**Live and Become Who You Are:**

**An Exegesis of Colossians 3:1-4**

John E. Doe

NT 520 New Testament Introduction

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**Main Idea and Outline**

Main Idea

The believer’s union with Christ draws them in to a new existence and a new life. Since Christ has created this new life, believers are to focus their entire beings on Christ and His domain.

Outline

1. Christian ethics and the believer’s proper heavenward perspective…Colossians 3:1–2
2. Christ’s death as the basis for Christian ethics…Colossians 3:3
3. Christ’s return as the motivation for Christian ethics…Colossians 3:4

**Introduction**

Upon completing his rebuttal of the ‘Colossian heresy’ in Col 2, the Apostle Paul turns his attention to exhorting his readers. Throughout much of Col 3–6, Paul gives clear instructions to his readers concerning how they should conduct their lives. But, before actually doing so, he reminds them of what has transpired in their lives because of Christ’s sacrificial death and suggests how we should live in light of that fact (see Col 3:1–4). Thus, Paul instructs his readers regarding the Christian life by noting what has already been done by Christ.[[1]](#footnote-1) Hence, this passage can be described as the Apostle Paul’s attempt to explain how we can live and become who we already are, in Christ. No longer are believers to orientate themselves towards the things of this world. Realizing that the truly obedient life begins with the mind, Paul encourages them to turn their mental energy towards the risen Christ. But beyond that, Paul gives a word of encouragement by reminding his reader of Christ’s return. Paul thus reminds believers that they can find comfort in knowing that Christ will one day return to claim and vindicate them.

**Context**

Historical Context

Generally speaking, scholars are divided over three introductory issues pertaining to the letter to the Colossian church: its authorship, provenance, and the nature of the heresy being addressed. While the Apostle Paul has been traditionally viewed as the author of this letter, some critical scholars have questioned the Pauline authorship of Colossians.[[2]](#footnote-2) Challenges to the authenticity of Colossians are generally based on the following factors: 1) supposed differences between the theology of Colossians and the undisputed Pauline epistles; 2) supposed differences between the language and style of Colossians and the undisputed Pauline epistles; and 3) supposed similarities between Colossians and Ephesians.[[3]](#footnote-3) Ultimately, these challenges to the Pauline authorship of Colossians do not sufficiently account for the close ties between Colossians and Philemon (widely viewed as authentic), the strong similarities between Colossians and the undisputed Pauline epistles, and the widespread acceptance of Colossians by the early Church.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In terms of Paul’s location while writing this letter, the internal evidence of the letter suggests that he was imprisoned at the time (cf. Col. 4:3, 10, 18). There is, however, debate over which imprisonment Paul is referring to (cf. 2 Cor. 6:5;11:23). Scholars have generally proposed three primary options: Rome, Ephesus, and Caesarea.[[5]](#footnote-5) While certainty on this issue is unattainable, the preponderance of the evidence favors a Roman imprisonment. The reference to Aristarchus in Col 4:10 (cf. Acts 27:2; Phlm. 24) and the strength of the testimony of the early Church especially favor a Roman provenance.[[6]](#footnote-6)

A careful reading of this letter suggests Paul was writing to a church that was in danger of being misled by some form of heretical teaching (e.g., Col 1:23; 2:7–8, 16–23). The precise nature of the “Colossian heresy” is a subject of much debate with proposals including Gnosticism, proto-Gnosticism, and Jewish mysticism.[[7]](#footnote-7) Unfortunately, Paul does not present a detailed description of the nature of this heresy. This has lead M. Hooker to propose that there was in fact no such heresy.[[8]](#footnote-8) However, given the presence of what are likely slogans of Paul’s adversaries and specific commands (e.g., Col 2:21), it seems best to conclude that there was some systematic teaching that was dragging the Colossian believers away from the truth.[[9]](#footnote-9) One can also reasonably conclude that the “Colossian heresy” emphasized Jewish beliefs and asceticism (cf. Col 2:16, 23).[[10]](#footnote-10)

