

Camelback Bible Church



Dr. Tim Savage, Senior Pastor
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LIFE AFTER DEATH

God's Plan for Our Lives: Practically Speaking (Part 2)
Colossians 3:1-2

Are you living the life you want to live? Or maybe I should ask, Do you even know what kind of life you're looking for?

On midnight of July 31, 1834, the last night of bondage for eight hundred thousand slaves in the British Empire, George Trevelyan, the famous historian, wrote . . . "The [black people] in our West Indian islands went up onto the hilltops to watch the sun rise, bringing them freedom as its first rays struck the waters."

These slaves knew what they were looking for. They knew what kind of a life they wanted. They wanted a life of freedom!

Last week the apostle Paul told us that as Christians we've been set free from the elemental principles of the world – the tyranny of making lives for ourselves, by ourselves, according to our own desires; and setting up the criteria by which we can produce such a life. If we're religious, sticking to certain rules like don't touch this and don't taste that; the do's and the don'ts of religion. Or if we're secular, like most of us, chasing after MS&P (money, sex, power); the keys to a good life, getting each of the three in the right amount and in the right order.

It's all so pointless, says Paul. How can inanimate objects like MS&P actually make a life? If you use them for that purpose, they will only perish with the using. If you try to use money, sex, power, or religious legalism to make a life for yourselves they will rot in your hands. And you know what decomposing matter does to your hands, does to your heart! MS&P will not gratify your desires. They won't give the life you want.

You got to get out of such a life and there's only *one* exit: Jesus Christ.

He took us with him to the killing tree and when he died the lives we were living died with him. Colossians 2:23 – *So then you have died with Christ to the elemental principles of the world. We died **out from under** the elemental principles of the world. We no longer are compelled to make a life for ourselves, by ourselves, according to our own desires. We are set free from that tyranny.*

But do we realize it?! Have we gone up to the hilltops to watch the sun rise, bringing us freedom as its first rays strike the waters? I don't think we have. We don't climb very high as Christians, ***not nearly high enough.***

Raised with Christ

Lesli and I drove up to the top of Haleakala on our honeymoon, a ten thousand foot high extinct volcano on the island of Maui, just to see the sun rise. They said it would be spectacular. They said it would be life-changing. They said we'd have to awaken at three-thirty in the morning to arrive on time – not an easy thing to do on your honeymoon! What we saw on the mountaintop was breathtaking and it has stuck with us; we still comment about it thirty-two years later.

Paul wants to take us to the mountaintop this morning. In fact he wants to do even better. He wants to take us to heaven. He knows one glimpse of heaven will change our lives forever.

We have died with Christ, he says, been brought out from under the cruel tyranny of trying to make a life for ourselves. But that's not all. Not only did we die with Christ, we have also been raised with Christ – really raised, indeed raised so high that we can look into heaven itself!

Did you know that? Do you realize what this means? To look into heaven?

Let's find out. With panting hearts, let's find out.

Look with me at Colossians 3:1 – *If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above.*

This is one of the most remarkable sentences in a Bible filled with remarkable sentences. *If then you have been raised with Christ.* Grammatically, this sentence represents a first class condition. The if-clause, 'if then,' could be translated *so then*. And notice the past tense – *so then you have been raised with Christ.* The sentence indicates that this has already happened to Christians. When Christ burst from the tomb he was not alone. We, Christians, were with him.

So then you have been raised with Christ.

Did you know that? We think of what Christ did on the cross and the resurrection as being something he did instead of us. He was a substitute. He certainly was, but he was also more. He invites us to join him, to participate with him in an extraordinary way. We died and rose with Christ.

What does that mean? It means something happened to us on the cross and in the resurrection. In a word, *we* changed and the change couldn't have been bigger. We've changed from a person who was dead with Christ to a person who is now alive with Christ. Can you get any bigger change than from death to life? We no longer have to live a decomposing life, making a life for ourselves, by ourselves, according to our own desires. We are now living completely new lives, spectacularly new, with the resurrected Christ.

