

Location, Location, Location!

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[0 : 00] Location, location, location. You realtors will tell us this is the number one rule in the purchasing of property, whether residential or commercial.

Location, location, location. And most realtors will tell us that the key to the location is the view. View, view, view.

What most people want in a location is a view. A view of the city skyline, a view of the mountains, a view of a park, a view of the water. In our city, if there's even a little glimmer of a view out of one of the side windows, that raises the price of the property big time.

Location, location, location with a view. Because the view from where we are located affects us more than we know.

The view from where we are located shapes our sense of the city. Indeed, it shapes our sense of the world. The same thing is true of where we work.

[1 : 08] The view, or lack of it in some cases, shapes how we feel about our work. The view, or the lack of it, shapes our sense of the world.

Something along these lines is what the Apostle Paul is opening up for us in the letter he wrote in 62 A.D. From a prison cell in Rome to the disciples of Jesus living in the first century city of Ephesus.

Where we are located, or more to the point, where we think or feel we are located, affects our understanding of our place in the world.

And what Paul wants us to realize is that where we think or feel we are located is not always the whole story. Paul is located in Rome with all that being in Rome entails.

Paul is located in a jail. He's been in prison now five years, two years most recently in Rome. The recipients of the letter are in Ephesus with all that that entails.

[2 : 18] And located in all kinds of different circumstances. Some are in nice homes, some in not so nice homes. Some are in great jobs, some in crummy, oppressive jobs.

Some are in thriving relationships. Some are in relationships that are strained. Some are in robust health. Some in great pain, even in hospital. In Rome, in jail, in Ephesus, in various states of being. Mentally, emotionally, and physically. But none of those locations is the whole story. Neither is any of the views from the location.

Paul writes from Rome to his friends in Ephesus to help them realize that they and he also live in another location. And the view from this other location is nothing less than spectacular.

The view from where he and they and we are truly located gives him and them and us a very different sense of the city.

[3 : 26] A very different sense of the world. And a very different sense of well-being. The apostle begins to open this up for us in his first major declaration.

Right after his opening greeting, Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to those who are in Ephesus in Christ, believers in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, Paul then lays out what it turns out to be the theme sentence of the rest of the letter.

And he gets right to the point. Location, location, location with a view. Where we are truly located brings us into a radically alternative reading of reality.

Our text this morning is Ephesians 1.3. But I also want to read what immediately follows it to once again give us a taste of what is to come.

Ephesians 1.3-14. And if you are able, would you stand for the reading of this text? Hear the word of God.

[4 : 49] 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, just as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.

In love, he predestined us to adoption as sons and daughters through Jesus Christ to himself, according to the kind intention of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace, which he freely bestowed on us in the beloved.

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us.

In all wisdom and insight, he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his kind intention, which he purposed in him, with a view to the administration suitable to the fullness of time. That is the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things upon the earth.

[6 : 09] In him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to his purpose, who works all things after the counsel of his will, to the end that we who were first to hope in Christ should be to the praise of his glory.

In him you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation, having also believed you were sealed in him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the glory of his grace.

Living God, we believe that you enabled the Apostle Paul to write down these words, to think out these thoughts.

And I pray now in your mercy and grace that you would help us understand what he has written, but more than understand, and even if we don't understand, will you help us actually live in the reality the words are describing, for we pray this in Jesus' name.

Amen. You may be seated. In the heavenly places, in Christ, yes, in Rome, in jail, and yes, in Ephesus, in all kinds of circumstances, and yes, in the greater Vancouver area, in all kinds of human circumstances, but also, and more fundamentally, in the heavenly places, in Christ.

[7 : 54] 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.

Blessed be. Blessed be. Focus on that phrase for just a moment. Blessed be. Not adequately rendered as praise be.

Yes, praise is involved in blessing God, but praise be does not adequately capture what is fundamentally going on in this blessed be.

I can think of no single English word or phrase to capture what is going on in blessed be. Some background.

Every word in the worship vocabulary of the Bible has a particular nuance. A particular nuance shaped by particular actions of the human body.

[8 : 58] Every word in the worship vocabulary of the Bible has a nuance shaped by some particular action of the human body.

Now this makes sense, given the fact that we are embodied creatures. And this makes sense, given the greatest commandment. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, and with all your might.

We are to love God with our whole self, our mind, our heart, our soul, and our body. And thus, the verbs of the worship vocabulary of the Bible all involve some particular use of the body.

Bless. It involves the hands and the knees. To bless is to bring a gift to another while kneeling.

While kneeling out of respect. To bless means to come before another, go down on one's knees, stretch out one's hands, and offer a gift.