Literary Context

Paul highlights the absolute supremacy of Christ in this letter in order to address the “Colossian heresy.”[[11]](#footnote-11) After employing his customary greeting (Col 1:1–2), Paul proceeds to express his love and concern for the believers at Colossae (Col 1:3–12). Here he notes his prayerful concern for these believers and the fruitful ministry of Epaphras. In Col 1:13, Paul begins his discussion of the work of Christ, culminating in a magnificent portrait of Christ (Col 1:15–20). This is widely viewed as a piece of traditional material (likely a hymn) and central to the message of the letter.[[12]](#footnote-12) This hymn is used to show “Jesus Christ triumphs over and outrules the complicated ways recommended or imposed” by the false teachers at Colossae.[[13]](#footnote-13) Paul here depicts Christ as the universal Lord over all things (see esp. v. 17).[[14]](#footnote-14)

The Apostle then describes the new relationship that has been created between God and believers through Christ’s redemptive work (Col 1:21–23). Here he notes that whereas believers were previously enemies of God, they have now become united with God because of Christ’s death on the cross (cf. 2 Cor 5:17–21; Eph 2:11–18). Paul’s ministry to the Christian community is then discussed in the next section (Col 1:24–29). There Paul describes his labors and sufferings for the body of Christ, as well as his responsibility to proclaim the “mystery” of Christ.[[15]](#footnote-15) Paul then notes his desire to protect the Colossian believers from the heresy they have been exposed to (v. 4, 8), as well as his concern for their spiritual growth (v. 2, 5–7).

The next section in the letter is crucial for understanding Paul’s response to this heresy (Col 2:9–15). Not only does Paul note that Christ-followers have died and been buried with Christ (v. 12), he also suggests that believers “have been given fullness in Christ,” who Himself has the complete “fullness” of the divine essence (v. 9–10; cf. Eph 1:23).[[16]](#footnote-16) Besides these facts, believers also have been freed of the “condemnatory aspects of the law” and have received forgiveness through Christ’s sacrificial death.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Paul then launches a full rebuke of the ‘Colossian heresy’ and shows its absurdity in light of what Christ has accomplished (Col 2:16–23). Here Paul notes that the Colossian believers do not need to involve themselves in the practices of the false teachers; these practices seem to have involved legalistic asceticism (Col 2:16, 21–23) and the worship of celestial beings (v. 18). Paul also suggests they are to realize that while such practices seem to be beneficial in regulating the desires of the flesh, they do not actually achieve the desired end (v. 23).

**Content**

Colossians 3:1

Paul begins this new section of his letter by drawing upon earlier statements within the letter. Paul also already stated that believers have “died with Christ” (Col 2:20) and have been “raised with Christ” (see 2:12–13). There is a very real sense in which Col 3:1–14 describes the practical implications of those two facts. Given that Paul begins this section with the conjunction “since” (*ei* *oun*), it is likely that he is continuing his train of thought from the previous section. This section begins in Col 2:20 and here Paul notes that given their union with Christ, believers are no longer subject to the “basic principles of the world” (Col 2:8).[[18]](#footnote-18) Given that the passage under discussion precedes the hortatory section of this epistle (Col 3:5–4:6) and follows Paul’s attack on the “Colossian heresy,” it is likely that Paul is creating a bridge between his treatment of the heresy and his admonitions concerning the true nature of the Christian life.[[19]](#footnote-19) Col 3:1–4 therefore addresses the proper perspective from which believers should engage in the process of sanctification. Col 3:1–4 also seems to be describing how believers are to live in Christ (see Col 2:6).[[20]](#footnote-20)

