

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Seek and Set

If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory. (Colossians 3:1-4)

Paul looks back to his teaching in Colossians 2:10-15, particularly 2:12 where he states, "...ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead." In this teaching Paul directs us to our vital and legal identity with the Lord Jesus Christ when He was crucified, buried, and particularly when He arose from the dead. We were "with him" throughout that whole process. God then applies the effects of that work to us in Colossians 2:13. Wherein we were previously dead, we are now "...quicken together with him...." Whether we apply this expression to our resurrection identity with Jesus at His resurrection or to our personal first experience of grace at the new birth, the point remains. The vital and effectual energy of our new birth and of our present life as a child of God grows out of that resurrection life.

The work of Christ that brings about our new birth gives us a life that we did not formerly possess. It gives us a nature that was formerly alien to us. It changes our essential moral and personal constitution. We were dead; we are now alive. We were hostile to God; we are now risen with Christ.

If ye then be risen with Christ.... Paul does not question whether the Colossians were in fact risen with Christ in this statement. He rather builds his admonition on the fact that they were so risen. In this setting "If" is equivalent to "Since" or "Because."

...seek those things which are above.... Our seeking heavenly things, things above, is not a robotic or puppeteer-like mindless reaction to divine orchestration. Paul here builds his exhortation on the fundamental truth that God in the new birth gives His children life and, with that new life, a new set of values and abilities. He urges the Colossians, and us, to live according to those new values.

If the heathen are primarily concerned about food and clothes, Christians are to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness

(Mt. 6:32 f.; cf. Lk. 13:24). They are to seek those things which are above (Col. 3:1).¹

The Greek verb translated "seek" in this lesson is in the present tense. It directs the reader to do something now; we need to engage the actions here addressed immediately. It is in the active voice. It directs the reader to do something, not remain passive like a puppet and wait for the cosmic puppeteer to pull the strings. It is in the imperative mood. It commands the reader to do something, not remain passive and wait for another to do it.

Our affections are quite personal and intimate to our essential being. Paul directs us to control and focus our affections.

To think, have a mindset, be minded. The activity represented by this word involves the will, affections, and conscience.²

In other words Paul directs us to take control of our "...will, affections, and conscience," and thereby to focus our life on God and on "things" that honor Him.

In recent months I have encountered more people than you might imagine who depict themselves as the "victim" of other people or of circumstances that they could not control. They gladly blame anyone or anything for their problems, but they carefully and stubbornly refuse to look in the mirror and take charge of their "...will, affections, and conscience." Simply stated, they refuse to accept personal responsibility for their own failures, choosing to blame anyone or anything in sight for their problems. I received a phone call this week from

¹, vol. 2, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich, electronic ed., 893 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-).

² Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary : New Testament*, electronic ed. (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000).

one of these men who wanted me to try to rebuild a bridge with a former spouse whom he had alienated by his own irresponsible and abusive behavior. When I reminded him of his own responsibility, he hung up. He didn't want to face his own sins or failures; he wanted someone else, me at the moment, to rescue him from the damage he had perpetrated by his sinful conduct.

Sadly, our culture seems to cultivate the "I'm a victim" attitude. Sometimes even professing Christians allow this attitude to dominate their minds instead of actively focusing their minds, their will, affection, and conscience, in harmony with God and with Scripture.

When God created the world in which we live, He created a moral universe, not a robotic stage. In the first chapter of this world, God gave His first man, Adam, a moral commandment. Adam could make one choice, and he would enjoy abiding fellowship with his Creator and enjoy the ideal world of the garden in which God placed him. He could make another choice, and personally face the consequences of his choice, separation from his Creator and from that ideal garden; in a word, death to God and death to that state. Precisely like the man who phoned me and wanted me to rescue him from his own abusive behavior, when God confronted Adam, Adam's first response was to play the victim and point the finger of blame at Eve, the companion that God gave to him. Notice Adam's victim attitude, "The woman whom thou gavest to be with me..." (Genesis 3:12) Already demonstrating his fallen selfishness, Adam presumes that the only reason for the woman was for Adam's personal companionship, but as soon as God put the spotlight on Adam, Adam blamed Eve. In reality, Adam tried to blame God for his problem. When God confronted Eve, being the good observer that she was, she promptly blamed the serpent. I am convinced that the "I'm a victim" attitude transcends our immediate culture. Its roots go right back to the original problem that man created for himself in the Garden of Eden. Thus, every time we blame someone else for our personal problems we manifest our fallenness and the direct influence of the serpent on our thinking.

The ultimate depth of the "blame-game" victim mindset appears when people try to blame God for their problems. Some folks hold to the idea that God "orchestrates" every event in human history to bring about an ultimately good outcome, but they cannot support such an idea by Scripture, nor by the reality of their own life's experiences. This same idea becomes more personal, but still ungrounded in Scripture, when an individual dismisses his/her failures and problems with the attitude of "I know God will bring something good out of all this mess." John rejected this ultimate victim, blame-game mindset emphatically.

For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. (1 John 2:16)

So does Paul.

For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints. (1 Corinthians 14:33)

Scripture presents God as the moral Governor of the universe, not the cosmic puppeteer of the universe. In these two verses both John and Paul tell us in the simplest of words that everything that occurs does not originate with God, nor is it divinely orchestrated. If God orchestrates every event and every sin of humanity, we must conclude, based on Paul's reasoning in Romans 3:1-8, that God, not man, should stand trial on the Day of Judgment. When someone who claims to be a believer in God falls into lust, regardless of its object, he/she cannot blame God, either directly or indirectly. This sin originates with the "world," not with God. When a church of sincere believers suffers schism at the hands of an unscrupulous and divisive preacher, we cannot say, "Surely God will bring something exciting and good out of this event." Blasphemy! Paul leaves us without any doubt that God doesn't author confusion among His people and churches. He brings peace in His household. In Matthew 12:24-28, Jesus rejected the Pharisees' abominable notion that Jesus and Beelzebub were actually cohorts, working together to bring about good; Beelzebub causing the demonic possession of the man, and Jesus casting the demon out. The "God orchestrates everything that occurs" idea is frighteningly similar to the Pharisees' accusation. It depicts a house divided, one that cannot stand, and certainly one that God did not create.