Christian, you have been translated from one polar extreme to another. The gulf separating you from what you once were to what you now are is infinitely wide.

You are life and death from what you once were. You are heaven and earth away from your former self.

Do you see how different you are? More than different – you are the polar opposite of your former self!!!

I don't think we know how changed we are. And one reason why we don't know is because we've never been to heaven to see what actually becomes of us. "Of course we've never been to heaven," we will say. "We haven't died yet. Got to die to go to heaven!" Ah, but you have died, says Paul. You have died with Christ out from under the elemental principles of the world (2:20). But that's only half the equation. The second half is this – you have died with Christ in order to be raised with Christ, in order to get a glimpse into heaven.

A Glimpse into the Things of Heaven

Look again at verse 1 – *If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above.* [And then drop down to verse 2] *Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.*

Being raised with Christ is spectacularly eye opening. It puts you in a place where you can look into heaven. And what do you see in heaven?

Paul says you see *things*. He uses the word 'things' three times. *Seek the **things** that are above, set your mind on **things** that are above, not on **things** that are on earth.* And we might respond, "What a strange and nondescript way to describe what we see in heaven. Things?!"

You could do better than that, Paul. How about saying we see thrones or streets of gold or rivers of life in heaven? But "things"? *Seek the **things** above. Set your minds on things that are above.* Why does Paul leave what the eye sees in heaven so . . . undefined?

I think I know why. Because in heaven *things* are not the most important *things*. On earth we make *things* important. *Things* like money, sex, and power. To us such *things* are really *something*. But what is *something* on earth is *nothing* in heaven.

Everything in heaven derives its value from one *thing*, the only *thing* that's really *something*. And what is the one *thing*?

Verse 1 – *If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is.*

Heaven. That's *where Christ is*. He's the one *thing* that's really *something*. He's the only *thing* you really need to know about heaven.

When you look into heaven you're going to see Christ and he will so fill up your frame of reference, the height, depth, width, and breadth of your horizons that *everything* else in the celestial city will be seen in the light of who he is. Jesus Christ is the one *thing* that shapes *everything* in heaven.

And how does he shape everything? What shape do *things* take in heaven by virtue of Jesus Christ being in heaven? Do you want to know?

The Posture and Position of Jesus

Paul's give us two clues, the two *P*'s. Posture and position. Look at Jesus' posture. Look at Jesus' position.

Let's read farther in verse 1 – *If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated.*

Look at his posture. He's seated. That is highly significant.

It means he's not standing. He's not healing the sick, not reprimanding the religious authorities, not teaching on the Mount of Olives, not dying on the cross, not rising from the tomb. It means – are you ready for this? It means Jesus is *finished* with his work. He is sitting down.

And it's not just posture that's so significant, but also position. Look a little farther in verse 1 – *Seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.*

What a position! The most lofty position of all. The position reserved for the ranking dignitary of the universe, the one who has fulfilled the high commission of the holy God. Namely, the commission to purge from creation all rebellion against God; the only instance of which rebellion was registered on a third-rate planet called Earth in a backwater galaxy of the universe, where human beings were trying to make lives for themselves apart from God, according to their own desires, and as a result were falling into all sorts of relational conflict and perversion and misery as a species, literally suffering decomposition as living entities.

To that planet God sent his Son to crush the rebellion and eradicate the suffering and to do so by dying on a cross and rising from the dead.

He's now finished with the divine commission. He's sitting down at the right hand of God. And not only is he receiving rave reviews from the twenty-four elders and the angels, myriads of myriads of angels and thousands of thousands of angels falling down before him and singing with a loud voice, "*Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!*" (Revelation 5), but, what is more, the *things* over which he is presiding in heaven are so perfect and so pure and so beautiful.

In other words, the *things* of heaven are so unlike the *things* of earth. All because heaven is where Jesus is. Think about it. In heaven, there is no financial insecurity, no debilitating disease, no relational conflict, no tarnished reputations, no lingering loneliness, no chronic pain.