Paul first notes in Col 3:1 that believers have been “raised with Christ.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Here Paul draws upon the doctrine of union of with Christ. Throughout his epistles, the Apostle Paul uses various phrases (e.g., “in Christ”, “with Christ”) to describe the believer’s mystical union with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection.[[22]](#footnote-22) Rom 6:1–10 is foundational for a proper understanding of this doctrine. This passage suggests that there was a “once-for-all definitive breach with sin which constitutes the identity of the believer.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Paul also suggests here that this breach is symbolized by the rite of baptism, which signifies our baptism into Christ (v. 3). This refers to our “baptism into union with Christ . . . in all that he is and in all phases of his work as the Mediator.”[[24]](#footnote-24) This mystical union with Christ is to be primarily viewed in an objective fashion and is closely related to Paul’s eschatology and Adam-Christ typology (cf. Rom 5:12–14; 1 Cor 15:22).[[25]](#footnote-25)

Paul then encourages believers to “set your hearts on things above.” The phrase “set your hearts on things above” is likely a consequence clause and suggests that since believers have been “raised with Christ,” they are to focus their mental energy towards the realm where their true life has been placed.[[26]](#footnote-26) Paul suggests Christ-followers are no longer to be driven by the earthly and the temporary. Rather, they are to be directed by that which is spiritual since that is where their genuine existence can now be found. According to J. D. G. Dunn, the believer’s attitude should be that “which follows from complete identification with another person or cause [Christ], when the service of that person or cause becomes all-consuming, the basic determiner of all priorities.”[[27]](#footnote-27)

Paul then turns attention to this heavenly realm believers are to be so attuned to. He notes that this is “where Christ is.”[[28]](#footnote-28) These statements serve to remind Paul’s readers that the arena that they are to seek is none other than where Christ has been exalted.[[29]](#footnote-29) This further suggests that the believer’s life is now to be entirely Christocentric in focus. Paul then further describes this heavenly realm by reminding us that Christ is “seated at the right hand of God.”[[30]](#footnote-30) Paul thus reminds his readers that the Messiah is not just in heaven…He is the focus and center of heaven.[[31]](#footnote-31) This statement is particularly important to a group of believers who are being exposed to a deficient view of Christ (cf. Col 1:15–20; 2:18–19). With this realization should come the awareness that since Christ “is in a position of supreme authority no principality or power can prevent their access to this realm and to God’s presence.”[[32]](#footnote-32) This realization in turn leaves no place for angel worship or legalistic asceticism in the life of the believer; instead, all religious devotion is to be firmly grounded in Christ and His work on the cross (cf. Col 2:14–23).

Colossians 3:2

Paul seems to restate the content of v. 1 for emphasis in Col 3:2. While Paul does employ a different verb in v. 2 (*phroneō*), this verb is likely parallel to the verb *zēteite* in v. 1.[[33]](#footnote-33) This same verb is also used in Phil 3:19 to describe those who solely seek to gratify their physical desires. Perhaps more significantly, this verb is also used in Rom 8:5 to suggest that those who submit to the desires of the flesh “have the things of the flesh as the absorbing objects of thought, interest, affection, and purpose” (cf. Gal. 5:19–21).[[34]](#footnote-34) What Paul is admonishing here is a heavenward/Christological perspective.

Paul also explains in v. 2 where believers should not focus their hearts and minds.[[35]](#footnote-35) So rather than setting their attention and devotion to the things that correspond to the values of this world, Paul suggests believers are to be solely focused on the things that pertain to Christ’s realm of existence *and* their new existence. Hence, Paul describes two modes of living in v. 1–2. One has its focus on the self; the other has its focus on Christ and the believer’s new existence.

