

THE Unseen Real



Life in the Light of
the Ascension of Jesus

STEPHEN SEAMANDS

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CHAPTER ONE

A Mind Set on Heaven

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

—COLOSSIANS 3:1–3

As a young Christian I was often warned not to be “so heavenly minded you’re no earthly good.” But in the verses above, Paul urged the fledgling Colossian believers to be *more* heavenly minded, not less.

“So if you have been raised with Christ,” he instructed them, “*seek* the things that are above” (Col. 3:1, italics mine). The apostle wanted them to desire, pursue, and run after heavenly things. He also told them to “set [their] *minds* on things above,” which implies thinking about, reflecting upon, and contemplating heavenly things. The

New Living Translation captures it well: “Set your sights on the realities of heaven” (Col. 3:1 NLT).

Paul was not merely making a suggestion. In the original Greek, the verbs are in the imperative mood. That means he was giving a command. They are also in the *present* tense, which implies continuous ongoing action. Paul, then, was insisting that the Colossians *do* this, *keep on* doing it, and do it *always*. His concern was not that these young Christians would be *too* heavenly minded, but not heavenly minded *enough*. He wanted their earth to be crammed with heaven.

Not, however, so they would despise earthly things or withdraw from the world. Not in order to avoid present suffering by escaping into a pie-in-the-sky future. Suffice it to say, the heavenly mindedness Paul wanted them to seek after was for the sake of, not the denial of, the earth and the world. That’s why he spent the rest of his letter telling the Colossians how they should conduct themselves in a wide range of practical, down-to-earth contexts and relationships (Col. 3:5–4:6). He discussed everything from personal morality, relationships in community, worship, marriage, parenting, work, time management, and relating to outsiders. Paul then urged them to focus on heavenly things so they could truly and rightly engage in earthly things.

The apostle believed—and so have wise Christians ever since—that if you want to properly love this present world, you must think about the next. Your heaven will determine your earth. So if you want to change earth,

set your mind on heaven. As C. S. Lewis put it, “Aim at heaven and you will get earth ‘thrown in.’” If you aim only at earth, “you will get neither.”¹ For the sake of the earth, then, Paul wanted the Colossians to be more heavenly minded, not less.

Where Christ Is Seated at the Right Hand of God

He also wanted them to seek after and set their minds on the realities of heaven *for the sake of knowing Christ*. Because, according to Paul, heaven is “where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God” (Col. 3:1).

Now when we think about “where Christ is,” most likely “seated at the right hand of God” is not what comes to mind. Paul told us to “set [our] minds on things that are above, *not on things that are on earth*” (Col. 3:2, italics mine). But when we think about Jesus, that’s often the very thing we end up doing. We bring him down to our level and view him from the perspective of earth below, not of heaven above where, according to Paul, he is seated now.

As a result we think of Jesus either from the horizon of the past (what he accomplished on earth for us through his life, death, and resurrection) or from the horizon of the future (when he shall return to judge and to reign over the earth). And, of course, there’s nothing wrong in doing that. In the New Testament he was often viewed from both of those horizons.

But this is incomplete. What’s obviously missing is the horizon of the present—what Jesus, as the one who

has ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God, is doing now. No wonder Paul urged us to seek after and set our minds upon things above. He wanted us to understand and encounter Jesus from the horizon of the present, from the perspective of today, not merely from the perspective of yesterday or someday.

And, by the way, today—the present—was the dominant horizon of the New Testament writers, the way they most often viewed Christ. If then we read the story of Jesus only or primarily from the horizon of the past or the future, we will inevitably misread and misinterpret it.

When we think of heaven, for example, we think primarily about the future. Heaven is the place you go after you die. In heaven you'll be with Jesus and the saints and your loved ones forever. There will be pearly gates and streets of gold, and no more crying, suffering, or pain. In heaven we will gather around the throne with people from every tongue and tribe and nation to worship and praise God forever. We can cite particular scriptures that describe all these things happening in the heaven of the future. And we should. Thank God for the blessed hope that we have!

But the “things above”—the heavenly realities Paul wanted us to seek after and set our minds on—are not primarily in the future yet to come. Instead, he wanted us to fix our gaze on the heaven that is *already* present, where Christ is ascended, seated, and reigning at God's right hand. We think of heaven as a place we go to after

we die. For Paul and the writers of the New Testament, it was, above all, a dimension Christians inhabit *now*.