[10 : 10] To bless God, therefore, means to come before His presence, kneel in adoration and submission, lift up our hands, and offer a gift.

To offer the only gift we have to give. The gift of our whole selves. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I think we can paraphrase it this way. May it be that people come before the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, kneel, and with outstretched hands, offer their very selves.

That's what it means to bless. Now we can appreciate the wonder of what the Apostle Paul is declaring in this theme sentence. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us.

Blessed us. Exact same word used in blessed be. We bless the God who has blessed us. God has blessed us.

[11:17] God blesses us. God has come to us, knelt before us, stretched out His hands, and offered us a gift.

Lots of gifts. The living God has come to us in Jesus Christ. The living God has got down on His knees before us in Jesus Christ.

The living God has opened His hands and given us the gift of Himself in Jesus. And with Jesus, everything else He can give us in order to make us all we were meant to be.

What Paul is celebrating in this theme sentence is the full implication of the benediction which he would have heard all his life as a Jew.

Numbers chapter 6, verses 24 to 26. You've heard the words often. God instructs the priest to say over the people of God, Yahweh bless you and keep you.

[12:18] Yahweh make His face shine on you and be gracious to you. Yahweh lift up His countenance upon you and give you His peace. Then God says, So they shall put My name on the sons and daughters of Israel and I will bless them.

Do you see what's going on in that benediction? Yahweh bless you. Yahweh come to you and get down on His knees before you and stretch out His hands towards you.

That's why He can keep you. He stretched out His hands to take you. Yahweh make His face shine upon you, not from way above, looking down, but from right in front of you.

Yahweh lift up His countenance upon you and grant you peace. He has to lift up His face because He's come down and knelt before you.

An alternative reading of divinity. The God we bless blesses us. We bless God because God has blessed us.

[13:32] The great and awesome Creator has come to us in Jesus Christ, knelt before us, and given us the greatest gift He could ever give. God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son and with Him every spiritual blessing, every blessing the Spirit has to give.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Now we have to hear this in the context of all of Paul's life. For most of his life, he would be addressing God the way his fellow Jews did. He would address God as God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Right? Throughout Scripture you see that. God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. For in Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, God has revealed Himself.

And God has revealed Himself as the God who blesses. To Abraham God said, I will bless you. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed. But in light of what God has done in Jesus Christ, Paul has to have a new name for Him.

For all of the blessings God did in Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and David, none of it held a candle to the blessing God has done and is doing in Jesus.

[14:50] So God has to have a new name. And the new name is God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Blessed be the God and Father Jesus knows and loves, Paul is saying.

Blessed be the God and Father who has revealed Himself in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. People flocked to Jesus while He was here visibly on earth.

For in Jesus, they experienced a kind of blessing they had never ever experienced before. Let Paul's rephrasing of the great benediction grab hold of your soul.

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.

Which brings us back to location, location, location. We experience the every spiritual blessing in a new location with a new view.

[15:55] We experience the every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ. Paul is in Rome.

His friends are in Ephesus. Paul is in jail. And his friends are in all kinds of different circumstances. But Paul is also in the heavenly places in Christ.

And so are the believers in Ephesus. They too are in the heavenly places in Christ. And so are we. Alternative reading of reality.

Now note carefully. In order to be in the heavenly places in Christ, Paul is not transported out of Rome. He's not taken out of jail in order to be in the heavenly places in Christ.

He is in Rome in jail. It's just that he is also in the heavenly places in Christ. We are in Vancouver or Burnaby or Richmond. We are in all kinds of life circumstances.

[17 : 02] Some that feel blessed and some that do not. But that's not the whole story about our location. We are also in the heavenly places in Christ. Now, I have repeated the phrase so many times purposefully.

for if you are like me, you keep forgetting where you are located. In Christ.

Paul uses the phrase or its equivalent some 30 times in the letter. 11 times in the text we just read. In Christ. It's the defining reality of his life.

Whatever else can be said about the apostle Paul, he is, as James Stewart says, a man in Christ. Now, this phrase can also be translated, this phrase in Christ can also be translated because of Christ.

We are located in the heavenly places because of Christ. We are chosen before the foundation of the world because of Christ. We have been predestined to adoption because of Christ. We have redemption, the forgiveness of sins because of Christ.

[18 : 06] We are sealed with the Holy Spirit because of Christ. But if you look at every place Paul uses this term in Ephesians and the rest of his writings, you will see that his primary emphasis is locative.

He's speaking of his and our new location. We live and move and have our being in Christ.

It is what Jesus promises us. On the night before he went to the cross, he said to the first band of disciples, abide in me and I in you. I am the vine, you are the branches.

Abide in me and I in you. Dwell in me and I in you. Make your home in me and I in you. It's what Paul will pray for later in the letter so that Christ may dwell in your hearts.

