

The Call of Heaven

Based on Colossians 3:1-4 | Sermon 1 of 5: The Call of Heaven

"Set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God." — Colossians 3:1

SERMON SUMMARY

This sermon opened a new five-part series on the theology of heaven — examining a topic that is either often forgotten by the church or a source of genuine confusion. The series will move through the call of heaven (this week), the nature of the present heaven, the doorway to heaven through judgment and resurrection, the nature of the new heavens and new earth, and finally the glory of heaven.

The sermon began with two deceptively simple questions: How often do you think about heaven? And how often should you? Those questions frame everything that follows.

The Context: Colossians and the Two Wrong Ways to Live

Colossians is a letter Paul wrote from prison — likely during his two-year house arrest in Rome — to a church he had never visited, founded by one of his associates. He was writing to protect them from false teaching. In the Roman city of Colossae, two tempting but wrong ways of living competed for their allegiance.

- **Libertinism** — the anything-goes morality of Roman pagan culture: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, greed. No law, no restraint.
- **Legalism** — a Jewish-influenced approach drawing bright lines around behavior: do not handle, do not taste, do not touch. Rigid rules as the basis for righteousness.

Paul says neither is the right foundation for how to live. In chapter 3, he pivots to a third way — and it is not another set of rules. It is an orientation. Since you have been raised with Christ, he says, here is how Easter people are meant to live on earth: look up.

Colossians 3:1-4 "Since then, you have been raised with Christ. Set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."

The word translated "set" is the same Greek word used in Matthew 18 for what the shepherd does when seeking the lost sheep. It is not passive reflection. It is active, present-tense pursuit — a continual, daily, ongoing seeking. Set your heart. Set your mind. Not once, but always. Orient your whole life by what is above.

Why We Don't Think About Heaven

The sermon honestly surveyed three reasons people give for thinking so little about heaven.

1. "It's not possible." Some appeal to 1 Corinthians 2:9 — 'No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him' — to argue we simply cannot think about what is beyond our comprehension. But the sermon pushed back: that passage goes on immediately to say, 'But God has revealed it.' The point of the passage is actually the opposite of how we use it. We can think about heaven.
2. "It's not practical." We have bills to pay, livestock to load, noses to wipe, sales calls to make. There is no time to think about heaven because earth demands everything. This is not malice — it is simply the weight of daily life crowding out the eternal.
3. "It's not desirable." Many people's picture of heaven is a man on a cloud with a halo saying 'Wish I'd brought a magazine.' An eternal worship service. Crowns and divine splendor, but nothing that sounds like life as we actually love it. The sermon acknowledged this honestly: if that is heaven, why would we long for it?

A fourth reason was noted: some consider heavenly-mindedness actually harmful — Karl Marx's "opium of the people," a theology that dulls the pursuit of justice and excuses passivity. As Oliver Wendell Holmes famously put it, "Some people are so heavenly minded they're no earthly good."

The Cultural Drift Away from Heaven

This neglect is not only personal — it is cultural and ecclesial. John Lennon's "Imagine" articulated the modern dream: no heaven above us, only sky, living for today. When the first human was launched into space 65 years ago, the Soviet cosmonaut reportedly declared he looked and saw no God — the philosophy of materialism made visible.

The church has drifted with the culture. The sermon cited major Reformed theologians whose systematic theologies devoted nearly zero pages to heaven — two pages in three volumes, zero in a book literally called *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, one final page out of 737 in Berkhof's systematic theology. A survey of church worship music found that heaven, once frequently and richly sung about, has now all but disappeared from our songs.

Three Truths in Response

Against all of these objections, the sermon offered three grounding affirmations from Colossians 3 and the broader New Testament.

1. God calls us to hear heaven's call.

Paul repeats the command three times in four verses — set your hearts, set your minds, not on earthly things. This is not optional or occasional. It is a continuous, present-tense imperative. The same call echoes across the New Testament:

Philippians 3:20 "Our citizenship is in heaven, and we eagerly await a Savior from there."

Hebrews 11:13-16 "They were longing for a better country — a heavenly one... Even Jesus himself endured the cross, scorning its shame, for the joy set before him."