In biblical cosmology, as N. T. Wright explained, heaven and earth are not different locations, far apart from each other.² They are different dimensions of God's creation (Gen. 1:1). Heaven and earth can overlap and interlock with each other. They're not like oil and water that don't mix. In fact, because heaven relates to earth tangentially, it touches and permeates earth. So the poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, is right: Earth is "crammed with heaven."³

Though the original close, intimate connection between the two has been deeply ruptured by humanity's fall into sin and evil, God has been faithfully at work in a redemptive process slowly repairing the connection. Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension are at the very heart and center of that process. In the end when Christ returns, the connection will be fully restored. The two will be joined together as God intends (Rev. 21-22). The last line of the hymn, "This Is My Father's World" sums it up well: "Jesus who died will be satisfied, and earth and heav'n be one."⁴

That is why Christ's ascension from earth to heaven is such a significant event. It further establishes and forges the connection, forever binding heaven and earth together. In the divine-human person of the ascended Christ, they have been and are now bound together eternally.

And that—we can't emphasize it enough—is the dominant horizon of the New Testament for viewing Jesus. Not from the horizon of the past or future, but from the horizon of the present, where the ascended Christ is sitting in heaven at God's right hand. The fact that *today* he is reigning as the ascended Lord both validates and vindicates his *yesterday* (Christ's life, death, and resurrection) and assures and guarantees his *tomorrow* (Christ's final return and victory).

When I am trying to get this across to a group of pastors and Christian leaders, I often start by asking them a question: What Old Testament verse is either directly quoted or alluded to in the New Testament more than any other? The vast majority don't know. You should see the puzzled looks on their faces. Most are hesitant to even venture a guess.

So I say, "Let me help you. Is it (A) Psalm 23:1: 'The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want'; (B) Leviticus 11:45: 'You shall be holy, for I am holy'; (C) Isaiah 53:5: 'He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities'; or (D) Deuteronomy 6:5: 'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might'?" Most of them lean toward D. Since it is the Great Commandment, it would seem the logical choice.

But then I smile and say, "Actually, it's none of the above!" They usually laugh and protest. Then I give them the correct answer. It's Psalm 110:1: "The LORD says to my lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies

a footstool for your feet” (NIV). And that verse, I inform them, is either directly quoted or alluded to in the New Testament a total of twenty times.⁵

Now they are even more puzzled and surprised! Why that verse? It’s certainly not the verse we would have picked! What is it about that verse that caused the New Testament writers to keep coming back to it?

The Significance of Psalm 110:1

You may recall that before there was an Apostles’ Creed, the earliest Christian confession was simply, “Jesus is Lord!” When the early Christians said that, they were declaring that Jesus, the one who had been rejected and crucified, had been raised from the dead. But not only had God raised him from the dead, Jesus had also been exalted to God’s right hand and enthroned as Lord and King.

The foremost reason, then, that they kept citing Psalm 110:1 was because it underscored the fact that Jesus is Lord. Devout Jews at the time of Christ believed this verse, along with the entire psalm, referred not only to Israel’s past Davidic kings, but also to the future Messiah who was to come. Convinced Jesus was that Messiah, the early Christians therefore boldly applied it directly to him. Peter, in fact, declared it in the sermon he preached to the crowd gathered on the day of Pentecost. After his earthly ministry, he proclaimed Messiah Jesus, Son of God and Risen Lord, ascended and returned to

his Lord and Father in heaven, who said to him, “Sit at my right hand, until I make all your enemies your footstool.” God, therefore, has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, “both Lord and Messiah” (Acts 2:32–36).

The New Testament writers, therefore, kept returning to Psalm 110:1 in order to proclaim the resurrected Christ’s exaltation to the place of honor at God’s right hand and his installation and enthronement as Messiah and King. As the writer of Hebrews put it, alluding to this verse, “When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Heb. 1:3). His time of humiliation and death was over, so too were his resurrection appearances. His earthly ministry was complete; now his heavenly ministry had begun.

Paul magnificently summed it up in the beginning of his letter to the Ephesians. God displayed his great power 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 he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Eph. 1:20–23).

