

READING PAUL FOR THE PEAKS AND THE VALLEYS

COL
3:1-2

IN COLOSSIANS 3, THE SUMMIT OF THE PEAK IS VERSES 1-2.

This is not the peak because it comes first in the chapter, but because it caps the general principle from which Paul delineates the examples, down in the valleys.

Paul pushes the reader up the mountain from the shoulder of Colossians 2:20-23, and then states: “If you are raised together in Christ ...” This is the top of the mountain from which we should judge everything else Paul is getting ready to say. We seek upward and think upward—focusing on where Christ is, not the happenings on the ground (3:1-2). These dual commands explain the posture that we, as those who are raised in Christ, are to have in our lives.

COL
3:3-4

NEXT, PAUL EXPLAINS WHY THESE THINGS ARE NECESSARY.

It is because we have died to the past and our new life—our true life—is hidden with Christ in his relationship with God (3:3). Consequently, when Christ is finally revealed at his second coming, we will be revealed with him (3:4).

COL
3:5-9a

THE FIRST RHETORICAL VALLEY IS THE LIST OF NEGATIVE BEHAVIORS IN 3:5-9A.

We are often tempted to read quickly through the “Christ is our life” section (3:1-4) and focus more on the practical instructions that form the bulk of the chapter. In Bible studies, we often spend a great deal of time on “valley” passages, because people want to discern how Paul’s examples relate to their everyday situations.

COL
3:9b-10

AFTER THE FIRST SEVERAL VALLEYS, PAUL PROVIDES ANOTHER PEAK—A SMALL ONE.

Verses 9b-10 summarize the specific examples of 3:5-9a with another general principle, similar to Paul’s point in verses 3-4. Just as we have died to the past and found life in Christ, so must we cast off the old self and put on the new.

COL
3:11-25

THE SECOND HALF OF THE CHAPTER IS A LONG VALLEY.

Here, Paul describes positive ways that God’s people should conduct themselves. Throughout Colossians 3, the various examples are not exhaustive, nor do they shape the peaks. The valleys are important, but only as they flow from the peaks. Without first pursuing the things above and trading the old self for the new, we cannot be dead to immorality (3:5-7), break free from our dysfunctions (3:8-9a) and prejudices (3:11), put on godly virtues (3:12-14), marinate in Christ’s riches (3:15-17), or strengthen our family relationships (3:18-25).


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The first time I saw Mount Kilimanjaro, I was impressed anew by God’s handiwork. The mountain stood out starkly from the savanna as we drove along the highway from Arusha, Tanzania. Unlike much of the terrain I had experienced in the eastern United States—a mix of flat areas and minor slopes—Kilimanjaro proclaimed its independence from the lowlands in a bold, unforgettable way.

As with most other New Testament writers, Paul crafted rhetorical peaks and valleys for his audience. This is not unlike public speakers today who vary their speech or writing with high points and low points in order to keep listeners’ attention. In this style of communication, valleys are not less important than peaks; instead, valleys support the peaks and allow them to come across in bold, unforgettable ways—much like the contrast between the savanna and Kilimanjaro.

Reading Scripture thousands of years after it was written, we aren’t attuned to the ups and downs of its rhetoric. We often read passages silently to ourselves or aloud in the reverent cadence of a small group or worship service—but imagine if we were to read Paul’s letter to the Colossians in its original mode of proclamation, out loud in a public place.

We would naturally begin to strengthen our voices for the “big ideas” and lower our voices when we started to give examples—and we would easily recognize the peaks and valleys.

When studying this passage (and others), we have to be careful to avoid getting stuck down in the valleys without celebrating the peaks of God’s goodness to us. Rhetorically speaking, we shout out the new life we have in Christ, and we talk through the practical details of embracing that life and making it our reality. 



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