It is found in 2 Kings 11:1-21.

They were turbulent days in the kingdom of Judah. On the death of king Ahaziah his mother, Athaliah, usurped the throne (2 Kings 11:1). She was a wicked woman and in order to feed her ambition she killed all the royal children (2 Kings 11:1). These were really her grandchildren. It looked bad for the royal line of David. However, one of the children was preserved from her destroying hand, only a baby it would seem (2 Kings 11:2). The wife of Jehoiada the priest took the boy and hid him in the temple of the LORD (2 Kings 11:3). He was hidden for six years (2 Kings 11:3); very few knew about it. After the six years, the king was shown to the army chiefs (2 Kings 11:4). They were to protect him in all his movements. At the seventh year, the king was brought out of hiding and crowned and anointed as the rightful king on David's throne (2 Kings 11:11). It was a happy day. The people clapped their hands and said,

"*God save the king*" (2 Kings 11:11). The wicked Athaliah was killed (2 Kings 11:13-16), and once again a light was kept burning on the throne of David.

It is a wonderful picture of one who was hidden and then manifested. This is the way it will be with regard to the Lord Jesus Christ. "*When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with Him in glory*" (Colossians 3:4). The world does not see the glory of the Lord today; we see Him by faith! Those around us do not know of our life with Christ, but they will know in the day of manifestation. This is not His coming for us at the rapture but our coming with Him at His appearing. It should be noted that when the appearing of Christ is the subject, it is connected with our practical living. This is borne out in Colossians 3:5-11.

### Put to Death

Colossians 3:5-11, is very practical in its content. There is to be a ruthless dealing with ourselves. We would think of it as self-discipline. Let's listen to these verses, "*Mortify [put to death] therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness which is idolatry*" (Colossians 3:5) As we have been taught in Colossians 3:1-4 we are dead to our old life in Christ, then there is to be a corresponding change of behaviour. So the vital word is, "*Mortify [put to death]*" (Colossians 3:5).

We may never have been guilty of the awful features outlined in our verse but we have a nature capable of them all. Let's think again of Colossians 3:5; the Apostle uses the expression "your members". We might gain the impression, just listening to Colossians 3:5, that the members are the ugly features themselves.

Looking at Paul's other letters however, the impression is that they refer to the members of our bodies through which these things show themselves. To make this a little clearer, just listen to a brief passage from Paul's letter to the Romans: "*...for as ye have yielded your members servants to uncleanness ... even so now yield your members servants to righteousness unto holiness*" (Romans 6:19).

You may recall some words of the Lord Jesus, when He was on earth and speaking to His disciples, He said, "*Wherefore if thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off, and cast them from thee ... And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee*" (Matthew 18:8-9). No one would think that the Lord Jesus was referring to any physical mutilation; of course not! He was speaking of the need for self judgement **very** similar to the sentiments of Colossians 3.

Let's have another illustration from the Old Testament scriptures, this time from the book of Joshua. After forty years wandering in the wilderness, Israel had crossed the river Jordan (Joshua 3:1-17). Joshua was instructed to take out of the midst of the river Jordan twelve stones, each one representing a tribe of Israel (Joshua 4:1-2). They were to be a memorial reminding them of their deliverance into the Promised Land. They were to set up a cairn of stones in the place where they lodged that night (Joshua 4:3). Eventually they were set up again in a place called Gilgal (Joshua 4:20). As we today look back on these stones taken out of the waters of death by the Holy Spirit, we can see the truth we have considered in Colossians 3: Risen with Christ!!

Gilgal was the scene of another event of great importance. The generation which crossed Jordan was different from that which left Egypt. None of this company had been circumcised. This was an important rite for Israel as God had given it to his people many years previously as a mark of the relationship that was between them, (see Genesis 17:9-14). It involved all the males among them and was to be done when each was eight days old.

In Joshua 5:2 we read, "*At that time the LORD said unto Joshua, Make thee sharp knives, and circumcise again the children of Israel the second time.*" This does not apply to the Christian in any physical way; it is referred to in Colossians 2:11 and is related to the cross of Christ. "*In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made **without hands** in the putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ.*" The flesh is that principle of sin which is in each of us and is incapable of any good. It was judged [cut off] in the death of our Lord Jesus. The believer accepts this as true. Believers assent to this in baptism.

In Colossians 3:5-11, however, it is practical. We must put to death our members which are upon the earth (Colossians 3:5). Gilgal, as a type for us, tells of the need of rigorous self-judgement. Gilgal became a base of operations in the land of Canaan. Whenever a conquest was made and battles were won, the Israelites were to return to the base again (Joshua 9:6, 10:6-15, 14:6). There is a lesson for us here. When we imagine that we are making progress in our lives as Christians, let us be vigilant against the subtle foe within. Let us be thankful that, as well as having a new life in Christ, there is the indwelling Spirit to be our help.