For the New Testament writers, Psalm 110:1 was foundational in understanding who Jesus is and fully and properly exalting him. He is not only risen but reigning, not only alive but sovereign, not only central but supreme. All things—in the world, politics, society, history, culture, their personal lives—were to be viewed from the vantage point of the ascended Christ, “who has

gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him” (1 Peter 3:22). That was the horizon that shaped and determined everything else. Instead of relegating him to the past or the future, it situated him in the present and the center.

Opening Our Eyes That We Might See

The ascension, then, “where Christ is seated at the right hand of God” (Col. 3:1), is the dominant horizon of the New Testament. But it is definitely *not* the horizon from which we usually view things. That’s why Paul reminded us to seek after and set our minds there. We are so prone to forget! Our natural tendency is to do the exact opposite of what Paul told us—to set our minds on things that are on earth, not on things above, and then to view Jesus from that perspective. Because of the universal nature of human sinfulness and brokenness (Rom. 3:9–20; Eph. 2:1–3), I believe this is true for all people everywhere. We set our minds on earthly things.

But it has become especially true for those of us in Western culture. For the past three hundred years, since the Age of the Enlightenment, we’ve been told that the *only* things that are real are the things of earth, those things we can perceive with our five senses. So if you can’t see, hear, smell, taste, or touch it, you may personally think it’s real, but you can’t be sure, nor can you insist it must be real for anyone else.

One hundred years ago, G. K. Chesterton explained what has happened in modern Western culture like this:⁶ When the wind is blowing and the branches of the trees are waving, there are two kinds of people in the world. One group believes the wind moves the branches; the other group believes the motion of the trees creates the wind. For most of human history and in most parts of the world today, people adhere to the former view. The consensus has been that the invisible lies behind and is the source of the visible. Only recently, and particularly in the West, has the latter view emerged, that the motion of the trees creates the wind.

Unfortunately this recent view has had a profound and pervasive influence on Western culture. As a result, belief in the *unseen real* is no longer a part of the average person's plausibility structure. It has also profoundly influenced and shaped Western Christianity, turning most of us into practical, functional deists, depriving us of spiritual imagination, and diminishing our capacity for contemplation.⁷

This Western worldview, of course, directly contradicts and is antithetical to the biblical worldview, where what is real simply cannot be reduced to what is empirically verifiable. In addition to the *seen* real, the Bible assumes and affirms the reality of the *unseen* real. In fact, the unseen real is considered more real, more ultimate than the seen real. As Fred Rogers (the famous Mr. Rogers) often said in quoting from *The Little Prince* (21:36), "What is essential is invisible to the eye."⁸

As I write this I am in my office in my home in Wilmore, Kentucky, where I have lived for many years. So if you were to ask me where I am sitting right now, I would say, “I’m in my office at home, sitting on a large comfortable swivel-back chair; in front of the desk where my laptop is turned on.” And no doubt, what I’ve just told you is true. It’s real—I’m not imagining it. I’m not in some sort of Matrix right now!

But, as we’ve noted, according to the New Testament, because I am “in Christ” I’m also sitting somewhere else. Paul said, I have been “raised with Christ” (Col. 3:1) and am seated “with him in the heavenly places” (Eph. 2:6). That means I’m seated “here” in my office, but I’m also seated “there” in the heavenly places. Both are true and real. But which of the two seatings is more real and more ultimate? This one (on my office chair) or that one (enthroned with Christ in heaven)? This one may appear to be more real—I can see and touch and feel the chair in my office. But the truth is, it will soon pass away. It won’t be long before I’m not living here anymore! That one (enthroned with Christ), however, is an eternal seating and will never pass away.

According to Scripture, then, there is more to reality than the seen real. In fact, the unseen real is actually more real, more ultimate than the seen real. That’s what Elisha the prophet had to get his servant to realize (see 2 Kings 6:11–23). They were staying in the city of Dothan at the time, and when the king of Aram (Syria) found out Elisha was there, he sent his soldiers to capture him.

Elisha had been helping his archenemy, the king of Israel, elude his attacks so the king of Aram wanted Elisha dead.

The king's soldiers came in the darkness of night and surrounded the city. The next morning when Elisha's servant looked out and saw them with their horses and chariots, he trembled. "What are we going to do now!" he cried out to Elisha.

But Elisha didn't seem the least bit concerned. "Do not be afraid," he told his servant, "*There are more with us than there are with them*" (2 Kings 6:16, italics mine).

