

“But Now . . .”

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Colossians 3:1-17

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.

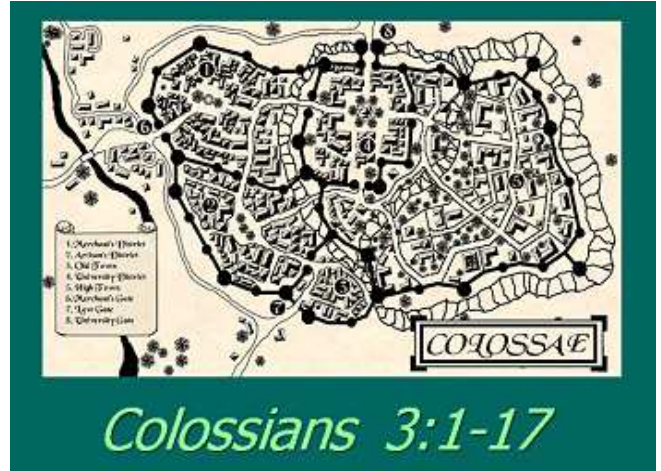
Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. *But now* you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips.

Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.

And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.



“But *now* . . . but *now* . . .” Two very short words in English, and just as short an expression in the Greek of the New Testament: *nun de* or *nuni de*, or simply *nun* — *now*!

In one English translation of the New Testament that I often use the phrase “but now” is found some 27 times, usually with this clear implication: *something has changed*. Things used to be one way, *but now* things are different. This was our old situation, *but now* we have a new situation. We used to look at the world one way, *but now* we see reality in another way. We used to be like that, *but now* we’re like this.

“But *now* . . .”

νυν δε

Things used to be like that, *but now* they’re like this!

“But now . . .” It’s a short, clipped expression but it packs a powerful punch. In fact, we might even call these two three-letter words the motto of the New Testament, a motto implied behind the text even where the expression itself doesn’t occur. The message of Jesus, and the proclamation of his apostles, are based on the certainty that a new reality has burst upon the human scene; or if not exactly a new reality, the manifestation or revelation of a reality that has been there all along but which has been obscured or hidden — until now!

It’s impossible seriously to read the New Testament without being conscious of the fact that Jesus and his apostles, the writers of the Epistles, are “fired up” with a piece of news that is world-shaking and life-changing. We call this piece of news “the gospel,” the good news about what God is doing. It’s there in the New Testament from start to finish: from the first preaching of Jesus in the Gospels, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at

hand" (Mark 1:14) to the great declaration of the Book of Revelation, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he shall reign for ever and ever" (Revelation 11:15). History, authority, life, understanding used to be shaped one way, *but now* they have taken on a different shape.

What is it that has made the difference between *then* and *now*? Anyone familiar with the Christian faith must know that the difference has something to do with Jesus! But not everyone understands exactly what it is about Jesus that makes the difference between *then* and *now*, between BC and AD if we put it that way. Skeptics might claim that the difference is an accident of history — that only because Christianity became the dominant religion of Western civilization do we now think the appearance of Jesus created a history-dividing difference. Others might think the difference has to do with a way of life Jesus taught, a way of "love" and good deeds and being kind to others. But Jesus was surely not the first man to figure out that those are good ideas, and teach people to follow them.

Others might think that the difference occurred because Jesus, and the apostles after him, were able to break out of their Jewish mold and offer a way of life that all people could embrace. But any accurate assessment of the New Testament has to reckon with the fact that it's thoroughly grounded in the worldview, the promise and expectation, of the Hebrew Scriptures. The New Testament's fundamental premise is that Jesus, as Lord and Savior of all people, is Lord of all *precisely because he is the Messiah of Israel*.

We're getting close to the answer here. What makes the difference between *then* and *now*? Peter, speaking to people who had gathered in Jerusalem for the Jewish feast of Pentecost, put it essentially like this: "Our Scriptures always told us that God's chosen and anointed one, his Messiah, would overcome death. Jesus came, and obviously God was working in him, but you couldn't accept that so you had the Romans crucify him.



But God raised him from the dead, and therefore we know that God has made him both Lord and Messiah — this Jesus whom you crucified! So change your minds about him; repent and be baptized, so you can be forgiven!" (Acts 2). For Peter's audience, the difference between *then* and *now* is the resurrection of Jesus, which vindicates him as the Messiah of Israel.

The apostle Peter seems to have confined his mission to proclaiming Jesus to his fellow Jews. The apostle Paul, on the other hand, was called by Jesus to take his name to the Gentiles, people outside the fold of Israel. So, speaking to the Greek intellectuals at the Areopagus in Athens, Paul put the matter like this:

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.