Before leaving Colossians 3:5-11, just listen to Colossians 3:6, referring to the awful features outlined in Colossians 3:5: "*For which things' sake the wrath of God cometh on the children of disobedience.*" This is very solemn; God does

not pass over sin lightly. He has provided salvation for us freely through the Lord Jesus. The cost was great, His precious blood (see 1 Peter 1:18-19). This salvation may be ours through faith in Him.

### A change of clothes

We shall move on a little further, in this wonderful chapter, to Colossians 3:8-14. It is still very practical. The subject to be considered in this section is 'the old man and the new man'. The exhortations are a little different from those we have already looked at. Instead of putting to death, it becomes a matter of putting off and putting on. The impression is given of a change of clothes. We will keep that picture in mind. The question is, of course, what is the old man? The apostle does not say! He just leaves it in the abstract. Can we get some light elsewhere? In Romans 6 we get some help, because the writer puts the truth right on to our doorstep, not now in the abstract: "*Knowing this, that **our** old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin*" (Romans 6:6). How important is the cross! Let us never underestimate its value! The old man, then, is that old nature we all inherited from Adam and it was crucified with Christ at Calvary. We need to accept these statements by faith and act upon them.

Let's listen to Colossians 3:8-9: "*But now ye also put off all these; anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth. Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds.*" The features given here are not quite the same as those given in Colossians 3:5, but some of them may easily come into evidence and spoil Christian fellowship. How easy it is to give way to anger, wrath and even malice when things don't go our way! We must put them off and be finished with them. But the verse goes on to say that **we have** put off the old man.

How do we understand this? Think again of Romans 6:6, where we learned that "*our old man is crucified with Him.*" This provides the answer to our question. It is in the light of the cross of Christ it is said, "*ye **have** put off the old man...*" (Colossians 3:9) But if it is true in fact we must deal with the old man in practice. We will move on now. Let's listen to Colossians 3:10: "*And **have** put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of Him that created him.*" We had no part in this; it was God's sovereign work in our heart.

The new man is said in Colossians 3:10, and also in Ephesians 4:24, to "be created". In an earlier letter of the Apostle Paul there is a passage that goes like this, "*So if any one be in Christ, there is a new creation*" (2 Corinthians 5:17) Because these things are true of us, we are to put on new clothes. This is practical! It is important to point out that the new man is not the Lord Jesus personally, but the characteristics of the new man was seen in Him.

Let's listen to Colossians 3:12: "*Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering.*" How often, as believers, we have thought about the life of the Lord Jesus. Every feature given here was seen in Him. The sense here is that we have determined to do this once for all and then seek the help of the Lord to go on. It is also true that we are to be Christ-like in our daily walk. What an effect these expressions of Christ should have on our fellowship with one another!

Let's think of one more illustration from the Old Testament, this time in 2 Kings 2. We read there of two prophets, Elijah and Elisha (2 Kings 2:2). They were evil days (1 Kings 16:29-34); God's people had turned to the worship of Baal (1 Kings 18:1-19) and Elijah had been called to restore them to the worship of Jehovah (1 Kings 18:20-19:10). Elijah had been told that when his work was done he would be taken up to heaven in a whirlwind and Elisha was to take his place (1 Kings 19:16).

As this time drew near, they made an interesting journey together. They visited certain places of significance until they reached the river Jordan (2 Kings 2:7). We are told that Elijah took his cloak and wrapped it together and smote the waters and they parted and they both crossed over (2 Kings 2:8). If Elisha was to take Elijah's place in power, everything depended on seeing him taken up. It did happen as God had said. Elijah was taken up in a whirlwind and Elisha witnessed it and then saw him no more (2 Kings 2:11). The reaction of Elisha was that he took hold of his own clothes and rent them in two pieces (2 Kings 2:12). He took up the cloak that fell off Elijah and went back and stood by the bank of Jordan (2 Kings 2:13). With the cloak, he parted the waters again and went over (2 Kings 2:14). There were some who saw it all happen and they said, "*The spirit of Elijah doth rest on Elisha*" (2 Kings 2:15). There had been a change of clothes!

We are reminded here of what was said of Peter and John in Acts 4:13, "*They took knowledge of them that they had been with Jesus.*" This incident takes us back to our first point today. We are to look above to where Christ is and thus gain the necessary power to be Christ-like in our lives. Others looking on will see the change.

### **The Overcoat**

Listen to Colossians 3:14, *“And above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfectness.”* All will be bonded together by love; without it there will be little power.

Colossians 3:8-14 ends with a reference to the **“peace of Christ”** (Colossians 3:15, JN Darby Translation) to enable us to be true to the truth of the one body in our relationships with other believers. The **“word of Christ”** (Colossians 3:16) is to dwell in us to give us the instruction we need and that spiritual joy that would have us singing with grace in our hearts to the Lord. May the Lord help us that in all the circumstances of our lives it may be true that in reality Christ **“is our life”** (Colossians 3:4).

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