2. The hope of heaven shapes how we live on earth.

The sermon demolished the objection that heavenly-mindedness produces earthly uselessness. C.S. Lewis put it precisely: the Christians who did the most for the present world were exactly those who thought most about the next. The apostles who transformed the Roman Empire. The evangelicals who abolished the slave trade. The founders of hospitals and orphanages. "Aim at heaven and you will get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you will get neither."

And Colossians itself bears this out. The very passage commanding us to set our hearts on heaven immediately flows into the most earthy ethics imaginable — put off lust, greed, and impurity; put on compassion, kindness, humility, patience. The hope of heaven is the ground of earthly love. As the sermon put it: heaven shapes earth. Listening to the music of heaven is what enables us to dance on earth.

3. We set our hearts on heaven by setting them on a person.

The key to the passage is not a place but a person. Paul does not say "think about what heaven will be like." He says set your hearts on things above where Christ is seated. Your life is hidden with Christ. When Christ who is your life appears, you will appear with him. Heaven is where Christ is — and because of Easter, our story is bound to his story. To think about heaven is to think about Jesus.

The sermon closed with a question that reframes everything: How often do you think about heaven? How often should you? Reframe it this way — how often do you think about Christ? How often should you? It's not what is beyond. It's who is beyond. And his name is Jesus.

Key Takeaway

The call to set our hearts on heaven is not an invitation to escapism or passivity. It is the foundation of faithful, loving, courageous life on earth. We are Easter people, hidden in Christ, citizens of a country we have not yet seen. And thinking about that country — thinking about the person who reigns there — is what shapes everything we do today.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Take your time. Listen well to each other. There are no wrong answers — only honest ones.

1

The sermon opened with two honest questions: How often do you think about heaven? How often should you? Before discussing theology — just answer honestly. How often does heaven actually enter your mind in a given week?

2

The sermon identified three personal reasons people don't think about heaven: it doesn't seem possible, it doesn't seem practical, and it doesn't seem desirable. Which of these three resonates most with your own experience? Why?

3

Many people's picture of heaven is someone sitting on a cloud with nothing to do. Where did your image of heaven come from — Scripture, culture, hymns, childhood, something else? How has that image shaped (or limited) your desire for it?

4

Paul repeats the command to "set your hearts on things above" three times in four verses, using a present-tense verb meaning continuous, active pursuit — the same word used for a shepherd seeking a lost sheep. What would it look like in practical terms for you to actively and daily pursue a heavenward orientation?

5

C.S. Lewis argued that the Christians who did the most for this world were those who thought most about the next — the abolitionists, the hospital founders, the empire-transformers. Does that claim surprise you? How do you reconcile it with the fear that heavenly-mindedness leads to earthly passivity?

6

The sermon said that Colossians 3 moves immediately from "set your hearts on heaven" to a list of very earthy ethics — compassion, kindness, humility, patience. How does the hope of heaven actually change the way you treat the people around you? Can you think of a specific example?

7

The sermon reframed the question at the end: instead of "how often do you think about heaven?" ask "how often do you think about Christ?" Do you find it easier to think about a person than a place? How does that reframing change your approach to this series?

LIVING IT OUT

We are Easter people — raised with Christ, hidden in him, oriented toward a country we have not yet seen. This week's invitation is to begin practicing that orientation.

In Your Inner Life

- Read Colossians 3:1-4 once each morning this week before anything else. Let it be the first frame you put on the day. Notice what changes — if anything — about how you move through the hours that follow.
- The sermon said the Greek word for "set" is active, present, and continuous — like the shepherd relentlessly seeking the lost sheep. Choose one moment each day this week to deliberately, consciously redirect your heart upward. Before a meal, before bed, on a commute. Do it on purpose, not by accident.
- Sit with the question the sermon ended with: How often do I think about Christ? Keep a loose, honest count for three days. Not to feel guilty — just to see. Then ask: what would it take for that number to grow?

In Your Closest Relationships

- Colossians 1 says the church at Colossae was loving their neighbors because of the hope laid up for them in heaven. Talk with someone close to you this week about what heaven means to them. Not to correct or teach — just to listen and explore together.
- The sermon used beautiful illustrations of how a known joy changes present endurance — the bride before her wedding, the prisoner before release, the traveler who can see the destination. Share one of these illustrations with someone in your family or household and ask: what is the "joy set before you" that helps you endure hard things right now?
- The hope of heaven produces the earthly virtues of compassion, kindness, humility, patience, and gentleness (Colossians 3:12). Pick one of these and ask someone who knows you well: how am I doing with this one? Let their answer be honest.