I doubt the servant found Elisha's words particularly reassuring. I can imagine him thinking to himself, "Yeah, right!" So Elisha prayed, "O LORD, please open his eyes that he may see" (2 Kings 6:17).

And the Scripture says, "So the LORD opened the eyes of the servant, and he saw; the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha" (2 Kings 6:17).

For Elisha there was the seen real, but there was also an unseen real, and that made all the difference! Too often, however, like Elisha's servant, we view things only from the perspective of the seen real. We set our minds on things below, not things above. We, too, need to have our eyes opened to see and grasp the reality of the unseen real.

It's fascinating how, as the story continued to unfold, that perspective shaped what Elisha did. He prayed and God temporarily blinded the soldiers who were surrounding the city. Then he led the blinded soldiers to the king of Israel!

Naturally, the king wanted to kill them—they were his enemies. But Elisha said, “How can you do that? You didn’t capture them. Give them food and water instead. Then send them back to their master.” I’m sure the king of Israel was bewildered at that suggestion. But he did what the prophet said. In fact, he went further, and “prepared for them a great feast.” Then, “after they ate and drank, he sent them on their way, and they went to their master” (2 Kings 6:23).

What a strange military strategy that was! It reminds me of Paul’s exhortation: “If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink” (Rom. 12:20). But here’s the point: because Elisha “saw” and recognized the unseen real, he battled in a different way, “waging war,” as Paul put it, not according to human standards but with divine power (2 Cor. 10:3–4).

And amazingly, it worked! When his soldiers returned and told him what had happened, the king of Aram was discombobulated. “Why in the world would my enemy prepare a feast for my soldiers? He feeds them better than I do! He must not be afraid of me? What kind of god does he have protecting him? I better leave him alone.” Those might have been some of his thoughts. But we do know how the story ends: “And the Arameans no longer came raiding into the land of Israel” (2 Kings 6:23).

Too often, like Elisha’s servant, we view things only from the perspective of the seen real. And that not only fuels our fears, it shapes how we work to overcome

situations, circumstances, and persons who threaten us. We rely upon human wisdom, skill, and strength. We fight power with power, waging war according to human standards. We set our minds on things below, not things above.

What a difference it can make when our eyes are opened so that we may see. Oswald Chambers described it like this: “Suppose Jesus suddenly lifted the veil from our eyes and let us see angels ministering to us, His own presence with us, the Holy Spirit in us, and the Father around us—how amazed we should be! We have lived in the muddle of things instead of in the middle of things. Faith gets us into the middle, which is God and God’s purpose.”⁹

By Faith and Not by Sight

How true! When we reduce reality to the seen real, we live in the muddle of things. And Chambers was right: “faith gets us into the middle.” These heavenly realities, “where Christ is seated at the right hand of God” (Col. 3:1) and we are “seated with him in the heavenly places” (Eph. 2:6), are dimensions of the unseen, not the seen real. Faith is the spiritual sense that enables us to perceive and grasp the reality of the unseen real.

In fact, according to the oft-quoted definition of faith in Hebrews 11, that’s what faith is: “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things *not seen*” (Heb. 11:1, italics mine). As Gordon Smith put it,

“Nothing so marks faith as this: that a person recognizes and lives in the reality that there is another order to life beyond what we can engage with our five senses.”¹⁰

So we live in this seated with Christ position by faith and not by sight. As Charles Wesley expressed in one of his ascension hymns:

By faith already there,
In thee our Head we are
With our great forerunner we
Now in heavenly places sit,
Banquet with the Deity,
See the world beneath our feet.¹¹

If, then, “where Christ is seated at the right hand of God” is to be the horizon from which we view things, a growing, deepening active faith is indispensable. For our earth to be crammed with heaven, nothing is more crucial.

Yet we know, based on our many failures and experiences, that nothing is so fragile, weak, and unstable in our lives as our faith. Frustrating circumstances, external pressures and opposition, internal fears, the constant stress of the daily grind, our preoccupation with the cares of this world—all combine to challenge and deplete our faith. How quickly we forget that we are seated with Christ and our lives are hid with Christ in God. The disconnect between what we *believe is true* and what we *experience as real* fuels doubt and fear and causes unbelief to rise.

