

The Reality of Heaven

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[0 : 00] Let's turn once again then to Ephesians chapter 1. You'll know, of course, that we've been working our way through this chapter. And last time we spoke about those three, these three things that we said God wants us to know.

Three things that God wants every one of his people to know. And these three things were here in verse 18. Having the eyes of your hearts enlightened. This is what he's praying for, for them.

He's praying for his brothers and sisters in the church of Ephesus. He's well aware of all the dangers and the challenges that they face. And this is what he prays for. Having the eyes of your hearts enlightened that you may know.

Here they are, one, two, and three. One, what is the hope to which you have been called, which he has called you? Two, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints?

Three, what is the immeasurable greatness of his power to us who believe? And here he begins to expand now on that power. He's not talking about, we said last time, he's not talking about the kind of visible, tangible power that you and I think about sometimes.

[1 : 05] And that we see in the world around us. He's not talking about the great demonstrations of God's power like in creation. Or when he divided the Red Sea. Or when he sent the flood. Or all of these demonstrations of God's power.

He's talking about a unique power. The power that was operating in Jesus when he rose from the dead. That was a power behind the scenes. Secret.

It was a power that nobody saw. That nobody witnessed. It was an event that nobody witnessed. And yet, it was the greatest power in the world. And it's the power, more importantly, this is the power you need.

The power of the resurrection is the power you need. Now, this is my prayer, says Paul, that you may know that power. You may experience it. And that you may know what it is in your day-to-day lives as you struggle.

And remember, these people struggle just the same way as you and I do. With the same, with very similar things. And he says, this is what you need. You need to know. You need to be aware of this power.

[2 : 03] And here it is. But he begins to expand on the resurrection. And he says this, according to the working of his great might. That, verse 20, he worked in Christ. When he raised him from the dead.

And seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places. Far above all rule and authority and power and dominion. And above every name that is named.

Not only in this age, but also in the one that is to come. And he put all things under his feet. And gave him as head over all things to the church. Which is his body.

The fullness of him who fills all in all. So Paul is talking about the power of the resurrection.

The power by which Jesus rose from the dead. Or by which I should say, to be more technically correct. God raised Jesus from the dead. But you'll notice that Paul, when he's talking about the resurrection.

[3 : 00] He doesn't finish with the moment in which Jesus come back to life again. That is because the resurrection did not end at that moment.

For Paul, the resurrection only began with the moment that Jesus came back to life again in the grave. And the moment he stood up with his new and yet the same body.

For Paul, the resurrection was ongoing. Now that doesn't mean, of course, that Jesus is continuing to come back to life again. But what it means is that Jesus is today alive in that resurrection body.

And he is exalted in heaven. I'm going to ask a question. How much do we think about Jesus in heaven this evening?

How much does he fill our minds? How much thought do we give his resurrection? What we might call the second phase of his resurrection.

[4 : 01] Paul, when he's talking about the resurrection, doesn't stop at the empty tomb. But with the occupied throne in heaven. That's what he wants us to think about. In fact, as far as he's concerned, the coming to life of Jesus was only part of it.

What he wants to concentrate on is Jesus as he is today. And I wonder how much thought we ever give. We very often give thought to the baby Jesus.

We might give thought to the Jesus who walked on the earth and the walking on the water and the feeding of the 5,000. We might give thought to Calvary and his death on the cross. We might give thought to the resurrection on the third day, the empty tomb.

How much thought do we give to Jesus as he is today? And just because that is invisible to us doesn't mean that we don't know anything about it.

And it doesn't mean it doesn't have any bearing on the way we live our lives. In fact, as far as Paul is concerned, it has a direct bearing in two ways. There's a two-way bearing. First of all, that Jesus' resurrected life is involved in our day-to-day lives in this world.

[5 : 07] That is a fact. But secondly, he says in Colossians chapter 3, he says, If you then are risen with Christ, your duty, your responsibility is to seek the above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.

Now, he could have, he could have, Paul could have, of course, he could have described the 40 days in which Jesus was on the earth, appearing to his disciples and speaking to them and so on.

But he doesn't because for him, the resurrection is one unit. He's rising from the dead and is going to be with the Father after having done everything that he came to do in this world.

And it would do us good, I think, to just go back to that day when having appeared to his disciples at various points after he was raised, he took them to a high mountain by themselves and he gave them the command to go into all the world to make disciples of all nations.

