

## THAT VIRTUAL REALITY THING

Colossians 3:1-4

Laurie and I ate at a seafood restaurant last night. I noticed some people eating lobster. As a young man I had never eaten lobster. It looked like a bad idea to me. I'm sorry, but they look like giant bugs. Make a really big one and you'd have the makings of a good monster movie. I wonder if the fish swimming in the ocean don't see them and think, "we've got to get an exterminator down here." You hear people say, "I love lobster." Yeah, I love butter too. A spoonful of butter helps the bug meat go down. But then I was with Laurie's family and they had lobster. I had to eat it. And I was surprised. It actually tasted good, as long as you had enough butter on it. I had to change my view on lobster, although they're still ugly.

All of us have some fundamental beliefs that shape how we see ourselves and the world around us. In 1962 American physicist, philosopher and historian Thomas Kuhn wrote a book titled *The Structure Of Scientific Revolutions*. In it he introduced the expression "Paradigm Shift" to refer to a change in those fundamental beliefs about how we see the world and how that can cause us to completely rethink what we believe and to see things in a totally new light.

One example of a paradigm shift was the Copernican Revolution. That was the change from the Ptolemaic System that said the earth was in a fixed position and that objects in the heavens revolved around it, to the Copernican System that said the earth is neither fixed nor the center of things. That one change in how people understood the world had profound impact. It was a paradigm shift.

Paradigm shifts are seen in lots of areas beyond science. The Reformation was a massive paradigm shift that completely changed the world. Our culture has gone through a paradigm shift. Once our culture's paradigm was that truth could be known and that there were moral rights and wrongs. But that paradigm has changed. Now the premise is there is no one truth and there are now invariable moral rights or wrongs. In such a worldview nothing is inherently wrong. Morality becomes merely a matter of preference and opinion.

We can have personal paradigm shifts. What is your personal paradigm of life? The term paradigm shift is overused and often incorrectly applied. But the idea comes into play in the passage we are going to look at today. In effect if you are a believer in Jesus at some point in your life you had a paradigm shift that can be summed up in seeing Jesus as Lord and seeing your need for his grace. Colossians 3:1-4 directs us to what we must do to continue to flesh out that paradigm shift.

## HAVE A NEW PASSION

This passage begins with the premise that you have “died and been raised with Christ.” This traces back to 2:12 where Paul wrote that by putting our faith in Jesus Christ we have “been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.” The life we used to live ended when we put our faith in Jesus. We turned from it to faith in him, and as a result we have been given a whole new kind of life by God. That is a paradigm change. For some that change was dramatic. It was like the fellow Rick Richardson tells about in his book, *Reimagining Evangelism*, who went from being dedicated to marijuana and alcohol serving full time in ministry. Others may have grown up in a Christian home, as I did, but even those at some point had a change in their lives in which they let Jesus be Lord.

In light of the fact that we have this new life from God Paul has told us not to worry about people “judging” us or trying to get us off track, distracted from Jesus, in 2:16-23. Well if we avoid that, what should we do? In this passage he tells us to do two things. We are to seek something and to think something.

First he says we should seek “the things above.” Start with the idea of seeking. When we seek something we pursue it. We say this is something I need and want and I’m going to go after it. On Super Bowl Sunday Laurie and I decided after church that we wanted to have some breakfast food. We chose to go home and make bacon and eggs, but there was a particular twist on that theme. Since it was a national holiday we both became possessed with the idea that as part of that breakfast we wanted to each have a really good doughnut. On the way home we would stop at VG’s in Cardiff because they have our favorites in the area. So with great anticipation we drove to VG’s discussing what particular delight we each would purchase. Our hearts were about to be broken. When we got in the store we found their display cases totally devoid of doughnuts. They were completely sold out. There was not one doughnut in the store. What is wrong with people? When you watch the Super Bowl you’re supposed to eat chips and dip, nachos, wings, hamburgers and maybe pizza. How could so many people have wanted doughnuts? Who eats doughnuts during the Super Bowl? Rick and Laurie Myatt didn’t. Two days later Laurie was going to pick up a birthday cake at VG’s for some friends. While she was there she bought us doughnuts. Our Super Bowl observance was somewhat lessened, but at least we eventually got doughnuts. We were seeking doughnuts. Our hearts were set on having some.

