

## THE LIFE WE LOSE FOR THE LIFE WE'VE FOUND

---

Ben Janssen | **Colossians 3:1-4** | September 1, 2019

<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.

You are going to die. As sure as you have been born is the fact that you will one day die. And yet this is a basic fact that most of us do not want to talk about. But if you do want to face the fact, there are places you can go to for help.

You could go to You're Going to Die, a San-Francisco based "nonprofit bringing diverse communities creatively into the conversation of death and dying, inspiring life by unabashedly sourcing our shared mortality."<sup>1</sup> They have a website. They provide open spaces, usually in open-mic nights, in order to bring "people creatively into the conversation of death & dying, while helping to inspire & empower out of an unabashed embrace of our losses & mortality..."<sup>2</sup>

I'm sure many people find an organization like this (and there are others<sup>3</sup>) to be helpful. But the most helpful place to go for help ought to be the Christian church. We, of all people, should be well-equipped to talk about death, and to be able to offer real hope in the face of it. That's because the Christian faith is all about life and death. These are subjects that are in our wheelhouse. Ours is a faith that is centered on a crucified and risen God, and what this death and life means for us.

Today's sermon kicks off a new sermon year for us at Crosstown. We base our sermon year on the current cycle of our catechism. This year, we will be studying Cycle 2 of our Catechism, called "The Life." The big idea in Cycle 2 is that Jesus is not only the Truth we are to believe but also the Life we are to enjoy. And this Life comes to us through death. If you want to have Life, it's going to require death. It's going to come through loss.

So I want to give us a theme for the sermons we are planning from now through next August. The theme is the sermon title for today's message: "The Life We Lose for the Life We've Found." And I've taken it from this text in Colossians 3. There's a lot of talk here about death. But that's because there is a lot of talk here about living.

At the end of this message, I'll lay out our sermon plan for the year. But first, I want to lay out this big idea, found in Colossians 3:4. Notice what this verse says. It says, "When Christ who is your life appears." Now stop right there. What did he say? He said that Christ is our life. What does that mean? It's almost like a passing comment. "When Christ appears, Christ who is our life, then you also will appear with him in glory." We can talk about this appearance of Christ and our appearance with him in glory, but first we need to understand what Paul means when he says that Christ is our life. Because this is not a throw-away comment. It goes right at the heart of the Christian faith. So we need to explore what Paul has been saying, so that when he comes to verse 4 he can just throw it in for good measure: Christ, who is your life.

We'll focus on verses 1-4 of Colossians 3. But we'll need to go back a bit further, too. And what we'll find is that Christ is our life because we have been raised with Christ, because we are dead apart from Christ, and because we live in Christ.

### **RAISED WITH CHRIST**

First, we have been raised with Christ, and this is why Christ is our life. Look, please, at verse 1. "If then you have been raised with Christ." Now the word "if" does not put the matter into question. Paul is drawing a conclusion from what he has been saying in the previous chapter. That's why the NIV reads, "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ."

### **Believing Resurrection**

Yes, this is exactly what we are being told is true for us as Christians. We have experienced resurrection. We have been raised from the dead.

Christianity, of course, is entirely dependent upon the historical fact of Christ's resurrection three days after his crucifixion under Pontius Pilate. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, Christianity is not only false but completely worthless (1 Cor 15:12-ff). The question of whether or not Jesus really did rise from the dead is the defining theological question between Christians and non-Christians. According to Romans 10:9, "if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Non-Christians do not believe this. They do not believe that Jesus rose from the dead. But, if you are a Christian, you must believe it. You cannot be a Christian and deny the historical claim of Easter Sunday.

But now notice what the Scripture is telling us. It was not only Jesus who rose from the dead, but we who believe in him were raised along with him. When he walked out of the grave, we walked out of the grave with him.

### **The Day We Died**

But before we can explain this point—and it is a point that needs explanation—we need to point out the obvious. Before one can be raised from the dead, he has to die first. You can't have resurrection from the dead without dying first. And the Scripture says, "Yes, of course. You have already died as well."

When did we die? One might think of Galatians 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ." So Christians believe that as Jesus died on the cross, we died there with him. But what exactly are we saying? We aren't saying something nonsensical here, as if we had some sort of conscious though disembodied existence 2000 years ago on an execution hill outside of Jerusalem. But we are claiming, or maybe for the first time understanding, that what happened to Jesus, in a very real sense, happened to us as well.

That's why Paul can say it so plainly, here in verse 3: "For you have died." But he does discuss this in a bit more detail earlier in the letter. Look at what he said, in Colossians 2:12. He says that we have "been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the

powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.” The day of your Christian baptism is the day you can point to and say, “See there, I have, in fact, died.” Not because the minister held you under the water too long, but because baptism is God’s means for uniting us to Christ’s death on the cross. Paul could have left out baptism altogether here, if he had meant to say something different than this. He could have said, “we were crucified with Christ, we were buried with Christ, we have been raised with Christ,” and left us thinking that this death, burial, and resurrection that Christ experienced in some way applies to us as well. But he says we were “buried with him in baptism,” and follows this by saying that in the same baptism we “were also raised with him.”