Christ in us and we in Christ. Every spiritual blessing the blessed God gives us is experienced not only because of Christ, not only with Christ, but in Christ, in union with him.

[19 : 12] We live and move and have our being in a living person. He is our new location no matter what else we might want to say about where we live and in the heavenly places.

But of course, for that is where Christ is. There is where he who is our life lives. In order to be with him, in order to be in him, we have to be where he is.

Now, what does Paul mean by this phrase, heavenly places? He uses it five times in the letter. In the verse we're focusing on today, 1-3, blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

1-20, God raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places. 2-6, God has made us alive with Christ, has raised us up with Christ, and has seated us with Christ in the heavenly places.

What does that mean? 3-10, God makes known the mystery of the gospel through the church to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

[20 : 41] And then in 6-12, our battle is not with flesh and blood, not with human beings, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the forces of darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.

Because we are located in Christ, we must by necessity be located where he is located, in the heavenly places.

Okay, what does this mean? I do not know. I do not know fully yet.

I trust Paul. Yes, after all, an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ. I trust him. I believe what Paul believes. It's just that I don't know what Paul believes.

His alternative reading of reality takes time to comprehend. And using this phrase, Paul is taking us into the biblical understanding of the universe.

[21 : 51] Jesus. He's taking us into a biblical cosmology. In the Bible, reality is multi-dimensional. It's multi-layered.

And the authors of the Bible would tell us that we are not being realistic about our lives unless and until we take this multi-dimensional nature of reality seriously.

the authors of the Bible would tell us that for all of our hard-nosed realism, come on folks, be realistic, most of us are actually not being realistic enough.

And therefore, we really do not know where we're living. As I've said in other sermons, most 21st century people live with what we could call a two-dimensional worldview.

The two dimensions are the ego, the self, and the environment, made up of the physical universe and other egos and other selves.

[22 : 57] This reading of reality says that everything that happens in our lives can be explained in terms of these two dimensions, the ego or the environment.

And when something goes wrong in life, help or hope or healing is found in one or both of these two dimensions. In fact, hope and health and healing are found only in one of those two dimensions, the self or the environment.

But for the authors of the Bible and the Apostle Paul in particular, reality is at least four-dimensional. In addition to the self and the environment, there are the living God and the heavenly places.

and we are not being hard nose realist unless and until we factor in the living God and unless and until we factor in the heavenly places.

I became serious about following Jesus as Lord in 1967. I was studying physics and so understandably was deeply steeped in the worldview of these professors whom I admired and still do.

[24 : 20] At that time, one of the most significant players in the theological world was the German scholar Rudolf Bultmann. In 1961, he wrote an essay that resonated with many people entitled The New Testament and Mythology.

And Bultmann argued that in light of all that we learned about the universe in the past decades and centuries, it is no longer possible to hold to the worldview of the Bible and the Christian creeds.

This is how he wrote, No one who is old enough to think for himself supposes that God lives in a local heaven. There is no longer any heaven in the traditional sense of the word.

And if this is so, the story of Christ's ascension into heaven is done away with. Now, many theologians at that time agreed with Bultmann and said so publicly.

Many other theologians, evangelical theologians, disagreed with Bultmann and said so publicly.

But, many of those theologians who disagreed with Bultmann lived their lives as though they agreed with Bultmann.

[25 : 35] That is, heaven, or more specifically, the heavenly places made no practical difference in the way they lived their lives. It simply did not matter.

I would have put myself in that category. I saw the words on the page. I wondered what Paul meant and then went on to live my life as though it didn't matter.

I sometimes think I'm still in that category. I began the day without any reference to this dimension of reality.

Anyone relate to me? Bultmann called his program demythologizing. faith. In light of all that we were learning about the universe, we simply have to demythologize the faith.

We need to strip the Christian faith of all its mythological elements, especially this heavenly places.

Now, I would have never consciously agreed with Bultmann, but I've agreed in practice.

[26 : 40] I've lived as though what Apostle Paul is talking about simply doesn't matter. thankfully, as I grew in Christ, especially in the years we lived in Manila, I began to experience things that could not be accounted for with a two-dimensional demythologized worldview.

It was as if I were, in the words of E. Stanley Jones, forced by the facts of life to get serious about how the Bible and Paul understand the world.

A number of years ago, I came across the work of a man named Andrew T. Lincoln, who earned his Ph.D. at Cambridge University. And in a book entitled Paradise Now and Not Yet, Lincoln grapples with this heavenly dimension in Paul's thought.

And he argues that the great need in Christian theology today is not to demythologize our cosmology, but to re-mythologize it.

