

## Scripture Reading: Scripture Reading: Ephesians 1:1

“Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, To the saints who are in Ephesus, and faithful in Christ Jesus: 2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, 4 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, 5 having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, 6 to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved.”

# “In Heavenly Places”

I mentioned last week that it was very appropriate that these two messages on verse three would come on either side of the funeral we held for Alpert Hoey! Last week we spoke about the spiritual blessings that we have in Christ and stressed that we have them ONLY in Christ. As Al’s life was celebrated in the midst of many tears, the evidence of those spiritual blessings were very plain to see as people remembered how Jesus changed his life! For eleven years Al was here almost every Sunday growing in his understanding about how those spiritual blessings were not only real and impactful here on earth, but were in the heavenly places which will be our focus today. Of course, we know that Al now understands all of this far better than I will be able to explain things because today he is truly there with Jesus...

- That joyous reality should give us great comfort!

So, the question for this morning is why does the Apostle Paul teach that we are blessed with spiritual blessings in heavenly places:

- The most important way to answer this question is to remember that this is where Jesus is at present and since those blessings are all in Christ they are in heavenly places!

Now it has been a busy week, so this will not get all the attention it deserves but it will not be the last time we consider this important topic.

- In fact, the Apostle Paul will refer to these heavenly places some five times in this short letter!

He will come back to it in verse 12 of this first chapter to assure us that Christ Himself is seated in those heavenly places. In chapter two as Paul makes his case that we are saved by Grace, he will explain that God “raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus...”

In chapter three we will learn that the “manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places” And finally, as the Apostle calls on us to put on the full armor of God we learn that it is to do battle, “against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.”

- So, before we address this first reference among many, it might be good to consider just what the Bible means by heavenly places.

I especially want our young ones to grasp some simple things that the Bible teaches here, but it will also be good for all of us to review and might help us understand a few verses where we often scratch our heads!

- With heaven or heavens we come to another very popular word in the Bible which means we must be very careful to consider the context in which it is used to understand what is being taught.

You will find heaven or heavens used almost seven hundred times in the Bible and almost all of them refer to one of three places: We actually have all three established in the very first chapter of the Book of Beginnings and of course followed by other references in the Scriptures.

It is important to see the basic structure laid out in Genesis because it helps us determine which type of heaven is being referenced in a particular verse later in the Bible.

Genesis 1:1 begins with the creation of the heaven and earth. These are two distinct realms and the reference to heaven or heavenly places is often referring to the place where God has chosen to reside with His angels and the other heavenly hosts.

- But as Genesis chapter one continues to explain how God formed and filled His creation, we see the other two heavens clearly delineated.

Water appears to be the primary element of the creation and it is divided as God brings forth a firmament that is called heaven, distinct and separate from where God and the angels dwell.

The reference to that heaven is then divided again as the creation continues: On day four the sun moon and stars are placed in the expanse of heavens which we would usually call space today. The vast heavens of this creation, but again not the heaven where God and His angels dwell. Then again on Day five we see another reference to heaven but this time it is the sky and atmosphere that we often refer to as the heavens today.

Genesis 1: “20 Then God said, “Let the waters abound with an abundance of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the face of the firmament of the heavens.” 21 So God created great sea creatures and every living thing that moves, with which the waters abounded, according to their kind, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.”

So, we have the heavens that we can see each day where the clouds and birds dwell, along with airplanes now! Then we have the heavens where we see the sun in the day and the moon and stars at night, the vast expanse of space!

- And again, these are distinct from the heavenly places where God and His angels dwell.

So to keep it simple, we should think about this with some basic questions:

Where do the birds fly about.

- Yes, in our earthly heavens.

Where do the sun moon and stars dwell?

- Yes, in the vastness of the heavenly space.

Where do God and His angels dwell?

- Yes, in heaven, or as our text put it, heavenly places!

Now of course that still leaves us with the question that all of the children will ask at some point:

- Where is this heaven where God and the angels dwell?

And I would remind us that this is a very important question, because we know that this is where Jesus now sits as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords at God's right hand! The Bible gives us many descriptions of this realm but not a lot of details about where that dwelling is in relation to the earth or any of the known creation. The first important thing to remember is that it IS part of the Creation!

Only God is eternal and that is why the Bible opens with the creation of both heaven and earth. We are given a LOT of detail about the creation of the earth and the surrounding heavens, but none with regard to the heavenly realm. Is it some place beyond the vastness of space or perhaps a sort of different dimension? Since we are not told specifically in the Scriptures we must acknowledge that all such ideas are speculations.

- Again, what we do know is that it is a created place.

**It is a created place where the eternal Triune God has chosen to dwell in His Creation...  
We know that Isaiah was taken to that heavenly place where he saw God on His throne, along with the angels and the heavenly hosts!**

**Isaiah 6:1** “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. 2 Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. 3 And one cried to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is Jehovah of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory!”

The Prophet Ezekiel was also given the privilege of seeing these heavenly places, and again the description is quite stunning: *[good homework]* In addition to the creatures that Isaiah described this prophet sees other things including what he calls wheels...

**Ezekiel 1:** “17 When they moved, they went toward any one of four directions; they did not turn aside when they went. 18 As for their rims, they were so high they were awesome; and their rims were full of eyes, all around the four of them. 19 When the living creatures went, the wheels went beside them; and when the living creatures were lifted up from the earth, the wheels were lifted up. 20 Wherever the spirit wanted to go, they went, because there the spirit went;...”

Again, such passages just bring forth another million questions but there are two very important things to notice that we do know from this passage...