## **Believing Baptism**

I’m resisting now the temptation to go much further into this conversation about baptism; for more on this, you can refer to our catechism questions 46-54. That’s a full nine questions and answers on the meaning and importance of baptism.

But what I am saying is that it is a shame that we, who take our denominational name after this important biblical doctrine, know so little about what baptism means and how it is supposed to be used in our lives.

So let’s talk about it. After Easter, we plan to do our annual “Catechesis Sermon Series” and we’ll study baptism, along with the Lord’s Supper and other means of grace that our Lord has instituted. My hope is that we can begin to see that what has happened to us who are Christians is something real, every bit as real as the water into which we were plunged on the day of our baptism. We have been resurrected. We really have been raised from the dead with Christ.

And that is why we can say that Christ is our life.

## **DEAD WITHOUT CHRIST**

Second, Christ is our life because apart from Christ there is no life. Without Christ, we are dead.

I remember seeing these t-shirts that said, “Basketball is life.” When somebody wore a shirt like that, they were saying, “Basketball is awesome! Basketball brings me so much joy! Basketball is really important to me! I spend a lot of my time (and money) on basketball! I love, love, love basketball! And I want you to know how much I love it!”

Now, I like basketball. But basketball is not life. And if it is for you, then I’ve got some advice: Get a life!

## **The Christian’s Life**

For us Christians, Christ himself is our life. There’s a “life that we have found,” and he has a name. His name is Jesus. Jesus is our life.

We don't mean merely that Jesus is awesome or that he brings us much joy or that he is important to us or that we love him *so, so much*. All that should be true. But when Paul says, "Christ is our life," he is saying, "No, he really is, whether you feel it is so or not." This is a fact, not a feeling.

There's this one more facet about the Christian life that we need to explore. The Christian faith is not only that we have died with Christ in his death and that we have been raised with Christ in his resurrection. The whole point of this dying and rising again is that it is absolutely necessary. That is, the only way to have life at all is to die and rise again with Christ.

Yes, this is an exclusive claim that Christianity makes. This life we've found in the Christian faith is also the only place that life is found. What if the "basketball is life" t-shirts were taken to mean that basketball, and basketball only was life? That if you wanted to live at all you would have to live for and in and by the sport of basketball? No one takes the t-shirt to make such an exclusive claim. But this is exactly the claim of Christianity and of our passage this morning.

### **How Christ Found Us**

Here is how this works. We've seen that the Christian gospel is the news that we have died with Christ, and that we then are also raised with Christ. *But we also need to see that Christ died with us.* Why did Jesus come into the world in the first place? Did he come to condemn us, to put us to death with him? No, on the contrary, Jesus entered into a world that was condemned already, and under the judgment of God. Jesus did not come into the world and find us alive. Rather, as Colossians 2:13 says, "And you, who were dead in your trespasses ... God made alive together with him." You see, the whole point of dying and rising with Christ is the fact that we had lost our lives already by our sin. So the Christian faith is not a way to *enhance* your life. It is the only way to have life in the first place.

Jesus did not enter the world and find us alive. He entered the world and found us dead. This is the Christian message. And yet, before we can be made alive, we have to die again. We have to die with Christ. Only then can we be brought back to life.

### **The Necessary Death**

So, what we need to ask is this: "Why do we need to die first, if we are already dead?" In the theology of Colossians, we find our answer. Take a look at Colossians 2:20. "If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world." Being dead in our trespasses and sins, we were not free agents, able to become alive to God again should we so choose. Rather, we were in bondage to these "elemental spirits of the world."

In Galatians 4:3, Paul writes that we were once enslaved to the "elemental principles of the world." And a few verses later he asks why we would want to "turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more." So, being dead in our sins we were enslaved. We were in captivity. We were not free.

Now here we are on to something very important about the Christian gospel. When we talk about the gospel, when we talk about salvation, we are talking about being set free. We are talking about

release from bondage. This is what we mean when we say that Jesus is our life. We are saying that Jesus has set us free from the bondage of sin. To belong to Christ, to have Christ as your life, is the only way you can truly be free.

And this is not to speak in metaphor. These “elemental spirits” are probably intended to refer to the pagan deities that preside over nations and cultures. It’s not critical here whether or not such deities are real; as N. T. Wright has pointed out, “Certainly they ‘existed’ in the sense that pagans believed in them and worshipped them.”<sup>4</sup> But don’t get hung up here. The main meaning of the word used here is a reference to “the material components of the universe.”<sup>5</sup> And what Paul wants to point out is that Christians have died to such things. He is saying that material things have no power over us, like they do over non-Christians.

So we can play basketball. But basketball is not life. We can work jobs, but our lives are not found in our jobs. We can eat and drink, but these are not the source of our lives. Take it all away—basketball and career and food and drink and everything else—and we don’t die. The source of our life is Christ. So nothing we lose in this world can take away our lives.

This is a very different way of living. And it is liberating. It’s the kind of living that we saw in Hebrews 10, where those believers “joyfully accepted the plundering of [their] property.” How could they do that? Because they “knew that [they] had a better possession” in Christ (Heb 10:34).