In Your Daily Life and Work

- The sermon noted that heaven has disappeared from our worship songs and our theological books. This week, find and listen to one hymn about heaven that you do not typically sing — "How Great Thou Art," "When We All Get to Heaven," "Beulah Land," "I Can Only Imagine," or another. Let it shape your imagination.
- C.S. Lewis said that aiming at heaven produces earthly good; aiming only at earth produces neither. Look at the work in front of you this week — your job, your household, your relationships — and ask: how does knowing this is not the end of the story change how I approach it today?
- The sermon connected this series to the garden theme of Lent: creation begins in a garden, ends in a city-garden paradise. Revelation 22's river of life and tree of life echo Eden. Let that connection give weight to the ordinary beauty around you this week — a reminder that creation is going somewhere.

In Your Faith Community

- The sermon is the first of five in a series on heaven. Come to the next four with a growing question in hand — something you genuinely want to understand better. Write it down now while the first sermon is fresh.
- The survey cited in the sermon found that singing about heaven has nearly disappeared from modern church worship. Bring a hymn or song about heaven to your small group or a friend this week and discuss: why do you think we stopped singing about this? What do we lose when we do?
- If someone in your church or community is facing death — their own or a loved one's — consider whether this is a moment to be present with them and speak honestly about the hope this series is exploring. Don't wait for the perfect theological framework. Just show up.

A Word to Carry

It's not what is beyond. It's who is beyond. And his name is Jesus. To set your heart on heaven is to set your heart on him — the one who died, rose, and now sits at the right hand of God, waiting to appear so that you can appear with him in glory.

SERVICE CHALLENGE

C.S. Lewis said the people who thought most about heaven did the most for earth. This week, let the hope of heaven drive one concrete act of love toward someone around you.

This Week's Challenge: Aim at Heaven, Love Your Neighbor

The Colossian church loved their neighbors because of the hope laid up for them in heaven. This week, let that same hope motivate one act of earthly love.

Step 1 — Name Someone.

Think of one person in your life who is suffering, lonely, grieving, or simply carrying something heavy. Write their name down. They are the earthly neighbor your heavenly hope sends you toward.

Step 2 — Do One Concrete Thing.

Not something grand. Something specific and faithful. A meal. A phone call. A visit. A handwritten note. Help with a task they cannot manage alone. The abolitionists who changed the world started by seeing one person in front of them.

Step 3 — Connect It to Hope.

Before you go, spend two minutes in prayer — not just for the person, but orienting yourself upward first. Ask God to let your love for this person flow from the hope you have in him, not just from your own good intentions.

Step 4 — Offer to Pray.

If the moment is right, ask if you can pray for them. Keep it brief and honest. If heaven is real and Christ is there, let that reality enter the room through your words.

Step 5 — Come Back and Share.

If you're in a small group or Sunday school class, come ready to share briefly what you did and what you noticed. We are practicing, together, what it means to aim at heaven and get earth thrown in.

Optional Extended Challenge

- Read one chapter of Randy Alcorn's book *Heaven* this week — or another book that takes the topic seriously. Come to the next sermon in the series with one new question or insight from your reading.
- Look up the history of one institution in your community — a hospital, a school, a charity — and find out whether it has Christian origins. Many do. Let that history be a living example of C.S. Lewis's claim: the most heavenly-minded people did the most earthly good.
- Find someone in your congregation who is elderly, terminally ill, or in a season of loss. Spend time with them this week not to offer answers, but to ask what they think about heaven. Listen carefully. They may have something to teach the rest of us.

Closing Prayer Guide

Whether you're using this in a group or on your own, close by praying through these four things:

- Give thanks — that we are Easter people, raised with Christ, hidden in him, citizens of a country that death cannot take from us.
- Confess honestly — the ways we have let the noise and pressure of earthly life crowd out any upward orientation, and the ways we have made heaven small or unappealing in our own imaginations.
- Ask for hunger — that God would give us not just a glimpse of heaven, but a genuine longing for it that drives us to love our neighbors better today.
- Pray for the person you named in the service challenge — and ask God to let your love for them flow from the hope you have in Jesus.

"Aim at heaven and you will get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you will get neither."

— C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* | From This Week's Sermon