None of the *things* that bothered you when you woke up this morning or tormented you through the night are in heaven. None of the things that concern you about work. None of the array of criticisms coming from your spouse. None of the guilt from past sins gnawing at your soul.

No pre-election fears. No economic worries. No international terror. No domestic violence. No coarse words. No risk of failure. No complaining. No fretting. No worrying. No murmuring.

These *things* that are *something* on earth are *nothing* in heaven. In heaven *everything* takes its definition from Christ, from his posture and his position. And he's sitting down, finished with the work of eradicating all those *things* just mentioned. He's sitting at the right hand of God, having fulfilled the divine commission to bring earth back into full compliance with the will of its Maker.

And because the Lord Jesus Christ is now sitting and reigning, the *things* of heaven couldn't be more opposite the *things* of earth. There is no hurt or destruction in all my holy mountain, says the Lord in the prophetic book of Isaiah. The lion lies down with the lamb. The child plays on top of the adder's hole, and the child's mother is unconcerned. This is the way *things* are in heaven. There is peace in heaven, there is joy, there is love, there is contentment, there is satisfaction. In a word, there is LIFE.

You don't have to make a life for yourself in heaven. ***You've got it*** – a life as infinitely full as it is eternally long. All because of Jesus, who has become your life!! With him and in him and through him you are powerfully alive.

“But that's in heaven,” we say. True, but you can go there now and take a look, teaches the apostle Paul. And when you do it will change your life on earth completely. Because when you see the way *things* are up there, you will see the way *things really* are. And then you can start living right now according to this new reality, this true reality, this reality of heaven. You can start living on earth according to the reality of heaven.

The reality of heaven is the way *things* really are. Jesus is finished. Look at him. He's sitting down at the right hand of God. Do you see him?

All the mess of earth, all the vanity of trying to get our ducks in a row, all the futility of using money, sex, and power to make lives for ourselves – and discovering, as a result, only disappointment, frustration, defeat, worry, fear, insecurity, pride, guilt, sorrow, complaints. This is no longer the true reality. This decaying reality is a spent reality. According to the *things* of heaven, such a reality is over.

“What do you mean it's over? I live with *things* just like this . . . disappointment, despair, etc.”

True, but these are not the *things* of heaven. “I know, but I'm not in heaven yet.”

Well, that's precisely Paul's point – you can look into heaven. If you're a Christian, you've been raised with Christ and you've got a new life as different from the old as death is from life, as earth is from heaven. You've been raised so high that you can see into heaven and what you see there is reality as it is truly. Jesus is sitting down. He has conquered all that ails you, starting with your sin and including every real or potential disappointment.

Living in the True Reality of Heaven

The only question is will you live today in the light of what's already true in heaven? Will you live today according to the true reality of heaven?

You might think . . . that's kind of hard, living as though things really aren't what you see them to be on earth! Living as though that person has not just shattered me by slamming my reputation. Living as though my husband really isn't ripping me apart with his negative critiques. Living as though I'm really doing alright financially when I don't know where we're going to get money for the next meal.

Well, it's not a matter of living as though these things aren't happening. It's living as though something else much bigger and better is happening that so overwhelms the sorrow and so overwhelms the disappointment of these things that you can live in the light of that bigger and better and heavenly reality.

“It's so hard, Tim, for me to understand this, to get this right, to live according to the heavenly reality.” Excuse me for disagreeing – No, it's not so hard. You do it all the time. You constantly live by hope in the possibility of a better reality. Hope is the fuel that keeps you alive.

I think of a simple thing like this summer when I was up in the mountains on a three month study leave, at ninety-five hundred feet, and I'm apart from my wife, Lesli, for a good segment of that time, and I don't see the boys at all, and I don't even see people for several days at a time, and I don't have internet access, and I don't have phone access. For several weeks, I am all alone . . . alone with the coyotes and the deer. But this is not the extent of my reality. No, not even close. Hope enters my reality. Hope of an approaching reality that will bring some greater life into my existence. In particular, we have a family vacation planned, and the closer this great and wonderful hoped-for reality draws to the present, the more of an impact it makes on my demeanor, my entire existence.