## **LIVING IN CHRIST**

This is how we are meant to live. It is how we can live right now, in the present. Having been raised with Christ, we are no longer dead in our trespasses and sins. So we are free to live, to live in Christ.

### **Rules, Rules, Rules**

But, note carefully now, the concern of Colossians 2:20. Having been freed from bondage by Christ, why now go back and be enslaved again to the rules and regulations of the world? This is not only possible. Many Christians live just like this. They have freedom in Christ. But they live in slavery to the world.

What this looks like is that they play by the rules of the world. I’m not talking here about Christians who are what we might call “worldly.” I’m talking about Christians who appear quite “holy.”

Go back to verse 16. Paul’s concern was with Christians who were “passing judgment” on other Christians over what they were eating or how they were celebrating. The reference is to Christians coming from a Jewish background and insisting that Gentile Christians needed to follow the customs of Judaism.

This is not an issue for us today, but it is not hard to find this same legalistic spirit in the church. Without denying Christ, we encounter those who contend that if you want to be truly fulfilled you need to adopt this practice or stop doing another practice. But this “Christ plus this or that” mentality does not get us closer to Christ; it takes us further away from him who is our life.<sup>6</sup>

## The Indulgence of the Flesh

In verse 23 Paul says that demands that we do this or do that “have indeed an appearance of wisdom.” It makes sense. It seems logical. But it is the promotion of “self-made religion,” and this is why the Christian legalist is offering the same religion that is found outside the Christian faith. Whether you live a neat and tidy, highly ordered, disciplined Christian life, or whether you give yourself to unrestrained indulgence, neither of these approaches has the power to stop the indulgence of the flesh.

Do you see what is going on here? You can live by a strict standard or you can see yourself as living by no standard. But neither approach, not the legalist nor the antinomian, the law-keeper nor the law-breaker, possesses any true power in finding true satisfaction.

## Seek Things Above

There is a better way. “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above” (Col 3:1). “Set your minds on things that are above” (Col 3:2). Why? Because Christ is there. And Christ is your life.

This is the better way. But how do we seek heavenly things? How do we set our minds on heavenly things? What does this mean? How do we do it?

Answering those kinds of questions are dangerous. The legalist says, “Here’s what you do,” and then gives a list of rules to follow. But equally dangerous is the antinomian who says, “You don’t do anything, because *doing* is the problem.” And yet, Paul has given us a command, so there must be a way to do it.

Theologian Kelly Kopic says we have to be careful about identifying certain behavioral norms. We have freedom in Christ, but, he says, there is a basic form to follow.

Thus, the challenge we face is always the challenge of *knowing Jesus more* so that we can discerningly apply his example more and [move] *freely within form*—like a jazz soloist who is able to improvise long rifts because he is so intimately familiar with the basic beat of the song.”<sup>7</sup>

This basic form is the way of the cross, which is not completely spelled out for us in every detail of our lives, but rather requires us to remember and recite, sing and pray, and then, by the power of the Spirit live it out through individual and corporate imagination.<sup>8</sup>

## The New Creation

This is our challenge. This is our calling. Together we seek to remind one another of the life we lose by taking up our cross and following after Christ. And together we seek to remind one another of the joy of the cross, for in Christ there is a better life that we have found.

So this is what we’re after in our preaching this year. First, we’ve got to finish our study of Hebrews, the last three chapters of which will help us look to Christ and seek the things above. Then, during

Advent, we'll come and adore him who is our life as we study the meaning of the incarnation and wonder at the fact that God is pleased to dwell among us.

The elders have given me a sabbatical starting in January. The goal of the sabbatical is for me and Mindy to get some deep soul care and rest. I want to have many more years of fruitful ministry with you here, but there's a danger that ministry becomes life rather than Jesus. That's the reason for the sabbatical. But we're planning on a professor or two from OBU to cover the pulpit here during that time.

Then, after Easter and our Catechesis Series, we'll be back to summer which concludes with Crosstown Basics. That will be the end of the sermon year.

We have so much to look forward to in the year before us. As we close, consider what we are told in Colossians 1:15-20. Just as Christ was responsible for the creation of the world, so he is responsible for the new creation of the world. This new creation has begun, and it involves you and me who are Christians.

He has started a work and he will bring it to completion. And, just like the first creation, it will be good. Really good. It's worth giving up your life for this. Because in Christ we have found new life, a life that is stronger than the grave.

You are going to die. But the good news is that in Christ you have died already. The second death has no power over you (Rev 20:6).

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.yg2d.com/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.nedbuskirk.com/yg2d/>

<sup>3</sup> See <https://lifehacker.com/youre-going-to-die-heres-how-to-deal-with-it-1791498957>

<sup>4</sup> N.T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol 12, ed. Leon Morris (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), [107](#).

<sup>5</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, Pillar New Testament Commentary, ed. D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), [190](#).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, [193](#).

<sup>7</sup> Kelly M. Kopic, *God So Loved, He Gave: Entering the Movement of Divine Generosity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 158.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 158, citing from Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 383.