

SCRIPTURE | Colossians 3:1–14 (NIV)

¹ If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³ For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

⁵ Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. ⁶ On account of these the wrath of God is coming. ⁷ In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. ⁸ But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. ⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. ¹¹ Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

¹² Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, ¹³ bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

FOR REFLECTION

Colossians 3 illustrates the Christian expectation that to be gripped by the gospel is to be gripped by change. The writer, the apostle Paul, expresses it in terms of putting off the old self and putting on the new self (v. 9 – 10). This is not, however, an exercise in self-improvement undertaken with one's own strengths and resources. Any expectations for change are based on what God has done in the believer through Christ. From the very outset in verse 1, the changes envisioned ("seek the things that are above") are dependent on whether or not one has been "raised with Christ." This is New Testament shorthand for receiving salvation through Christ. When a person asks God to forgive his or her sins on the basis of the punishment Christ endured for sin on the cross, that person participates vicariously in Christ's death and resurrection and all the benefits that result. Thus the believer is said to have died "in Christ" and to have been "raised" (resurrected) to new spiritual life.

This sets the stage for all future expectations for change, since the person has "died and [his] life is hidden with Christ in God" (v. 3). Even for a believer, this can be hard to believe! But much of the Christian walk involves believing in the reality God presents rather than relying on one's own perceptions. That is faith! In this case, faith involves believing God when he says that you have already died in Christ, you have been raised with him, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

That's quite a paradigm shift, when a person may not feel as though he or she has died and would certainly expect to remember being raised from the dead. Nevertheless, God says it has happened, because what is true of Christ is true of those who are united to him.

What does this profound new reality mean for a believer? Note two things as Paul elaborates. First, when Paul writes of putting off the old self and putting on the new, he uses Greek verbs used to describe dressing and undressing. Paul's picture of radical change for the person united to Christ thus uses language that points to the person's participation in that process. So, while the power is God's and the work is Christ's, the believer is not passive. He or she actively participates in the putting off and the putting on involved in this new life.

Second, note the context of this change process. It happens in community. These changes are intended to be lived out among others engaged in the same process and learning to experience the same reality.

1. What does it mean to die, be raised, and hidden in Christ? What is left behind? What remains? Why?
2. Verses 7 and 8 discuss "putting away" old ways a person lived before encountering Christ. How simple do you think this task would be? How is the "putting off" process connected to the "putting on" process? Do you see a synergy there?
3. What strikes you about Paul's description of the new self? Do you find it appealing?
4. What would you say to someone who claims to be united to Christ but can't identify any substantive change in his or her life?
5. How would you describe the interconnections between God's power, Christ's work, and the believer's participation in the change process? What would happen if any element were omitted? Why would losing any of the three destroy a gospel dynamic?
6. If the church is intended to be a collection of people undergoing this change process, does this change your view of the church? Your definition of hypocrisy?