But then, in front of their very eyes, he was lifted up. It was like, if you can imagine, an invisible elevator and Jesus is in that invisible elevator, so he can't see the elevator and all of a sudden the elevator starts to rise.

[6 : 19] That's what it would have looked like, that Jesus was taken up. He rose from standing on the ground. He rose from where he was, right in front of them, and continued to rise until a cloud, we're told, enveloped him.

That wasn't any cloud, by the way. That was a special cloud that was sent by God to lift him and to take him away to where he was now going to dwell.

And we needn't think, for example, that he continued to rise, the place where Jesus was. And we're talking about a reality here, and it's hard for us to think about because very often you hear people talking in literary terms about heaven, hypothetically about heaven, not really believing that it's a real place.

But the New Testament makes clear to us that heaven, the place where Jesus is, is a real place. It's not a different planet. This week I read in the Times newspaper about how the Kepler spacecraft has been sent up to explore new worlds.

And they found, this week it was reported that they found five new worlds, they said, that were orbiting different stars. And there was a big excitement about this because there's an obsessiveness in humankind to find planets like our own where life could have evolved as they like to believe.

[7 : 43] There's this obsession with finding life on other planets. Well, so far, with all the technology that we've implemented in such a search, it hasn't happened. We haven't found other life.

We haven't even found another planet where life could exist as it is today, as it is in this world. But when we speak about heaven, and because Jesus rose from where his disciples, that didn't mean he continued to rise and somehow he's still in this physical existence and universe that we belong to.

That's not where heaven is. You can't take a spacecraft to heaven. Even although Jesus rose, that was only just to signify that Jesus was being taken from life as we know it, on this world, this dimension as we know it.

Heaven is another dimension. And his going up was like going behind. If you can imagine that there's a curtain that stands between this world and God's world.

Of course, this world is God's world, but the place where Jesus lives. And all that happened on this occasion was that Jesus simply went behind the curtain. And if you and I were to go behind the curtain, it would be completely different.

[8 : 57] It would be a new order, a different order of life and existence. Now, it's very hard for us to imagine what that is. But when you think about it, there could be a thousand different dimensions that God could have created that run parallel to the dimension in which you and I live.

There could be 2,000, 10,000. God, nothing is impossible with God. Nothing was impossible with God. And so, when we speak about heaven, we mustn't think in terms of what we know about all around us, our world, our solar system, our stars, our universe.

But he was taken to a different dimension altogether, the dimension from which he came, behind the curtain, which is heaven. Well, we don't know much about heaven.

We don't know much about that dwelling place. But God promises, this is the promise, that when a Christian dies, a person who has died in Jesus, for him it is simply going behind the curtain into that dimension where he sees and where he is with Jesus forevermore.

So, that place is a reality. It's not like the kind of other worlds that we read about in Lord of the Rings, for example, Middle Earth, or The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe by C.S. Lewis, where Narnia is another world.

[10 : 23] But, of course, these places don't exist. These places are only fictional. They're places which are outside or other than the world as we know it. But we mustn't think that heaven is fictional.

It isn't. It is another existence, but it's not fictional. And I think it would do us good to, and it does amaze me, that very often in the discussions that I have with young people, particularly, what they want to talk about is heaven and what do we know about heaven and the questions that arise.

Many of these questions, of course, cannot be answered. But it is good to live in the knowledge and the awareness that heaven awaits us and that a new heaven and a new earth will be created for, in fact, Jesus promised his disciples, I go to prepare a place for you so that where I am, there you may be also.

That's the promise that belongs to every one of us if we live by faith in Jesus. It's not a question of earning our way in there. It's a question of whether we accept Jesus' death as the sacrifice for our sin and if we trust in him as our savior and as our Lord.

Now, here is what Paul says about heaven. And here he tells us that what Jesus did, where he went to, and what Jesus did. He was seated at the right hand of God in heaven.

[11 : 48] Now, there are many, many areas in which we could explore this teaching. First of all, there's the fact that Jesus did not become something different or someone different when he rose and when he went behind the curtain.

He still remained as Jesus, God and man. The great truth of what we call the incarnation is that the Son of God himself, God himself came into our world as a man.

God became a human being. He took to himself human nature and a real human body with all the faculties that our human bodies have.

He came into this world as a baby and he grew up as a man and he lived as a real, real human being. God and man. When he rose and left this world, he did not cease to be a man.

He continued to be, and to this day, continues to be a man. In other words, if we were to go behind the curtain today, if we were to be taken to where he is, we would be able, we would see him and he would look like he looked in this world.

