

Living in Heaven
Colossians 3: 1-4

**First Presbyterian Church
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It seems that people everywhere have always loved participating vicariously in sporting events and even in arena combats. In Greece, in the 1300's, a theologian explained the mystery of Jesus through an example of a battle in a stadium. He wrote:

Imagine there is an epic battle going on in a stadium. A courageous man has confronted a cruel tyrant and has overcome him with tremendous efforts and suffering. You did not fight; you are not weary and do not have any wounds. But if you admire the courageous man, if you rejoice with him for his victory, if you weave a crown and stir up the crowd on his behalf, if you bow with joy before the victor and kiss him on the head and stretch out your right hand to him--in brief, if you rejoice for him and consider his victory as yours—I tell you that you will certainly have a part in the victor's prize.

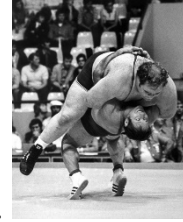
But there is more. Suppose that the victor has no need himself of the prize he has won, but desires more than anything to see his supporter honored and considers that his prize for the fight is the coronation of his friend. In such a case, will not that person who has no weariness or wounds obtain the crown? Indeed he will!

Well, that is what has happened between Christ and us. Without having put forth any effort or having fought, that is, having no merit whatsoever, nevertheless, through faith we praise Christ's battle, we admire his victory, we honor his trophy, which is the cross, and we show that courageous One fervent and inexpressible love. We make ours those wounds and that death. ¹

We have a champion. He fought for us. And he has included us in his victory. He came to participate in our lives. In order that we might participate in his life. He engaged a struggle with sin and evil unto death. That we might have life.

In the Munich Olympics in 1972, the Americans put forth a wrestler named Chris Taylor. He was 6'5" and weighed about 440lbs. As a skinny barely teenager, I was fascinated by Taylor. I'd never seen anyone that huge. That guy could kill you without realizing it. Taylor's opponent in the Greco-Roman heavyweight

wrestling final was the German Wilfred Dietrich. Victory for the USA seemed inevitable. Dietrich only weighed 285 and he was past his prime at 38. I still



I saw Dietrich move right into Taylor and try to wrap his arms around him. They didn't reach all the way. But Dietrich hung on and began to lean backwards. He picked Chris Taylor off the ground. What was he doing? Dietrich's back arched, he threw his head all the way back. Perfect position for his neck to be snapped. Down they crashed to the mat, Taylor engulfing Dietrich. Dietrich looked like he had pinned himself. Match over. But then we saw that Dietrich had used the momentum as they hit to flip Taylor over. He leaped on the stunned giant and pinned him. Then bounced up as the winner of the gold. Dietrich risked the match and his life to perform a move called *suplay*. Unexpectedly, you pull your opponent onto you, risking all, to create the sudden shift of victory.

Our champion pulled a *suplay* move on the powers of evil. He died. He was pinned beneath our sin and evil. The whole weight of death and hell crashed upon him. Then the surprise that the apparent move of defeat changed momentum to victory. The great reverse. Christ *meant* to die. He hugged the sin of the world to himself. And even as he went down, he flipped Death over his head. He got up in resurrection glory. Death had pinned Jesus but Jesus defeated death.

And we have a share in that victory. Jesus died and rose. We are joined to Jesus by the Holy Spirit. We died and rose with him. Jesus literally died. His body was buried. And he literally rose. He physically got up as a resurrected man. His frail mortal body was transformed into a body rigged out and ready for an embodied life in heaven with his Father.

Now here's where it gets tricky. What happened to Jesus in the body happens to us who believe in him. But it happens first spiritually. We get made new, on the inside. We receive new life, on the inside. We are in the same bodies but we spiritually die and rise with Christ. We become new creations. Things change. Peace arrives. Guilt gets washed into forgiveness. Hope arises. The power of sin gets broken. Love replaces hate. We have power to live differently.

Now that's not the end of the story. Jesus died and rose physically. We who are joined to him by faith die and rise right now with him spiritually. One day these bodies in which we live will die. And one day, we will rise in resurrection bodies to be with Jesus forever. Our union with Christ will go from being spiritual to being both spiritual *and* physical. We have expectation of an embodied life to come. That fills us with hope right now. That gives us an incentive to carry on.

Because there is one more aspect to consider. We have been made new in Christ. But the old self, the old sinful man within us, has not yet been fully shed. Until we enter the fullness of resurrection glory, we have to contend with being spiritually new while still wrestling with the old man. He lingers about, loitering and lurking in our new life in Christ, urging us to come back to the old life of living only for self and sin.

So Paul shows us how dying and rising with Christ works right now. On the one hand, we were dead in sin. We could not respond to Christ. We were bound to sin and dead in the water spiritually. But Christ made us alive so that we could believe in him, so we could be raised spiritually to be united to him. We went from spiritual death to spiritual life.

But on the other hand, we died to the old life of sin and independence from God. The old addictions that ruled us have been slain. The old proclivities, the sin we used to relish got crucified. We don't have to be slaves to pornography, to gossip, to worry, to hating, to malice, to lust, to ambition, to greed or to legalism anymore. The chains that bind have been broken. We died to sin so we can live to Christ.

That is our status. That is our position before God. We are in Christ, spiritually dead sinners brought to life. And people previously who lived to sin now dead to it and so set free.

But the old man lingers. The old life beckons. So in hope of all that is to come, we have to continually choose to live out the pattern of daily death and daily resurrection. Christ our champion has won the contest for us. But now we are called to freely choose the way of life, obedience, faithfulness and love. Here's a paradox. It takes everything we have to live the new life, even as we know we can't do any of it without his power. He gives us that power as we *call on him*, and as he gives us that power, he *calls on us* to give everything we have for the fight.