The last few days before I hop on the plane to go and see Lesli and the boys, I find there's a new resolve in my step. I discover that I am humming my favorite tunes as I write the book. In fact, I am becoming so excited by the hope burning in my heart that I find it almost impossible to concentrate on my work.

An interesting incident happened on one of these last days when I drove over to the neighbor's cabin, about a half mile away, to sit in his driveway and draw on his wi-fi access to work on emails. As I was backing up to turn around and get into just the right position to be closest to his

office, I hit a tree stump. It bumps the car and I think to myself, “I hope I didn’t just put a dent in the car.” When I get out of the car to assess the damage, I see no dent but I do hear a “psssss.” I’ve punctured the sidewall of the tire and soon it’s perfectly flat.

I knock on the neighbor’s door and start using his phone to make calls to tire shops in Grand Junction, two hours away, and discover that none of the shops will replace only one tire, since it will not mesh with the tread thickness of the other three tires and, as a result, will cause the car to drive erratically. Hence, I must buy an entire set of new tires – for \$950!! But here’s the point: this unexpected financial outlay hardly dents my spirit. It means I can leave one day early for the rendezvous with my family, first to change tires, and then to board the plane. What would normally undo me, and provoke some serious complaining, now, because of the hope set before me, the reality of seeing my family, now the dominant reality of my life, doesn’t discourage me at all. I doubt anything could. I’m going to see my wife! I’m going to see Matt and Jon! I’m pumped!

You see, we all know how to live with hope. It isn’t hard. We do it all the time. But do we live in the light of the greatest hope of all, the dominant reality of our existence as Christians. Heaven – it’s just a blink away. And that blink could come at any instant for us: it could come this week or it could come in a thousand weeks. Whatever, in God’s frame of reference, it will come. And we all know how to live in the light of a great hope coming to fulfillment soon.

There is no greater hope than the approaching reality of the things of heaven. And when you’ve caught a glimpse of that reality, and you know it’s your true reality, and you know it’s coming in the morning, it changes the way you live today.

My dad used to wake my sister Debbie and me each morning when we were children, and he would recite positive one-liners in the process . . . little ditties that actually drove us crazy, such as “Rise and shine and give God the glory” or “This is the day the Lord has made” or “Top of the morning to you.” The one I remember best was “It’s a beautiful day above the clouds,” which usually meant it was a foggy morning on the coast of California where we lived, but, don’t despair, above the clouds it’s beautiful and sunny.

When it was foggy in the morning, most kids wore sweatshirts to school. I never did because I knew the fog was going to burn off by noon. I was willing to endure the early morning chill in expectation of fair weather later on and the relief of not being encumbered by having to carry around a sweatshirt for the rest of the day.

Too many of us are encumbered and burdened by the things of this earth. But Paul is teaching us that the things of the earth are in the process of burning off in the face of the true reality, the beautiful reality, of the perfection of heaven.

Ultimate reality is what we see in heaven. Look at the things up there; none of the things up there are anything down here. Start living today in the light of the future, in the light of the things of heaven.

What about you? Are you living in the light of the reality of heaven? Or, are you a worrier? Are you frightened? Are you complaining? If you are, you're living the wrong life. You're not looking in on heaven. You're not living in the light of the true reality.

Jesus has done away with sin, done away with death, done away with danger, done away with disease, done away with the things that worry us, frighten us. Look at Christ. He's sitting down at the right hand of God. Paul says if you've been raised with Christ to a new life you can actually look at the Christ of heaven, actually seek the things that are above. You can set your mind on them. You can come out from under the realities of earth, at least in your mind, and start living according to things as they really are.

I know it's easier said than done. I awoke this morning thinking, "What you are preaching this morning you don't even apply in your own life?" It's not a comforting thought to climb into the pulpit and realize you're a hypocrite – that what I have to tell everyone in church, namely, that you should start living on earth in the light of the true reality of heaven, is something I find very challenging to do personally in my own life.