**Theological Interpretation and Application**

In considering how this individual passage contributes to the theological message of Scripture, one must first realize that Paul is attempting here to establish grounds for righteous living (see above). This passage thus primarily contributes to the doctrine of sanctification. Within these four verses, Paul suggests that the entire basis for godly conduct is what God has done in us through Christ’s death on a cross. Hence, Paul does not begin his ethical exhortations in this letter by suggesting that obedience should be driven by a desire to escape the wrath of God (cf. 2 Cor 5:9–11). Instead, “the indicative precedes the imperative as surely as the rope is made fast round a firm piece of rock before he has to apply himself to the struggle.”[[36]](#footnote-36) Paul thus does not exhort believers to engage in the arduous battle against their sinful nature on the basis of their own strength. Paul’s discussion of the sanctification process in this text thus seems to be informed by the biblical vision of human depravity.[[37]](#footnote-37)

Paul’s statements in Col 3:1–4 also inform our understanding of the doctrine of union with Christ. Paul here points to the believer’s union with Christ and establishes that because of that union believers should submit to the will of God. As noted earlier, Romans 6:3–4 establishes that Christ’s death on the cross has far-reaching implications. Through His death and exaltation, believers too have “died” and been “raised” to the heavenly realm. Given these realities, Christ-followers have a new life that is free from the bondage and power of sin.[[38]](#footnote-38)

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1. This is a pattern found throughout Paul’s writings generally known as the indicative-imperative tension (e.g., Rom 6:1–4; Gal 5:25). See J. D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 625–631, for further discussion of this important theme. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. E.g., J. D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 35–39; J. Sumney, *Colossian: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 1–9. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See D. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove: IVP, 1990), 572–577; D. A. Carson and D. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed.(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 517–521.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cf. A. Kӧstenberger, L. Kellum, and C. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: B. & H. Academic, 2009), 604; P. O’Brien, C*olossians, Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary 44 (Waco, TX: Word, 1982*)*, *xliv*; M. Pascuzzi, “Reconsidering the Authorship of Colossians,” *BBR* 23 (2013): 233–46. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Cf. T. Lea and D. Black, *The New Testament: Its Background and Message*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 432–435; D. Pao, *Colossians & Philemon*, ZECNT 12 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 23–24. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See esp. O’Brien, *Colossians*, *xlix–lii*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Carson and Moo, *Introduction*, 523–525; Moo, *Colossians*, 46–60. C. Arnold (*The Colossian Syncretism: The Interface between Christianity and Folk Belief at Colossae* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996], esp. 228–44] argues that the Colossian heresy is a mixture of pagan and Jewish popular religion and Christian teaching. Cf. Pao, *Colossians*, 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See M. Hooker, “Were there False Teachers in Colossae?” in *Christ and the Spirit in the New Testament: Studies in Honor of Charles Francis Digby Moule*, ed. B. Lindars and S. Smalley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 315–31. In Hooker’s view, Paul is attempting to guide the young church away from the pressure of Jewish and pagan influences. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. O’Brien, *Colossians*, *xxxi*. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Kӧstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles, *Cradle*,605–609, for further discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. According to L. Hurtado, the “key religious theme throughout Colossians is the centrality and supremacy of Jesus” [*Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 505]. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. O’Brien, *Colossians*, xlv. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. M. Barth & H. Blanke, *Colossians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 34B(New York: Doubleday, 1994), 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Cf. 1 Cor 2:6–10; 8:6; Phil 2:6–10. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. According to N. T. Wright, Paul discusses these issues in attempt to help his readers become comfortable with receiving instruction from an individual they have never even met [*The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary 12 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 86]. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. R. Melick, Jr. notes that this statement is Paul’s manner of expressing the fact that while Christ held the divine nature in its entirety, He nonetheless should be distinguished from God the Father. Paul thus avoids a modalistic conception of Christ’s incarnation by using the word *theotētos* instead of *theiotēs* [*Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, New American Commentary 32 (Nashville: Broadman, 1991), 255]. Finally, all quotations of the Bible are taken from the New International Version translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., 265. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The meaning of the phrase “basic principles of the world” (*ta stoicheia tou kosmou)* is yet another controversial issue. Some scholars suggest the phrase refers to spiritual beings and this interpretation fits well within the context of Col 2:8–15, 18–20 and Gal 4:8–9. Cf. C. Arnold, “Returning to the Domain of the Powers: Stoicheia as Evil Spirits in Galatians 4:3, 9,” *NovT* 38 (1996): 55–76; Moo, *Colossians*, 187–193, 233–34. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. O’Brien, *Colossians*, 157–158. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Cf. E. Lohse, *A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, Hermenia. (Philedelphia: Fortress, 1971), 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. The verb “raised with” (*sunēgerthēte*) is based on the root *egeirō*, which carries a wide range of meaning and can mean “to wake,” “to rouse,” or “to raise up.” This verb means “to raise up with from death, physical or spiritual” in Col 3:1. Cf. *BDAG*, 3rd ed., s.v. “ἐγείρω” and “συνεγείρω.”