[13 : 01] If he was to come from behind the curtain into this building, we would see him as a man with hands and fingers and arms and a body and nose and eyes and everything that is true and that was true about him when he was in the world.

And he would stand on both his feet. He is a human and continues to be a human, a human being. Now, I'm not saying that the body he has today is exactly the same body as he had 2,000 years ago.

I don't believe it is. Yet, it is the same in one sense and yet in another sense it's different because what we believe is that he is glorified. Something happened to that body as it rose from the dead and he is now in a glorified human state.

He's human and he is God. He is God and man. Now, that's only one of the many things that we could explore when we think about Jesus in heaven today. We don't think about it enough.

We don't think it has any relevance. And yet, just because it's invisible to us doesn't mean it doesn't have a bearing on the way in which we live our lives. Let me give you an example of that.

[14 : 12] When I was growing up, it was unheard of for there to be a TV camera in the houses of parliament. I remember a long time ago when there was a big debate about whether or not to televise parliamentary debates.

And there was, I can remember the day when it was unheard of, where people would have rioted. The politicians wouldn't hear of it. The idea of the public seeing into what took place in the houses of parliament, the arguments that there were between left and right and between Labour and Tory and all the rest of it.

I remember the day when you didn't even hear what was going on on the radio, let alone see the way we do today. But that didn't mean that parliament didn't have a bearing on the way we lived our lives.

What went on in that chamber had a direct bearing on the way you live your life. They made laws that affected you and I, speed laws, money laws, all kinds of different financial decisions and everything were taken, military decisions were taken in the houses of parliament.

Yet you never got to see it. But I didn't hear anybody saying, well, it doesn't exist, that has no relevance for me because I don't see it. It was only after years of fighting and struggling that they got the cameras in there and now everybody sees it.

[15 : 28] But it doesn't actually make any difference whether you see it or whether you don't. It's still the houses of parliament and it's still the place where laws are made and debated and where rules are made. Now it's the same with heaven. The fact that we can't see it doesn't make any difference at all.

It's there. It's a reality. It's the place where Jesus, and if it's true that Jesus came into this world in the first place, it is true that he continues to exist. The Bible says so, and he is.

That's why tonight we are worshipping the living saviour. That's why the greatest news in all the world is that the grave is empty. You can go to the grave where they placed the body of Jesus in Jerusalem today and there's nothing there.

But it's more than that. It's more than that. The fact is that that same Jesus rose and he left this world to go to the place where in his exalted state he can rule.

That's what Paul is so excited about in this chapter. And it would do us good to ask the Lord to make us excited about exactly the same truth. Do you wake up in the morning and say, Jesus is risen, he is exalted, he sits on the throne of the universe, do you come to a chapter like this and say, yes, Lord, praise the Lord that Jesus is no longer dead, he has died for my sins, he's paid the price of my sins, he's risen again, but more than that, he's gone to the throne of the universe and he's seated right now.

[16 : 57] The Bible tells us, the Bible also tells us in another area of exploration, in Hebrews, you find, the writer to the Hebrews says this, that he ever lives to make intercession for us.

What does that mean? What does it mean? That's Jesus and that's him in heaven today, he ever lives, he lives always to make intercession for us. What that means is this, it means that we are on his mind continually.

We are the focus of his attention continually. It means that him sitting in the throne in heaven has a direct basis, a direct bearing, rather, and an influence and a relevance and a direct power in the way that we live our lives.

And it means that also that he makes intercession, it means that there's a conversation going on. You know, if a politician were ever to, and I've seen this happening before, if a politician were ever to come to Lewis, we might have a welcoming committee, I'm sure that members of his party would organize a visit and he would have a timetable or she would have, whoever politician it was would come and they would arrive in style and they would have a place to stay and it would be maybe a public meeting where that person would speak and appear in the school or some of the other places round about but I guarantee you that one or two other things would be happening.

There'd be one or two individuals in Lewis who would be wanting to speak to that person because there are issues that they wanted to make known to that person, issues that they feel strongly about.

[18 : 51] And there's nothing wrong with that. You're quite right, you'd be quite right to do that. If there were something that was on your heart, in your mind, you'd be wanting to say, right, I'm going to talk to him.

I'm going to speak to that person, even if it was the prime minister. Do you know, that is what it means to make intercession. And that is what Jesus is doing tonight with the Father, speaking to the Father.