So let's take the second half of this message to consider three aspects of this quest to die and rise with Christ.

1—Since you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is.

At wedding rehearsals, there's a frequently asked question by the groomsman. So which way do we face when we come to the front and take our place? Great question. The answer is, "Wherever the bride is, look there. So if you know the bride is in the back of the church waiting to come in on her father's arm, look out over the congregation toward where she's hiding. Watch her as she enters. Then turn towards us as she reaches the front. Look where the bride is and you can't go wrong." That's the same principle in our life in Christ. Where do I look? Jesus is the bridegroom. I look where he is. He is in heaven, at the Father's right hand. He is Lord of all, reigning over all, and sending his Spirit to us. He's going to be entering our world again from heaven. He's coming back. So I look to him to set my focus for life now.

2—For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

Paul goes on to say that our lives have been hidden with Christ in God. We have been taken inside him. Our lives shelter in him. We are no longer alone out in the



wide, wild world alone. We are sheltered under the wings of Christ. This image of a mother bird with two chicks firmly under wings has meant a lot to many of us through the years. It's an image my wife has painted and others display in their homes. It's worth looking at again. This is where our souls long to be. Under the wings of Christ, hidden in him.

Another way to read the word hidden is to look at its root meaning. Literally, we have been *encrypted* with Christ in God. We've been encoded into Christ so that we are part of him. The Spirit's encrypting means some hacker can't come and yank us out of Christ. We are embedded in him. All the essential DNA of our lives is joined to Christ and enfolded into God. When the day comes that all the codes are revealed and everything is made clear, then it will be seen that we belong to Christ. Christ Jesus will appear as the Lord of all, full of glory and he will reveal that he has encoded into himself millions upon millions of believers. His body will

be shown to include us. We will be running through his hardwiring, programmed into him for eternity.

There's also a third way to consider what it means that our lives are hidden with Christ in God. We read the beginning of the sentence and realize, "I have died to the old life, to living for myself, to being my own god and the center of the universe. My life is taken up now with Christ in God." In other words, there is no independent glory for me. The story is not fundamentally about me. It's about my champion, Jesus Christ. I am included in the spoils of his victory. I am concealed under his protection. As long as I don't try to seek my own glory. I will waste and wreck my life and the lives of others if I try to live like the story of the world is all about how I can be glorious in myself and for myself. Having a champion means I am not the champion. My big ego is hidden, tucked up, under the true glory of Christ.

3—When Christ, who is your life, appears, you also will appear with him in glory.

I get no independent glory. But those in Christ are promised that we will share in Christ's glory. The Son of God appeared once in our midst when Jesus walked the earth. He is in heaven now. But he will appear again. Christ will return. And suddenly the story will make sense. What partakes of Christ will be enfolded in his great glory. What tried to be independent of God will burn away to nothing.

This means the humblest servant of Christ Jesus now will shine in a glory that makes the most splendid human glory look thin and pale by comparison. The lowly, obscure house servant who is hidden in Jesus will shine with radiance that makes the mightiest emperors look like children with Burger King crowns.

Now what does all this mean when you're in the grocery store trying to decide between Walmart raisin bran and the cereal made by Post for a dollar more? What does it mean if you like to walk around the lakes or enjoy balancing an account? What does it mean if you have to be at the plant by 7AM if you want to keep your job? Are we not supposed to think about any of these things because our minds are in heaven?

To set our minds on the things of heaven is not to ignore the good on this earth. Rather, setting our minds on our redeeming God is a way actually to find the joy in what we love on this earth. As Christians, God will not allow us to love the world more than him and get away with it. When we make something besides God

an ultimate, the satisfaction and joy slips away. When we lift our hearts to Christ above all, then we partake of his joy in the world he made. We partake of the Creator's interest in the tiniest things and glimpse how they fit into the big picture. We find rest in our rest instead of more restlessness. We get a perspective on priorities and so our joy is more grounded in eternity than in the ups and downs of this world.

The difficulty with the gospel, however, is that it's not natural to us. The treasure is there, but we don't hold onto it very well. To resist the natural tendency for our minds to wander, John Calvin urged his people: "As far as your mind can extend, employ yourself in knowing more and more the love that God has shown by giving us Jesus Christ His Well-Beloved Son. This is where we ought to employ all our life."² We keep thinking about the stunning reversal our champion pulled on Evil. He took it to himself like Wil Dietrich picking up Chris Taylor. He risked his neck as the weight piled him down. But in the greatest of triumphs, he used evil's own momentum to flip the entire story. His death became our forgiveness. His unexpected resurrection defeated death and opened heaven to us.

All that Jesus is and does belongs to us. But he waits for us to ask before he releases that power. He holds back until we ask him to join the death of Jesus to us so we might be free of sin. He yearns for us to draw on his resurrection power to energize and transform us.

The power is there. The work of Jesus is done. We make it more and more a part of daily experience by our mind set. We put our minds on Christ. We count on what he has done as being true in our lives. We ask the Holy Spirit to make it so more and more. We set our minds on things above, where Christ, who is our life, dwells now at the Father's right hand. This is the vision that brings life in the world to life.

¹ Nicolas Cabasilas, *Life in Christ 1.11*, as quoted in Raneiro Cantalamessa, *Remember Jesus Christ* (Fredericksburg: The Word Among Us Press, 2007) pp. 49-50

² John Calvin, *The Deity of Christ and Other Sermons*, Audubon, NJ: Old Paths Publications.