    Interestingly, the noun “Christ” is used four times within the span of these four verses, pointing to Paul’s Christocentric view of the sanctification process. Paul is clearly attempting to develop an ethical outlook in his readers that is solely grounded in Christ. This is in contrast to the false teachers at Colossae, who emphasized the Mosaic law, dietary regulations, Jewish celebrations, and angels (cf. Col 2:14, 16, 18, 21). Cf. O’Brien, *Colossians*, 142–43. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See H. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 57–64, for a helpful overview of this important element of Paul’s theology. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. J. Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid., 214. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ridderbos, *Paul*, 60–62. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. The adverb translated “above” (*anō*) normally means “at a position above another position” or “extension toward a goal which is up” in the NT (*BDAG*, 3rd ed., s.v. “ἄνω”). Here in Col 3:1 it is used to refer to the “heavenly world” (Cleon L. Rogers Jr. and Cleon L. Rogers III, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 466). Cf. Gal 4:26. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Dunn, *Colossians*, 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. The clause “where Christ is seated at the right hand of God” is a locative clause that identifies where Christ has been raised. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. The verb translated “set your hearts on” (*zēteite*) can mean “to try to find something,” “to seek information,” “to devote serious effort to realize one’s desire or objective,” and “to ask for” (*BDAG*, 3rd ed., s.v. “ζητέω”). It is the third meaning that fits best in Col 3:1. In the LXX, the verb is often affiliated with the Israelites relationship to God and pointed to their need to desire and obey God (e.g., Psa 24:6; 27:8; 83:16). Cf. *NIDNTT* vol. 3, s.v. “seek.” This nuance is likely carried over into Paul’s use of this verb in Col 3:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. The phrase “seated at the right hand of God” is an allusion Psa 110:1. This allusion points to the supremacy of Christ over creation and helps establish the fact that all worship is therefore to be given unto Him, as opposed to any other intermediary being (O’Brien, *Colossians*, 163). Cf. Exod 15:6, 12; Psa 16:11; 17:7; 20:6; 44:3; 98:1; 1Kgs 2:19; Mark 10:37. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. See Rom 8:34; 1 Cor 15:25; Eph 1:20; Phil 2:9-11; Heb 1:3,13; 8:1;10:12; 1 Pet 3:22; Rev 3:21. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid., 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Barth, *Colossians*, 395; Dunn, *Colossians*, 205; Lohse, *Colossians*, 133. The mind is an important dimension in the thought of Paul. This is can be seen particularly in Romans 8:6–7. These verses make it clear that “a man’s thinking and striving cannot be seen in isolation from the overall direction of his life.”Goetzmann, “Mind”, *NIDNTT*, V. II, 617. See also Rom 7:23; 1 Cor 15:34; Phil 1:27; 2:2, 5; 4:2; Col 1:21. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Murray, *Romans*, 285. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. The clause “not on earthly things” in v. 2 is likely a contrast clause. It should be noted that Paul is not necessarily speaking of the material world in a disparaging manner (cf. Gen 1:31). Rather, he is speaking of its potential to ensnare the Christian and cause the Christian to view it with the wrong perspective (Barth, *Colossians*, 395). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. C. F. D. Moule, “‘The New Life’ in Colossians 3:1–17,” *Rev Exp* 70 (1973): 482. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. L. Berkof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 247–248. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. See Rom 7:6; 8:1–14; 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 2:20; Col 2:11–14. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)