God has this, there's this conversation going on in God, within God, about us. There are all kinds of things that we need, that we could explore from this great truth, from this amazing truth.

And it amazes me how relevant it is. And what we need tonight are the eyes. That's why Paul says, and right back in verse 18, what we need are the eyes of our hearts enlightened, that we may know these things.

And we'll never know them until God opens our eyes. Only he can do it. That's why I said last time, make sure you pray for these three things, because you can't have them yourselves.

[19 : 58] You can't work your way into them. God has to give you this insight. He's got to give you the knowledge of the hope to which he has called you, and the riches of his inheritance, and the immeasurable greatness of his power.

Now, what are these eyes? Let's go back to verse 18 for a few moments, just to stress the point I'm trying to make, that we need the eyes of our understanding opened.

And that's why I read that great passage in 2 Kings and chapter 6. You remember when Elisha was living in a house, he had a servant with him, and God had told Elisha where the king of Syria was going to come and attack Israel.

So as soon as God revealed that place to Elisha, he would tell the king, so the king would have his army, and they would wait for the army. And every time the king of Syria sent the army to attack Israel in a certain place, Elisha would have known it beforehand, and they were there ready for him.

And of course the king of Syria thought there was a spy within his own council, and so at first he suspected his own men, and his own men said to him, no, nobody's spying for Israel, but they said, Elisha knows the very words that you speak in your bedroom.

[21 : 10] Why? Because God tells him. So he then became the target for the king of Syria. So he sent a host, hundreds of horsemen and chariots, and they all surrounded the place where Elisha and his servant were.

And they did this at night time, so that in the morning, when they got up in the morning, Elisha and his servant, they got up, they looked out the window, and there it was, this massive army, and they know, they both know what they're there for.

They're not there on a diplomatic exercise, they're there to find and probably kill Elisha. And the servant just lost it altogether, he panicked, and he said, what are we going to do?

But Elisha knew perfectly well what he was going to do, because he knew perfectly well what God had done for him. And what Elisha did was he said, Lord, open my servant's eyes.

And all of a sudden, the scales came off the servant's eyes, and he was able to see what he hadn't seen before, but what had always been there, and that was that there were chariots of fire, chariots and horsemen, not human chariots, but angels surrounding the house where they lived.

[22 : 28] Now, these angels had always been there. The only difference was that up until that point, the servant wasn't able to see them. that's what it means to have the eyes of our understanding open so that we see that our lives consist of more than we think that they do.

God has his eye on every one of us. He has his hand on every one of us. He is concerned about our lives and every circumstance that we come across in our lives.

He has a deep concern, and when he is concerned, it's not just an inactive concern, but he can operate for us and do for us more than we can ask or even think.

So tonight, I hope that once again, will you pray with me that the eyes of our understanding will be opened.

Our eyes, the eyes. Only God can take the scales off our eyes. If you're not a Christian tonight, ask the Lord to do this for you, to take the scales away from your eyes so that you're able to see for the first time in your life the reality that God is, the reality of heaven and hell, the reality that Jesus came to save us and to bring us into his kingdom.

[23 : 53] And if you're following the Lord tonight, ask that for an increasing vision of where he is, what he's doing, and the bearing that he has, the help and the power that he has already given us to face the challenges, the difficulties, the temptations that we all struggle with in the Christian life.

Ask him to show you how great his power is. Only he can do that and only he can reveal his greatness to you and draw us into a greater relationship with him and to a greater knowledge of him and closeness to him so that we can experience more and more of his goodness and his power towards us.

I'm going to stop there. Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we ask that you will take us to our homes in safety.

We give thanks once again for the tremendous reality that there is a God in heaven, that there is a place where Jesus dwells this evening and a place from which he can rule and reign over us and from which he can work out everything for good to those who believe.

We give thanks, O Lord, for the great assurance that the Lord who has not withheld his only son but given him up for us all, how shall he not also freely with him give us all things.

[25 : 28] So Lord, whatever we face this week and whatever future that we are about to step into in your providence, may we remember that Jesus is on the throne and that Jesus loves his people and that Jesus loves those who call upon him and we ask, Lord, that you will give every one of us this tonight to call upon you and to accept Jesus for their own, as their own saviour.

Bless us, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Psalm 57 in the Sing Psalms version, page 74, we're going to sing the last four verses of the psalm, Psalm 57 and the last four verses, my heart is steadfast, Lord, Lord, thanks, we're going on the