I had dinner a few weeks ago with a group of about ten Christians who took pity on my isolation in the cabin and decided to include me in their social function. At the table, one woman started talking about the upcoming national election and then relating how afraid she was for the future of our country. She went on to relate how one of her friends attends a church where the pastor encouraged the congregation to come on a given Sunday without their Bibles and who then also removed all the hymnals in the pews. His purpose was to prepare the people for the day, a day he felt was soon approaching, when the government would disallow the reading of the Bible and the singing of hymns. He wanted to prepare them for national persecution. How very disconcerting, related the woman at the dinner table. America's being sold down the road to perdition and all of us losing our religious freedoms. And everyone listening to her – you could tell by their expressions – were trembling at the thought of what is happening to America.

At this point, I decided to try out on them my insights from Colossians 3. I said, "Why are we afraid?" They all looked at me rather shocked, as though I was about to spoil a riveting conversation!

"Why should we be afraid?" I said. "We're just a tick away from the reality of heaven. In fact, the reality of heaven is the true reality. As Christians, we've been called to live in the light of the reality of heaven. Christ is sitting down. He has conquered all that ails us. He has fulfilled the divine commission to eradicate all evil and all sin. Why should we ever be afraid? Look at the apostle Paul. He is being subjected to far more frightful social conditions than any of us will ever face. He is being beaten up one side of the Roman Empire and down the other. He's being beaten by rods, whipped by a cat of nine tails, shipwrecked, persecuted, several times left for dead, and so on and so forth. And yet what does he say? 'I will not lose heart.' He says it twice in 2 Corinthians 4. And while chained between two smelly guards in a Roman prison, perhaps only days before his death, he says 'I rejoice always.' What's he thinking? He can be thinking only one thing. His reality, his true reality is that which he sees in heaven. And he's living in the light of that reality now, even while on earth. Because of Jesus, because of what Jesus has done, nothing frightens Paul. Nothing. Nothing."

To repeat, Jesus is seated – and that’s our life.

We focus on Christ. Not Christ as he was in the past, focusing on his death and resurrection, which we do and should love to do, but also focusing on Christ as he is now, in the present in heaven.

We don’t think of Christ in this way nearly enough, Christ as he is now in the present, in heaven. But Paul always does:

For me to live is Christ now.

I can do all things through the reigning Christ who strengthens me.

I am more than a conqueror through Christ who loves me right now.

It is no longer I who live but Christ – right now – living in me.

Christ in me today, the hope of glory.

I seek the things above where Christ is presently, seated, at the right hand of God.

Seek and Set

Paul gives us two ways to apply the truths of Colossians 3, and they are right in front of us in the passage. Do you see what he says in verses one and two? He says **Seek the things above**. And he says **Set your mind on things that are above**.

Seek and set.

Seek the things that are above. Draw a bead on them. Hone in on them. In other words, seek the Christ of heaven, Christ as he is now, the Christ of the present. And, then, set the dial on him. Lock in on Christ.

How do you do that? By constantly re-focusing on Jesus Christ as he is in heaven. You’ve been raised with Christ . . . so you can do this. You can look into heaven and see Christ as he presently is, reminding yourself that he has conquered all that ails you, every potential fear, every potential lust, every potential insecurity. He’s done away with them all. Only he has. But he most certainly has. Seek him. Set your sights on him.

This idea of seeking and setting reminds me, for some reason, of the cruise control in our cars. If you want to be safe, you seek a certain speed, usually by accelerating to the right speed. And when you reach that speed, you press the button on the cruise control and set it firmly at that speed. You lock in.

Something amusing – amusing to me (!) – happened on my way home from Colorado. I came up behind a car that was going a little too slow for me, and so I pulled out into the other lane and passed the car. He wasn't going that slow, so I didn't quickly pull away from him. I just eased away from him slowly.

About three minutes later I could still see the car in my review mirror and while I'm looking back a sheriff's car comes roaring up behind him with lights flashing. Since I had recently passed that car, I am convinced the sheriff is coming after me for speeding. But no, the sheriff pulls over the car that I passed and gave that driver a speeding ticket.