If faith is to continue, deepen, grow, and increase in us, if we are to live by faith and not by sight, we must ever be determined and disciplined in nurturing, cultivating, and exercising it. Paul, as we've already noted, didn't merely suggest, but commanded us to seek after and set our minds on things above. When we are intentional about doing that, then we put ourselves in a place where God can impart to us the assurance of that reality. Faith in the reality of heaven, which we have affirmed and sought by exercising our wills, can then rise in us as the divinely given "conviction of things not seen." What we believe to be true and experience as real will then become one.

Living an Ascension-Shaped Life

In the chapters that follow, as we seek after and set our minds on things above, we will be focusing upon Paul's words, "where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God" (Col. 3:1). As we reflect and meditate on them, we will essentially be considering the meaning and significance of Christ's ascension for us.

"He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty" is a central tenet of the Christian faith and affirmed in all the major historic Christian creeds. However, it is one of the most neglected of all Christian beliefs, especially among Protestant Christians. Most of us have never heard someone preach or teach about it.

Sadly, some church leaders, having been shaped by the Western worldview and modern secularism, seem almost embarrassed by the ascension. Others merge it so closely with the resurrection of Christ that it loses its distinctive significance. Still others consider it too mystical or elevated to have any practical value for the ordinary Christian. I am convinced, however, that the ascension is an extremely important Christian belief and has enormous practical significance for our daily lives.

About twenty-five years ago, as I slowly worked through *The Holiest of All*, Andrew Murray's classic devotional commentary on Hebrews, I first began to grasp the significance of Christ's ascension and the reality of living an ascension-shaped life. No other New Testament book focuses on the ascension as much as Hebrews. Some scholars even suggest the entire book is actually an extended sermon on Psalm 110:1. In his commentary, Murray wrote this: "The knowledge of Jesus as having entered heaven for us, and taken us into union with himself into a heavenly life is what will deliver the Christian from all that is low and feeble, and lift [us] into a life of joy and strength."¹²

Convinced that he was right, I began to study and reflect, meditate, and pray about the meaning and significance of Christ's ascension. I came to realize how important it was to the early Christians and how, as I mentioned earlier, it was the dominant horizon from which the New Testament writers viewed Christ, themselves, and the world.

“Christ ascended to the right hand of God,” said A. B. Simpson, “that he might lift us up into an ascension life.”¹³ In the chapters that follow, then, I want to unpack the meaning and significance of our belief in the ascension and what it means for us to live an ascension-shaped life. We will consider what the ascension means for Jesus and what it therefore means for us, i.e., for faith and practice in our ordinary lives as Christians. In each chapter, I will consider one key element of the doctrine and draw out some of its practical implications for us. At the end of the chapter, I will also include some questions that can be used for both personal and group reflection.

My prayer is that what follows will help you as you strive to follow Paul’s instructions to seek after and set your mind on things above. That’s where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God, and where you are, as a believer in Christ seated in the heavenly places with him. I pray that it will both deepen your faith and cause faith to rise in you, so that you may live a life on earth that is crammed with heaven.

Let me conclude this opening chapter with these inspiring words from Charles Haddon Spurgeon:

It is sweet to remember that the exaltation of Christ in heaven is a *representative exaltation*. . . . His exaltation is *our* exaltation. He will give us to sit upon His throne, even as He has overcome, and is set down with His Father on His throne. . . . He has a throne, but He is not content with having a throne to Himself . . . He cannot

be glorified without His bride. Look up, believer, to Jesus now. . . . We have Christ for our glorious representative in heaven's courts now . . .¹⁴

Questions for Personal and Group Reflection

1. The New Testament Christians viewed everything from the perspective of the ascension of Christ. Why do you think the ascension is such a neglected topic among most Christians today?
2. Have you ever heard a sermon or a teaching on Christ's ascension? Does your church do anything to underscore its importance? What might your church do to emphasize it more?
3. Have you had moments where you have experienced "the reality of the *unseen* real"? What do you remember about those times? What long-term impact did they have on you?
4. Paul commanded us to "set our minds on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God" (Col. 3:1ff). What are some of the reasons why this is difficult for you?
5. "Now we in heavenly places sit," wrote Charles Wesley in the hymn in this chapter. Then he immediately described in wonderful poetic imagery what that means: "Banquet with the Deity, See the world beneath our feet." Can you imagine yourself doing that? What might it look like?