That’s why our translation says, “set your heart on things above.” When you seek something you have your heart set on it. You pursue it. This has to do with what we

make the priorities of our lives, the things we become passionate about. Paul says to be passionate about the “things above.”

What things above? Seek the things that are on the upper floors of the department store? Seek things up in the mountains? Seek the things that are more noble, loftier, not so mundane like whether the Padres actually will have a chance to make the postseason this year? No that’s not what Paul meant. He said “above” is “where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.” So above refers to the spiritual realm. Above is not literal. If you were on Madagascar on the other side of the globe from us above there would be down from here. It is helpful to think of the spiritual realm as another dimension or perhaps an alternate universe that exists right by us. The spiritual realm is not “way up there” it is right here, we just can’t see it. So we are to set our hearts on the things of the spiritual realm.

That leaves me with the question, what are those “things above”? What are the things that exist in that spiritual realm that we are supposed to be passionate about? Let’s start with thinking about what things above are not. In this context one of the issues was whether as followers of Jesus we need to keep the ancient Jewish laws. Look at 2:17. Paul said of many of those laws, “These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.” All those ancient Laws are just the picture of Jesus, they are not him. Those laws, which we saw in 2:22 pertain to things on this earth, are not about things above. In that spiritual realm Jesus is not appalled that you ate bacon this morning. He is not aghast because you’re wearing clothes that are a cotton rayon blend, a violation of the Law. Those things are not in the spiritual realm. Jesus is. A lot of the things Christians tend to emphasize and fret over, the things they pursue, are not things above. Jesus is not in heaven upset because you didn’t make it to Bible study this week.

What else can we know is not “above”? No matter what field you may pursue in life there will be stars. That’s true even in ministry. In seminary I learned in subtle ways that there were stars in ministry, men like Chuck Swindoll, Bill Hybels and John MacArthur, just as there are stars in ministry today. My motives for ministry were mostly good, but in there somewhere there was that desire to become one of those stars. There were people who told me that I was sure to become one of those. Fortunately I got over that fairly quickly, though for a long time there was always the temptation to dream of that again. But here’s the thing, is that one of the things that is “above”? In the presence of the risen King of glory, do you think it would matter if I had become a nationally famous pastor and author? If you’re not sure of the answer let me help you. It is a thousand times no. Nor is success in your chosen field a thing above. Neither are fame or money.

I will tell you of an experience that had to do with another thing that is not one of the “things above.” Years ago Laurie and I had to go to Lake Tahoe for a wedding. On the flight home I had a major problem with my sinuses. As we were descending the pain became so intense it felt like something was about to rupture. A nice flight attendant who learned of my problem got a cup full of steaming hot water and put ammonia in it. As I breathed in the fumes it opened up my sinuses and the pain eased to a bearable level. The only problem was I was still holding that cup when we landed and the pilot apparently thought he was making a carrier landing because he slammed that plane down on the deck hard. It jolted me and caused the water to slosh out of the cup...right onto my lap. I was going to have to walk off that plane looking like I’d had a really embarrassing accident. I could see people looking at me and asking, “Wow, was the flight that bad?” I hated that. I can still remember it even though it was probably 15 years ago. I didn’t like what people might think of me. Here’s the thing: what people think of us is not one of those things above.

The overwhelming majority of the things that occupy our thoughts, our dreams, the things we are passionate about and spend much of our time and energy on, are not things above. Having a great portfolio, a lot of money, is not one of the things above. Getting your way is not one of the things above. The list is long. Does that mean all those things are wrong? Is it wrong to not want people to think you lost control of your bladder during your flight? No, that’s not wrong. Is it wrong to be successful, even to have a good portfolio? No, that’s not wrong, it’s just not to be what you seek. It is not to be the priority, the passion of your life.

What are the things that are above then? Start with the fact that Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Ephesians 1:22 says “God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything.” So one thing that is above is Jesus being Lord.

What does it mean then to set my heart on Jesus being Lord? It means I want him to be Lord of my life. I want him to rule in me. This verse calls on us to set our hearts on that idea. It means my passion is not that I be famous, that I get what I want, that people like me or respect me, but what I want more than anything is that Jesus rule in me. In every moment it means my heart beats to do whatever Jesus wants. That one change of heart is the most healing, healthy and transforming paradigm shift we could ever have. It would impact how we speak, how we spend our time, how we treat that person who ignores us or even worse is unkind to us. It impacts our priorities, our relationships and everything else in our lives.