So how do we explain the presence of sin in the world? The answer lies in the basic concept of the "moral universe" teaching of Scripture. God created Adam with the ability to keep that single law in the Garden of Eden, as well as with the ability to break it. God's glory appeared, not in a robotic manipulation of Adam, but rather in Adam's ability freely to choose to do righteously. Adam's free choice to sin brought about a true fall, not a momentary stumble. Adam, and his posterity, lost the ability perfectly to obey God's moral commandments. In the new birth God gives His children both the inclination and ability to obey His commandments. We honor and glorify God when we freely choose to obey Him. We bring His chastening judgments upon us when we freely choose to disobey Him. Our obedience,

no more than Adam's, does not result from our passive orchestration by a cosmic puppeteer, but by our free choice to obey. On the final Day of Judgment, fitting and consistent with God's "moral universe" creation, God shall judge both the righteous and the wicked.

Proponents of the fatalistic view outlined here will often play the "straw man" logical fallacy when challenged by the view I here advocate, that God created a moral, not a cosmic puppeteer universe. A "straw man" is a phony misrepresentation of a view, one that the critic can more easily "torch" than the actual view that challenges his ideas. For the fatalist, any view that does not make God the cause or cosmic orchestrator of every action and event in human history is, straw man-like, depicted as abominable deism. True, historical deism holds that God created the universe, imposed certain fixed scientific rules onto it, and immediately became the absentee landlord, never subsequently intervening or in any substantial way involving Himself in its activities. One logical fallacy typically fosters another, and this straw man fallacy moves directly to the "horns of dilemma" or the "excluded middle" logical fallacy. This fallacy defends one extreme view by claiming that the only alternative to its view of things is the opposite extreme. There can be no other option, no other view of the issue. In fact there can be--and are--many other views. I believe Scripture clearly and consistently teaches the "moral universe" view that I here present, rejecting both the fatalistic and the deist's views. Scripture frequently depicts God as intervening in the affairs of humanity personally and powerfully. I reject both the fatalist's and the deist's view of Scripture.

Paul shows the Colossians and us God's moral alternative, God's imperative command to us. Take control of our emotions and of our will, and aim them at God, not at the most convenient excuse for our failures and sins. The "one-two" punch for godly success in our passage requires us to "seek" and to "set." Instead of seeking our own benefit, Paul directs us to seek "...those things which are above..." Instead of setting personal gain as our goal, Paul requires us to set our affections "... *on things above, not on things on the earth.*" He didn't say that God would "orchestrate" our setting and seeking; he directs us to take personal responsibility for our minds and our actions and to aim our life's energies toward spiritual, heavenly things. Later in this context, Paul will draw an analogy between our conduct and our wardrobe. Each day we assess the day's activities and choose a suitable wardrobe for the day's activities. We don't dress in our "Sunday best" when we plan a day of work in the yard. We do not passively wait for a cosmic wardrobe manager to put our clothes on us. We

make the logical choice of our clothes. As Warren Wiersbe accurately describes that context, Paul directs us to put on "grace clothes," not "grave clothes."

Another thinly veiled contemporary error in this area of study appears in the "health and wealth" heretical teachings of our time. According to this teaching, if you devote yourself to God, He will send financial and personal prosperity to you. You will never face a trial or encounter a disappointment. Apparently these folks must think that the apostle Paul was a wicked man. (Acts 20:23) I fear that this error often creeps into the thinking of many believers who would outright reject the blatant "health and wealth" teaching, but they in fact mirror its error. They think if they simply serve God, all their problems will disappear, and all their difficulties will mysteriously and supernaturally be resolved. When they realize that this is not in fact the case, they often become severely disillusioned and walk away from their faith. Sadly, they failed to embrace a clear Biblical faith. We do not serve God and walk by faith to gain anything for self, nor to avoid difficulties in our lives. We serve God and walk by faith because this behavior glorifies God, whether it benefits us personally or not. Scripture repeatedly reminds us that the godliest of believers often face grave trials, but they remain steadfast in their faith, regardless of the circumstances they face. The idea of serving God with the expectation of deliverance, even from our own foolish actions mirrors the "health and wealth" heresy. It is also a near-equivalent to the modern marriage vow, "Till convenience and self-benefit do us part." In contrast the Biblical model of discipleship likewise mirrors the Biblical model of marriage, "Till death do us part." (Revelation 2:10) That behavior frames Paul's teaching in our study lesson to "seek" and to "set."

In the new birth God permanently and profoundly alters our deepest, most basic disposition. He writes His law, His fundamental moral code, in our hearts and minds. Whereas we once may have sinned freely and without conviction of conscience, every thought and deed now faces the scrutiny and conviction of that resident divine Judge. Sometimes it "accuses" our fleshly inclinations. At other times it "excuses," reinforces and encourages, our godly activities. (Romans 2:15) Far from leaving us in the passive, helpless victim's role, Paul directs us to take charge of our life and focus its activities toward God and heavenly things.

Where do we aim our lives? We may not always hit the target, but we certainly will not hit it if we never aim at it. Paul gives us the bulls' eye and directs us to take careful and consistent aim. We'll linger with this passage; it speaks to us.

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Worship service each Sunday 10:30 A. M.
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