

COLOSSIANS 2–3

The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Epistle to the Colossians (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, forthcoming).

3:2. Things Above

A small cluster of verses (Colossians 3:1–4) completes Paul’s section of reviewing principles and doctrines, which started in chapter 1. It becomes obvious that when leaving his discussion of essential concepts, the Apostle seeks to lift our gaze toward heavenly vistas, toward “things above, not [toward] things on the earth.” For the things above give meaning to “things [that occur] on the earth” (3:2). Specifically, it all begins with Christ’s Resurrection. In more than a metaphorical sense, “if [we] be risen with Christ” in baptism, then we find the door open to “seek those things which are above.” That search, diligently undertaken, leads us astonishingly to “where Christ sitteth [enthroned] on the right hand of God” (3:1). The payoff? “When Christ, who is our life, shall appear” at His Second Coming, “then shall [we] also appear with him in glory,” an unspeakable experience (3:4). From this point on in his letter, he will draw our attention to the application part, which begins at 3:5. As will become apparent, the significance of the application portion is enriched and buttressed by the doctrine.

2:16–23; 3:1–17. Looking Out for One’s Own Soul

The last verses of chapter 2 lead us into the teeth of Paul’s criticism of certain teachers who were seeking to undercut the faith and commitment of Colossian Church members. The Apostle’s language becomes almost fierce, though measured: “Let no man therefore judge you,” and “Let no man beguile you” (Colossians 2:16, 18). What do the tenets that Paul discloses tell us about those teachers? The short answer is that we

are not completely certain. To be sure, what Paul wrote was understandable to his readers in Colossae. His references to aspects like the new moon and the Sabbath days, when combined with the worshipping of angels, take us in the direction of Jewish ideas (2:16, 18). But concepts like the rudiments of the world and neglecting the body may hint at Gentile ways of thinking, specifically Hellenistic perspectives (2:20, 23).

The Apostle had warmed to his concerns in 2:8 when he sternly warned, “Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men.” This path’s trajectory was “after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.” The metallic gauntlet was now thrown down, lying where everyone could see it. Paul’s expression “the tradition of men” brings matters onto soil that leaves no place for gospel truths, displacing them with odd concerns, even judgments about meat and drink that adherents might partake of (2:16). All this amounted to following “the commandments and doctrines of men” (2:22). Driven by a false humility, the teachers embraced “harsh treatment of the body” (2:23 New International Version). Perhaps worse, these people appeal to spiritual visions as divine sanction and go “into great detail about what he [or she] has seen” (2:18 New International Version). The proof of Paul’s counter-message lies in Christ’s Resurrection, the event that soars above all else in power and grace: “Buried with [Christ] in baptism” and washed clean of “all trespasses” (2:12–13). God be thanked!

Beginning with verse 3:5, Paul turns our attention to practical items, to applications. The conjunction “therefore” (*oun*) indicates that Paul is ready to draw inferences from his doctrinal discussion of the prior two chapters. He prepared his readers for this change of focus when he wrote “seek those things which are above,” setting “your affection on things above” (3:1–2). The astonishing result will be that “ye [shall] also appear with him in glory,” an unspeakable outcome (3:4). But holding onto the promised prize will not be easy. To take full advantage of being “risen with Christ” in baptism, Church members must work at becoming what their celestial selves really are.

To achieve this state, believers first come to realize “that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are . . . whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness.”¹ The life-changing choice that lies within these lines potentially leads Church members to Christ’s side when He comes again, appearing “with him in glory” (3:4). It all starts with walking in the Lord “as ye have been taught,” a possible hint at sacred ceremonies.² Incidentally, we discover in chapter 3 one of the few references in the New Testament to worship services (see 3:16–17). Its presence may well be due to the attractiveness of the worship patterns pushed forward by the teachers whose emphasis lay in the worship of angels and the neglect of the body (2:18, 23).

Bursting from the heart of Colossians 3:5–17 emerges “the new man [or woman]” (3:10). As the Apostle directs, we believers “have [to] put off the old man [or woman],” pushing away tendencies toward “anger, wrath, malice” and even lying “to [one] another.” These are the deeds of the old person, crumpled and discarded (3:8–9). In the place of such wretched actions we are to put on as a garment virtues that elevate us above the world such as “mercies, kindness, . . . forgiving one another . . . as Christ forgave you” (3:12–13). Above all else, we are to embrace “charity, which is the bond of perfectness” that comes as

a gift. Lest anyone not fully grasp who stands at the center of power and grace, Paul tells his readers that they are to “do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him,” for He is the bestower of “the peace of God . . . in your hearts” (3:15, 17).

Notes

- 1 Romans 6:16; see also Matthew 6:24 and Luke 15:13, “Ye cannot serve God and mammon.”
- 2 S. Kent Brown, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2023), 610–613; Colossians 2:6–7.

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Source: *New Testament Insights: Colossians*, by S. Kent Brown