Revelation 5:12 gives us a glimpse of something else that is above. There thousands upon thousands of angels and other beings are pictured around the throne and they are singing, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise.” Praise of Jesus is a thing above.

Back in 2003 our friend Mike Riley was hired to be the football coach at Oregon State. Mike and Dee invited Laurie and me to come visit them in the fall and go to a game. I have been to a World Series game, a Rose Bowl game, Charger games and other big sporting events. But that weekend we had a first time experience. We were able to go out on the field during the game. I’ve been in stadiums with larger crowds, but never on the field. It makes a difference. The crowd on occasion would chant O-S-U. It was like a wall of sound. It was powerful and exciting. In heaven what you would hear is that powerful wall of sound chanting “Worthy-Is-The Lamb!” You would hear it over and over.

Just like that powerful experience at Corvallis got me revved up as a Beaver fan, what is going on in heaven, that thing that is above, should get us revved up to praise the Lamb. To seek the things above is to be ablaze with passion that Jesus Christ would be praised by me and because of me. To come to church and sing songs in praise of him would be right at the heart of who I am. That is part of our passion. It should be our passion as we work, as we wash the dishes, as we eat a meal, as we converse with friends. We should make decisions regarding our actions, our moral choices, our priorities on the basis of desiring that Jesus would be praised because of who we are and whatever we do. I will do what will most bring him honor.

God’s unconditional love and grace are there. Why was Jesus called the Lamb in Revelation? Because he was the one who was slain so that judgment might Pass-over us. Why did Jesus enter this world and go to the cross? John 3:16 tells us. It is because God so loved the world. This means we should be passionate for two things. First, living in the reality of his love for us, rejoicing in his grace. Second, we should be passionate for channeling that love and grace to other people. In Galatians 5:14 Paul said, “the entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’” Paul says you can sum up in one principle all that it means to live a holy, Jesus honoring life. Love other people as much as you love yourself. Love God, love people. That’s what God wants for us.

We have a neighbor who is an interesting person. We have been on good terms with this individual and continue to be. But he is an unusual fellow. He thinks he knows pretty much everything and according to reports I have heard he can be a little

prickly. Two neighbors who lived near him recently moved out of the neighborhood, and we were sad because we liked them both a lot. I had the unusual thought, “I wonder if that’s a coincidence or if there is a reason two families near that person moved?” One of those neighbors was back visiting recently and stopped to chat with us. We expressed how we hated to see them leave. She was very gracious, but she finally said part of the reason was to get away from our prickly friend. So here’s the question: what does it mean to seek things above? It means that what I pursue, what I am passionate about, is loving that guy, even though he can be difficult at times. It would be easier just to sort of give him a wide berth and steer clear of him. But that’s not one of the “things above.” Seeking the things above means loving him more than I love my own comfort. These are the kinds of things it means to seek the things above.

### HAVE A NEW PERSPECTIVE

Paul goes on to say “set your mind on things above.” Literally he wrote, “think the things above.” Isn’t he just repeating himself for emphasis? No, the first command had to do with our heart, our passions, our desires. This command has to do with the way we think. In Romans 12:2 we are commanded “Do not be conformed any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” That’s a way of saying, “have a paradigm shift in the way you see the world that is so profound that it changes who you are.” This is what Paul is saying when he tells us to set our minds on things above, because our norm is to set our minds on things of this world. The way things are in this world is what rules our thoughts. Paul is telling us to change that.

Go back to what is above. That is where Christ is seated on the throne above all authority and power. It is where Christ rules. When we think about Christ ruling that changes how we see the world. Because Jesus is Lord of all that changes how we think about the world. Back in 2007 Mike Warnock had an article in *Leadership Journal* in which he talked about an experience he had ministering to North African Muslim children in the suburbs of Paris just months after 9/11. Some of the kids who knew he was an American would chant, “Bin Laden, Bin Laden! Il est mon pere!” (which meant “he is my father.”). In other words, “he’s my daddy.” One Muslim man would taunt him saying, “Vive Saddam Hussein.” The worst was a little boy who with a grin on his face mimed planes crashing into the World Trade Center and the towers collapsing. He wrote, “That hurt. In that moment I had to decide who I was... Christians serve a God without borders. We have been commanded by King Jesus—the Lord of all the earth—to go into all the world to share the gospel.” Though he loves America and is more than willing to stand up for his political convictions, he chose instead to represent the King of Kings. He realized that in that

circumstance order to bring news of King Jesus to those people he had to focus on representing Jesus rather than on representing America.