Well you know what I did? I had just dodged a citation and didn't want to get into any trouble. So I immediately sought the right speed on the odometer and I set the cruise control button firmly. I didn't want to get messed up.

Christians, we get so messed up in our fears and our worries and our anxieties and our guilt. And it's all because we are not seeking Christ and setting our minds on Christ, seeking and setting our minds on the way things really are.

When we lift our eyes to heaven, it changes our lives. Many of us, this morning, need precisely such a lift.

I grew up in a golfing family. My dad was a great golfer. Some thought he was the best junior golfer in America in his day. He appeared in a nine photo spread, stop actions of various stages of his golf swing, on the front page of the sports section of the *L.A. Times* in the 1930s. And Matthew, our son, followed in his footsteps becoming an All-American golfer at Stanford. And our other son, Jonathan, can outdrive everyone in the family. I've had no choice but to learn the finer points of this sport that cannot be perfected.

Probably the most important rule in golf is encapsulated by the word . . . “Play it where it lies.” It's referring to the golf ball. Wherever the golf ball lands, you can't move it. You must play it where it lies.

There is, however, one exception to the rule, and a lot of people don't know about this exception. When the golf course becomes especially muddy, after a season of rainstorms for instance, and there is a strong likelihood that the golf ball, as it rolls down the fairway, will become caked in mud, sometimes a special rule is put into play. The rule is called . . . “Lift, clean, and place.”

It's a merciful rule. Because when the golf ball becomes muddy, it no longer flies soundly when struck by the golf club. It will hook into the trees. It will slice into the lake. It will turn a challenging round of golf into a disaster.

But when this special rule is enforced, you don't have to play the golf ball where and how it lies. You can actually lift it, clean it off, and replace it – and, hopefully, proceed to play a good shot.

Here's the point. Many of us here this morning, who live in this messy and muddy world, have become caked by the ugliness of earth and we're in no condition to continue a round of life

without disappointing results. Slogging along on this troubling earth has left us frightened, worried, insecure, and, maybe even sinful, lustful, broken down. We are candidates deeply in need of a lift, clean, and place.

In Colossians 3, this is precisely what Paul is offering. Actually, it is what Christ offers. If we have been raised with Christ, we can be lifted to the highest place of all. We can peer into heaven and see Christ sitting at the right hand of God. It is precisely such a lift that we desperately need. Because such a lift cleanses us. It renews our mind. It freshens our perspective. How could it not? To see that Christ has defeated all that ails us, that we don't need to be slogging our way through every mess and muddiness thrown up by our world, that we can actually begin living in the light of the new and ultimate reality of Christ's victory over all sin – this is a cleansing revelation. And, once cleansed, we are ready to take our place again in life on earth. We are ready to take another shot at life. We are ready to be put back again into play.

All because of Christ – you can be lifted, cleaned, and placed. No matter what muck you've endured, no matter whether it is by your own weaknesses or someone else's that you've endured it, you can go to heaven today, take a look, seek the conquering Christ, set your sights on him anew, and be lifted, cleaned, and re-placed in the game of life.

Being socked away in a mountain cabin for three months has had a cleansing effect on me. Being without internet for three months has had a cleansing effect. Being alone with God for three months has a cleansing effect on me. It's amazing what happens to lust, it's amazing what happens to guilt, it's amazing what happens to all that junk that was in your life when you were trying to make a life for yourself. It's amazing what happens to your life when you seek Christ and set your mind on Christ

When you find ways to spend time with Christ, you feel like you've been lifted. You feel like you've been cleansed. You feel like you've been re-placed. And now you're ready to take the shot of life.

A lot of us need to be lifted, cleaned, and placed this morning. I know we do. You need to go to heaven and have a look. You need to seek Christ and then lock yourself in on Jesus Christ. You need to come to grips with the way things really are. You're so worried, you're so upset. God's saying that's not the way things really are. Jesus finished whatever it took to get rid of that fretting and worry. Look into heaven. See the way things really are.

Look at Jesus. Look to Jesus. Set your sights on him. Get lifted. Get cleaned. Get placed.