How's that for a bold statement? What we need, says Lincoln, is a thorough-going re-mythologizing of our everyday faith.

[27 : 57] This is how he puts it. It's not a question of whether modern or post-modern people will interpret their lives by symbols or myths. Everybody does. But rather, the question is, which symbols and myths will they accept and choose?

Will it be those rooted in a biblical perspective or those originating from some other worldview? Try this.

Imagine a point on a piece of paper. Imagine, then, this point being dragged across the paper into a line, one dimension.

Then imagine the line being dragged into a square, two dimensions. Then imagine the square being dragged into a cube, three dimensions.

Then imagine this cube being dragged into yet another configuration, four dimensions. though it's hard to conceive, mathematicians can write equations for it.

[29 : 10] In fact, many of you probably know that mathematicians have now written equations for at least 11 different dimensions. When the Apostle Paul speaks of the heavenly places, he's speaking of another dimension, another layer within and around and intersecting our space-time reality.

Christ is alive in this dimension. Christ is seated on the throne in this dimension. We are made alive with Christ in this dimension. We are seated with Christ in this dimension.

We are in Christ in this dimension. It is our true location in the world. And it is not far away. That is what I think most of us think when we hear the word heaven or heavenly places.

We think far away, both in terms of time and in space. But that is not what the Bible thinks at all. The authors of the Bible regularly use the words heaven and heavenly in the same breath with earth and earthly.

On the first page of the Bible, Genesis 1, in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. On the last page of the Bible, Revelation 21 and 22, God will make a new heaven and a new earth.

[30 : 35] The Bible does not speak of heaven without referring to earth and it does not refer to earth without speaking of heaven. Like earth, heaven is also created.

Like earth, heaven is also a created dimension of reality. As there was a time when there was no earth, so there was a time when there was no heaven.

heaven is not needed for God to be God. In the beginning there is God, the triune God, nothing else. Then God brought into being the earth and the heaven.

That's why we use the phrase maker of heaven and earth. Heaven is as inherently mortal as earth. Heaven is as dependent upon God as earth.

Earth cannot sustain itself and neither can heaven. And like earth, heaven has also been affected by sin. God has not been affected by sin, thank God, but heaven has by the sin of heavenly beings, fallen angels, principalities and powers, and by the sin of human beings, fallen humans.

[31 : 51] Revelation 12, there was war in heaven. Ephesians 6, 12, our battle is with the forces of darkness in the heavenly places. In the biblical cosmology, life on earth is influenced by life in heaven and life in heaven is influenced by life on earth.

What goes on in the heavenly dimensions affects life on earth. Daniel, the prophet, said he had been praying for Israel for a long time and after many days, Michael, the prince of Israel, comes to Daniel.

Michael is an angel, an archangel of Israel. And Michael says that he would have come earlier had he not been delayed by the prince of Persia and prince of Greece, angelic beings working in Persia and Greece.

And what happens on earth affects what happens in this heavenly dimension. Luke tells us that Jesus sent out an early band of his disciples to cities and villages with the proclamation, the kingdom of God has come near.

And when they came back, Jesus says to the disciples what they had not seen, that while they were announcing that gospel, I saw Satan falling like lightning. It happens every time.

[33 : 06] The gospel is announced and believed. In the biblical reading of reality, life on earth and life in the heavenly places is inextricably intertwined.

Now the clearest illustration for me is a biblical one. It involves the life of Elisha. An army of horses and chariots had surrounded the city where Elisha and his servant were living.

The servant is understandably afraid and says to Elisha, what shall we do? Elisha says, do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with this surrounding enemy.

And then Elisha prays, O Lord, open his eyes that he may see. And the Lord does, and Elisha sees. And behold, says the text, look, the mountains were full of horses and chariots of fire surrounding Elisha.

Another dimension of reality, very close at hand. Now the important fact for us today as we make our way through Ephesians is this.

[34 : 24] Christ has ascended into that other dimension. And since we have been united with him, somehow we too live in this other dimension.

We cannot make sense of our lives apart from this in Christ, and we cannot make sense of our lives apart from this in the heavenly places.

this is why C.S. Lewis often said that contrary to popular opinion, those with heaven on their mind are not of the least earthly good.

Those with heaven on their mind are of the most earthly good. Because those on earth with heaven on their mind have a more accurate cosmology.

location, location, location. In Rome, in jail, in Ephesus, in various human circumstances, in Vancouver, in Burnaby, in Richmond, in Seattle, in Shanghai, in New Delhi, in all kinds of circumstances.

[35 : 29] But by the grace of God also, in the heavenly places in Christ. and navigating this true location with its spectacular view, blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every blessing the Spirit has, is what the rest of Ephesians is all about.

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