First, we see the Spirit of God at work and that is important because just as we learned about His work to fill the earth with the Kingdom of Jesus in the Book of Acts, we here see Him working with the heavenly hosts as well. The second thing to notice is that earth and the heavenly places are not wholly separated because we see the wheels at times lifted up from the earth... We see this revealed from an earthly perspective in the life of the Prophet Elisha at II Kings 6:14

“Therefore [the King of Syria] sent horses and chariots and a great army there, and they came by night and surrounded the city. 15 And when the servant of the man of God arose early and went out, there was an army, surrounding the city with horses and chariots. And his servant said to him, “Alas, my master! What shall we do?” 16 So he answered, “Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” 17 And Elisha prayed, and said, “Lord, I pray, open his eyes that he may see.” Then the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw. And behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.”

- So again, the heavenly places are not wholly separate from earth, though we do not usually see their involvement!

The Book of Job also gives us a bit more information when we see Satan as one of the angels able to move between these realms. So let me step back again for a moment:

We live here on planet earth. We have directly above us the earthly heavens where the clouds dwell.

Beyond the earth we have the vastness of space where the sun, moon and stars have been placed and named by God. Psalm 19 says they declare the glory of God which they certainly do for those who have eyes to see.

- And then we have the heavenly places which are certainly in touch with the earth and heavens but not physically near by.

Isaiah and Ezekiel were taken there in the Old Testament and besides Jesus we have two others in the New Testament who journey there as well.

**John sees many of the same things that those prophets did in Revelation chapters four and five and the Apostle Paul describes his journey in II Corinthians 12 when he says:**

**"I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a one was caught up to the third heaven. 3 And I know such a man—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— 4 how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter."**

There has been a good deal of speculation about his reference to the third heaven, but I think it is pretty clear when we keep the first two heavens in mind as we have described them this morning.

Paul was not caught up into the sky like an airplane could do in the 1<sup>st</sup> heaven.

Paul was not caught up into space like a rocket can do in the 2<sup>nd</sup> heaven.

No, Paul was somehow translated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> heaven, the heavenly places that he mentions five times in this Epistle! And this brings us to Jesus, which is central because the Apostle makes clear that we are blessed in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus! So let me begin with this question:

- Where did Jesus dwell before His incarnation?

Yes, before Jesus became flesh and dwelt with man on earth He was in the heavenly places as the Lord God whom both Isaiah and Ezekiel saw in the heavenly places. Here we must remember that God is Spirit, so just as His presence in the Tabernacle and Temple here on earth was seen as a glory cloud, that is how God would be seen on His throne. When Isaiah says that he saw God seated on His throne, we should not have the image of a gray-haired old man sitting on an earthly throne.

- Our Triune God, Father Son and Holy Spirit has dwelt in those heavenly places since the beginning of time in this creation.

So as part of God's eternal plan, Jesus is born of a woman here on earth and carries out His life and ministry.

- His mission is to save His people from their sins which He accomplishes at the cross and declares His victory with the power of His resurrection.

Jesus then spends 40 days instructing His disciples and after that we come to His ascension: Given to us from an earthly perspective in Acts chapter one and from a heavenly perspective in Revelation chapter five.

Acts 1: "9 Now when [Jesus] had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight."

Unlike with the Apostle Paul, we do know that Jesus ascended bodily and again it was not into our sky or space but to the heavenly places and when we consider John's description of that event we will notice all those heavenly hosts once again... There is a scroll that no one could open & then John sees the ascension from heaven's perspective:

Revelation 5: "6 And I looked, and behold, in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as though it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent out into all the earth. 7 Then He came and took the scroll out of the right hand of Him who sat on the throne. 8 Now when He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. 9 And they sang a new song, saying: "You are worthy to take the scroll, And to open its seals; For You were slain, And have redeemed us to God by Your blood Out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, 10 And have made us kings and priests to our God; And we shall reign on the earth."

**11 Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne, the living creatures, and the elders; and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands, 12 saying with a loud voice: “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain To receive power and riches and wisdom, And strength and honor and glory and blessing!”**

- What a glorious scene and one that should always come to mind when we consider how we are blessed by God our Father in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

We can rejoice in these words as we read them, we can even glory in them as they are set to music in Handel's Messiah, but it is hard for us to even imagine the glory that Al and all the Saints who have gone before are experiencing there in the heavenly places today thanks to the finished work of Jesus!

And we know that the story has not yet ended as Pastor Martin Lloyd-Jones reminds us so well when he said:

“We know that the [problems of this world are] spiritual, and that the solution must be likewise spiritual. As it is from Satan that evil lusts and passions and desires ultimately come; so it is from Christ and Him alone, through the Spirit, that power to overcome can come. And He will not only come, to the individual; thank God, He will come to the whole world. The Christian knows that Christ who is now in the heavenly places will come again to this world in a visible form, riding upon the clouds of heaven, surrounded by the holy angels and the saints who are already with him; and those who remain on earth when He comes will be changed and will rise into the air to meet Him, and all will be ‘for ever with the Lord’. He will rout His enemies, and banish sin and evil.

His Kingdom shall ‘stretch from shore to shore’ and He shall be acclaimed as Lord by ‘things that are in heaven and on the earth and things under the earth’.

That is Christian optimism, and it means that we know that it is Christ alone who can and will conquer.”

Pastor Martin concludes as I will by asking, “Are you ‘in the heavenly places’... are you aware that you belong to two realms? Have you got this new spiritual view of war and peace, and the troubles of the world? Do you see it all from the perspective of heaven, and of God, and of the Lord Jesus Christ seated together with Him in the heavenly places? Blessed be the Name of God!”

### Communion Meditation: Revelation 19

“**6 And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude, as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty thunderings, saying, “Alleluia! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigns! 7 Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready.” 8 And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. 9 Then he said to me, “Write: ‘Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!’””**