God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. "For in him we live and move and have our being." As some of your own poets have said, "We are his offspring."

Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone — an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, **but now** he commands



all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead. (Acts 17:24-31).

These people Paul is addressing weren't Jews; they had no understanding of how the coming of Jesus was the fulfillment of what God had promised to Israel, in the covenant he made with Abraham their forefather. So Paul describes the Athenians' previous situation a different way. He says, in effect, "People have a desire to find God, and he's not really that far away. But you've been looking for him in all the wrong places — not only in the idols scattered around the city, but also perhaps in your philosophical speculations. Up to this point God has overlooked your ignorance, *but now* it's time to change your thinking [which is what it means to repent]. And the reason you need to change is because God has raised Jesus from the dead, and therefore we know he's the one who will judge everyone, and set things right" — which was always what the Messiah of Israel was expected to do.



What's the common factor in these two announcements of the difference between *then* and *now*? For Paul, Peter, and the other writers of the New Testament, what makes the difference between *then* and *now* is the resurrection of Jesus. When God created the world, the Scriptures make clear, he made it a *good* world, and created people in his own image. The disobedience of humanity messed things up, but it was always God's plan to rebuild and restore his creation. The resurrection of Messiah Jesus is the beginning of that renewed creation. The universe has been waiting for this rebirth, Paul says in Romans, chapter 8, *but now* it has taken place because Jesus has been raised from death, and lives as Lord of all.



So as far as the New Testament writers are concerned, history has taken a new turn. Like the old railroad bridge in Keokuk, the bridge of time has swung in a new direction and this world's destiny has been altered. What God promised to Abraham, Moses, David, the prophets of Israel, and all of his people has now come to pass. The Creator has returned to his wayward creation and has begun to bring it back into line, and the first step he has taken in this process has been to raise Jesus from the dead, vindicating him as the Son of God and pouring out his life, by the Spirit, into those who belong to him. Therefore Jesus can declare to his disciples, even before his death and resurrection, "In this world, this culture, you have tribulation — but I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Therefore the apostle Paul can say, *ei tis en christo, kaine ktisis* — "If anyone is in the Messiah, there is a new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

With that, let's turn to what Paul writes to the Colossian church in the passage we read earlier. Paul refers to some of the things that characterized the lives of these people — most of them probably Gentiles — before they had joined themselves to Jesus. They used to tolerate, or practice, sexual immorality. They were materialistic, grasping for money and treating it as an idol, like an object of worship and devotion. They weren't honest with each other; they lied, they put up a false front to each other. They took offense easily; they became angry with one another, slandered each other, and demeaned one another with crude and filthy talk. On top of all that, they built walls against their neighbors; they excluded one another based on whether or not they were Jewish, what race or nationality they identified with, or whether they were free people or slaves.

To all this Paul has a response: "You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. *But now* you must rid yourselves of all such things" (3:7-8). And why must the Colossians change their ways? Because, Paul says, "you have been raised with Christ." So "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" (3:1-3). In other words, Jesus has been raised from the dead and if you belong to Jesus — if you've died with him in baptism — then you've already been raised with him. Therefore, you're *already* a heavenly creature. Your job isn't to escape this evil world, to "cop out" on dealing with the garbage it throws at you, but rather to live out your heavenly reality in the here and now. "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, *on earth* as it is in heaven."

Then ...	But Now ...
• <i>Immorality</i>	• <i>Compassion</i>
• <i>Greed</i>	• <i>Kindness</i>
• <i>Idolatry</i>	• <i>Humility</i>
• <i>Dishonesty</i>	• <i>Gentleness</i>
• <i>Anger</i>	• <i>Patience.</i>
• <i>Insults</i>	• <i>Forgiveness</i>
• <i>Division</i>	• <i>Love</i>

The apostle Paul isn't one to give detailed instructions about how the people he writes to are to do this. Instead, he points to the fundamental change in their situation — the resurrection of the Son of God and their membership in him — and tells them to work it out for themselves based on that reality. As he writes to the Philippians, "work out your own salvation" — your own life of deliverance and wholeness — "with fear and trembling" — with a serious response to the awesome thing God has done to rescue you (Philippians 2:12).

But here, in his letter to the Colossians, Paul does provide a map for beginning this process. In place of the old self, with its corrupt and dysfunctional patterns, Paul's readers have "put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator" (3:10). The Christian life, Paul reminds us, is just one big "put-on." As he will write to the Romans, "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires" (Romans 13:14 RSV). Here, to the Colossians, he says, "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, *clothe yourselves* with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues *put on* love, which binds them all together in perfect unity" (3:12-14).