When I set my mind on things above it changes how I interpret what is going on around me. I know that in the spiritual realm there is a war occurring. There are beings trying to do everything they can to keep people from seeing who Jesus Christ is, from knowing God, from accepting the gift of grace he offers and experiencing his life. That's because they want to keep people from giving God the praise and honor he deserves. When we deal with difficult people, when people behave in ways that make no sense to us, when we find ourselves being continually battered with disappointment, discouraging or hard situations and loss, we need to view those events from that perspective of "things above." See that these are battles in that spiritual war that are intended to defeat us.

Seeing Jesus as Lord even in your life when things are bad will make a huge difference in how we deal with life and its manifold challenges. Have you ever heard of Operation Compass? My guess is you haven't. In 1940 during the early stages of World War II British General Richard Nugent was given command of the British Western Desert Forces in North Africa. The Italians, allied with Nazi Germany, were in control of Libya and were pushing into Egypt. General Nugent was given the task of not only stopping them but pushing them out of Egypt. This was no small task, for the Italians had 10 divisions, an army of nearly 200,000 men. Nugent was going to attack them with 31,000 men. He launched his attack on December 8, 1940. They breached the Italian defenses and poured through the gap in the Italian lines. Once in the Italian rear they began wreaking havoc. This caused the Italian defense to collapse and retreat in disarray. This alone would have been a big victory, but Nugent wasn't finished. He paused to give his troops a chance to briefly refresh and reorganize, then he pressed the attack. That December and in January of 1941 he drove the Italians back 800 miles. At the end of the month he executed a brilliant flanking maneuver to cut off the retreating Italians causing them to finally surrender. He captured 130,000 prisoners at the cost of only 500 of his soldiers killed in action. I tell that story because while there were several factors that led to such a sweeping victory including some terrific leadership, one large factor was the dismal morale of the Italian troops. They did not like their alliance with Germany and they had no interest in putting their lives at risk for the dictator Mussolini. That's why so many surrendered.

My point here is that if our morale is low then we are likely to surrender in the spiritual battle. But if we are thinking things above, we see our Lord on the throne, we know he has won the victory, we know he is wise and has a good and perfect plan

and that all these things happening to us are in fact attacks by an enemy who despises us, our morale will be great. We know that we can stand firm and win. And so we will.

Thinking things above changes how you see people. We won't be so impressed with the powerful and beautiful people of this world, for before Christ they are merely helpless lost souls in desperate need of grace. At the other end of the spectrum we will not look down on those whom the world might value the least. They are people whom Jesus loved enough to die for them. Last summer Laurie and I were in New Orleans. We knew better than to venture onto Bourbon Street at night, but we did walk down the street late in the afternoon. Even then it was becoming a wild scene. We walked by one place that was apparently a strip joint. As we were going by we encountered a woman who was apparently one of the featured employees and was wearing, well, not much. As we passed she called out, "Come on in. We have a family special. Wives are half price, husbands are double the price." Oddly, we didn't find the place even a little appealing. It would be easy to think poorly of that woman, but when we think about things above it changes how we see her. We see a woman who is a casualty of spiritual war. She doesn't even know it but she is a victim and she is carrying around desperate spiritual wounds.

We begin to see that if we think things above we are going to be different from the world around us because we are seeing something entirely different than what they see. Years ago Laurie and I took our kids when they were young to Belmont Park. We rode the roller coaster and they tried to bungee ride they had there. But back then they also had a room where you could pay to have a virtual reality experience. We watched some of the people doing it and it was a strange thing to see. They put these headsets on that covered their faces and they had an electronic gun. What they would see was a scene in front of them that we could not see. They would come to a door in a building where there might be bad guys. They would duck their head in quickly to see if anyone was there. Then they would enter the room with the gun up and ready to shoot. They would cautiously explore the building, firing when they saw a bad guy. They would duck to avoid incoming shots. That's what they saw. But what we saw was this person standing in an empty space ducking their head around nothing, cautiously stepping into something that wasn't there, going through doors that didn't exist and shooting at nothing. It was pretty weird to watch.

If we are thinking things above and seeking things above we're going to look like that to people. Our actions and our attitudes will be determined by things they cannot see. At times they might even look at us like we're crazy. And at times they might despise us, because what we see causes us to believe and do things they don't like.