In other words, replace your former behavior with behavior that reflects the resurrection of Jesus, and do it right away! Don't wait till you feel like it, or till you've

somehow dealt with, or tried to correct, the old behavior that pulled you down. Quit worrying about the inside, fix the outside and the inside will take care of itself. Trying to fix the inside of us first is like waiting till our dirty clothes have gone through the wash and are pressed and folded before we can put on any clean clothes. We don't do it that way, do we? We put on the clean clothes before the dirty clothes have hit the hamper. Jesus has been raised from the dead, and I belong to him. So, maybe I've got some dirty linen from the past, *but now* I can put on fresh clothing regardless of whatever I had on before.

Paul concludes this section of Colossians with a reminder that living the resurrection life with Jesus brings about unity and peace with other believers, and a life of thanksgiving, wisdom in the Word of God, and free-flowing worship of the Lord. "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" 3:15-17).

I don't know about you, but I would like to be at peace with my fellow members of the body of Christ; I would like to be thankful for the blessings I enjoy through the generosity of the Creator of all things; I would like to have a deeper understanding of what the Lord has revealed to us in the Scriptures; I would like to find release from self-centeredness in a life of praise focused on the majesty of the living God. These things are the result of the great "put-on," when we realize that formerly our lives were not so grand and glorious *but now* things can be different.

The gospel of Jesus' resurrection is that great announcement that we don't have to live in the *then* of what used to be, but we can live in the *now* of what is. As Paul writes to the Ephesians, "Once you were darkness, *but now* you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light" (Ephesians 5:8). And Peter writes this, in his first letter: "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, *but now* you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, *but now* you have received mercy" (1 Peter 2:9-10). To borrow from a traditional song, "The old gray life, it ain't what it used to be" — and how thankful we are for that!

The apostles Paul and Peter have been writing these things to the Christians of the first century, in the particular situations they found themselves in at Colossae, Ephesus, Philippi, Rome, perhaps Antioch, or wherever. But we're the successors, the fellow family members, of those earliest Christians, and what Jesus and his apostles said has life-changing significance for us as well.

You see, the Bible isn't a static, motionless entity that has no ongoing life. The invention of printing in the fifteenth century made it seem that the Bible consists of lines of type on a page — lines of type containing doctrines and precepts to believe, and instructions to follow. Yes, those things are in the Bible too, but really

the Bible is a narrative — a story that begins at the creation of the world and ends with the appearance of God's new creation, the renewed heaven and earth. That day hasn't yet arrived in its full dimensions, so the Bible is *a story with an open end*. The story is still going on, and *we're in it*. You and I are Bible characters; we're mentioned in the story, because the story makes it clear that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:13). If you're an "everyone," and if you've "called," then you're in the Bible and so am I. What Jesus and his apostles are saying to the people of the New Testament, they are saying to you and me as well. And the resurrection of the Son of God brings in the new creation for us, too, with its life-changing power.



Perhaps you're dealing with some issues in your life, wondering how things could ever change. Well, that's what life used to be like, *but now* life can be different. You might be angry about getting the short end of the stick, *but now* you can replace that anger with patience and love. You may have deep hurt in your heart because of the way someone has treated you, *but now* you can forgive them. Or perhaps you're weighed down by worry about your finances, *but now* you can trust in God's providence and lay that worry aside. Or you're dealing with health issues, *but now* you know that Christ is in you, the hope of glory and healing. You may be perplexed about some major decision you need to make, *but now* you have the wisdom of the Word of God and the leading of the Spirit of Christ. Perhaps you have feelings and fears about people who are different from you in some way, *but now* you see that all who are in Jesus are one body, one family. Or it could be that

Then...	But Now...
• <i>Darkness</i>	• <i>Light</i>
• <i>Not a people</i>	• <i>People of God</i>
• <i>No mercy</i>	• <i>Mercy</i>

you have to deal with thoughts and desires you know aren't right in God's sight, *but now* you can put on the Lord Jesus and lay those thoughts aside.

The apostle John concludes his First Letter with these words: "We know that the son of God has come and has given us understanding so that we should know the truth. And we are in the truth, and in his son Jesus the Messiah. This is the true God; this is the life of the age to come" (1 John 5:20-21a Kingdom NT).

"But *now* . . . but *now* . . .!" Two little words that make a big difference, because "now is Christ risen from the dead."

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