Matthew Parris is a columnist for *The Times* of London who is an atheist. Yet in 2008 he wrote an article titled “As an atheist, I truly believe Africa needs God.” In it he wrote, “In Africa Christianity changes people’s hearts. It brings a spiritual transformation. The rebirth is real. The change is good... We had working for us Africans who had converted and were strong believers. The Christians were always different. Far from having cowed or confined its converts, their faith appeared to have liberated and relaxed them. There was a liveliness, a curiosity, an engagement with the world, a directness in their dealings with others, that seemed to be missing in traditional African life. They stood tall.”

### REMEMBER THE REALITY

Wait, are we just saying we’re supposed to pretend these things? Not at all. Verse 3 starts with the word “for.” It tells you why you should have this different paradigm in which you have these unusual priorities and passions as well as a new perspective on life and the world. It is because your life, the one you lived with the old passions, with the old way of thinking ended. It died with Christ when you believed in him.

Now your life is “hidden” with Christ. The world cannot see it, but in Christ you have an eternal life. That is a life as it is experienced in that heavenly realm, with all the security, peace, joy, love confidence and optimism that exists in anyone who lives with Christ in that place. Furthermore, what awaits you in the future is profound glory. It’s easy for us to think, “right, someday I’m going to heaven and it will be really good, yada, yada, yada.” There’s a cool verse we don’t often think about that says this is going to be the farthest thing from a yada, yada, yada, deal. Romans 8:19 says “the creation waits in eager anticipation for the children of God to be revealed.” In his book *The Message* Eugene Peterson paraphrases that “creation can hardly wait for it.” In other words, all of creation is actually anxiously waiting to see it when you and I are revealed in glory with Jesus Christ.

Paul uses the imagery of childbirth in that passage. What an incredible event that is. Paul says right now it is like we are in the labor. That is no one’s idea of a picnic. The whole pregnancy thing is a long ordeal. For nine months the poor future mom deals with morning sickness, then her body getting flooded in hormones, expanding in size to ridiculous proportions, getting important body parts shoved around and stressed so that she’s got all sorts of aches and pains. She has this being inside her punching and kicking her. Toward the end sleeping becomes a problem because she can’t get comfortable and even when she does she wakes up frequently because she has to answer nature’s call because her bladder is being squeezed down to nothing. She endures all of that to get to the end and go through the most intense pains she will

ever experience. Sounds lovely, right? It's not all that pleasant for the future dad either. He gets to live with the poor mom. Actually if he's like me he gets to spend that 9 months stressed over the health of his wife and his child.

So my question is, how is it that anyone signs up for that? Oh, well, it's because they get to look forward to months, if not years, of being sleep deprived and exhausted after the child is born. Well, no, that is rather difficult, but the real pay off is that down the road they will get to have teenagers in their house. Oh, no, that can't be it because that's rather painful as well. I know, it's that once they graduate from high school the parents get to pay for college.

What is the reason for enduring the hardship of pregnancy and birth? It is that when that child is born it is the most incredible, mind blowing experience in life. There is an explosion of wonder, of love, of joy and relief that is found nowhere else. How eagerly do future parents look forward to that day? That is where we are right now. We are in the pregnancy and labor part of history. All of creation is pacing the halls of the hospital, anxious, but anticipating an explosion of joy and love that will happen when the children of God are revealed in glory with Jesus. It will be the best day in the history of creation.

That's not pretend. It's not wishful thinking. It is certainty, guaranteed by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. That is our real life, and that is why we should orient ourselves around things above. But note one more thing. Notice in verse 4 that Paul says that Christ "is your life." He is the one who provides it. We live for him, and when we live for him we experience the life he has for us. It is in living for Christ, in living for things above, that we begin to experience even now the life of that spiritual realm. God's desire is that when people come into contact with you they actually get a taste, a sense of what it is like in that spiritual realm where your life is hidden. It is a life the world cannot understand because it is hidden from them. Where does this kind of life with its peace, its joy, its hope and optimism come from? It comes from living in the reality of the spiritual realm, the things above.

If nothing else, please remember, Christ is your life. Some people are going to have better circumstances than others in this world. That's just how it is. And there are going to be times in our lives when we have good circumstances, and times when we have bad. Whatever our situation may be, when we seek and think the things above we can experience the life of that spiritual realm. Why would we ever want to go back to the life of this world?