

April 15, 2012

Psalm 2:1-9 / Psalm 110:1-7 / Philippians 2:1-11 / Ephesians 1:18-23  
The Living and Reigning Christ

Last week, being Easter, I spoke on verses 18-21 (verses which actually constitute a prayer of the apostle Paul) and purposely focused our attention on the "incomparably great power" and "mighty strength" which God "exercised (or exerted) in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead." After all, it was Easter and our focus was on the Resurrection!

But according to our text that's really only HALF the story. Because the full story (according to Paul) is that God the Father not only exerted an incomparably great power in raising Jesus from the dead but He also exerted the same degree of power by raising Him up into heaven bodily and seating Him at His right hand and then highly exalting Him by enthroning Him as Sovereign Lord over every other power, rule or authority in the universe and Head over all things for the Church.

That's the truth we'll be looking at today: That the Risen Jesus has been exalted above all earthly powers and all heavenly powers; angelic powers and demonic powers; forces of good and forces of evil; people, animals, the forces of nature, and even the movements in the distant constellations.

---

And here I need to add right from the start that this text is hard for many people to accept -- especially Westerners and North Americans. Because unlike Paul or the Ephesians or others from African, Eastern, Indian or tribal heritages -- we don't tend to think of a universe populated by spiritual beings or entities who have rulership and authority and power and dominion which they exercise over humans and the events that take place in this world.

---

We have problems with verses like II Kings 6:18 and 19, where Elisha's servant goes out in the morning to see the house surrounded with an army of chariots and horses. And with great fear he says: **"My Lord, what shall we do?"** To which Elijah calmly responds: **"Don't be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them."**

Yet the servant sees no one ***"with them."*** Thus Elisha prays for his servant: ***"Lord, open his eyes that he may see."*** And then we are told: ***"The Lord opened the servants eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha."***

They were there all along, but the servant could not see them until the Lord opened his eyes to be able to see those spiritual realities. And can I say that when Paul prays that the "eyes of our hearts might be enlightened," THAT is at least part of what they need to be enlightened to see: That there are powers and principalities and angels and demons in the spiritual realms and they have an effect upon us in the natural realms.

---

For the most part, we do enjoy the thought of it when we see it played out in movies and books and the like. But deep down we're taught to believe that although it makes for a good story, in reality (as it effects our lives) those things don't really exist.

In fact I watched a movie a while back, where a female social worker took on this difficult foster child only to discover the child was possessed by a demon. And yet when the social worker went to tell her church-going associate (as they both stood on the front steps of a large church on a Sunday morning) his response was complete disbelief / suggesting she take a vacation / or see a psychiatrist.

And her frustrated response to him was: *"Yeah, you believe it when you're in there, but it all ends when you come out here."* Quite an astute observation for a Hollywood script writer: *"You believe it when you're in there, but it all ends when you come out here."*

It was just another way of saying he didn't really believe it at all. And the same could be said about many Christians raised in Europe and North America. Why? Because in the West we are taught that such things don't really exist outside the Bible or our imagination. We're taught that such views are the remnants of an archaic, antiquated and pre-scientific way of thinking. They're the result of ignorance / or a flawed education / or a backward, unenlightened, third-world way of thinking (as some have put it).

Yet let me say this from the very start: If your view of the cosmos, or the universe, does not allow for the reality such things -- I may as well skip over this text completely and not even try to explain it -- because that's what it's all about. And therefore if you're unwilling to accept it, I'll simply be wasting your time and mine.

Because Paul not only believes that evil powers and principalities populate the heavenly realms, He asserts that Jesus has been exalted to a position of authority and dominion that exceeds every one of them! That's part of having a biblical worldview.

---

You'd have to throw out major portions of the Bible to deny the existence of Satan, the angelic and demonic or the ongoing battle between Good (or God) and evil.

And let me be clear here when I say: By the word "evil" the Bible does not mean, nor anywhere suggest, that evil is simply, "the absence of good."  
Basically because such a statement is absurd and irrational!

If there is no objective reality called evil, then the absence of good (which would really be indefinable apart from its opposite) -- would NOT result in the display of something that doesn't otherwise exist! The absence of good would simply result in NOTHING, it would not result in evil. If evil surfaces when people fail to do good, its only because evil was there in the first place to jump in and fill in the gap or rear its ugly head when good was neglected.

---

And lest you hear we wrong let me say: I know that people can (and have) gone to ridiculous extremes with this issue. They have. I've had friends who've had the tendency (to use the common phrase) of "seeing a demon behind every rock" or demonic activity behind every odd behavior or form of mental illness. I've known people who have gone to that extreme.

In fact, that's what makes many Christians feel justified in denying the whole idea completely. That and the fact that they've never personally seen or encountered any raw, visible manifestation of "in your face" evil.

Yet if you happen to be one of those people, let me offer this advice: The way to respond to such unhealthy extremes is NOT to go to the equally extreme position of denying it all! The best response to fanaticism is balance, not another extreme.

What you need to reject is not the truth of Scripture but the unhealthy and unbalanced fanaticism that takes that truth to extremes which God never intended it to go.

---

So, having tried to clarify that(!), let me now go on to consider the THREE major truths Paul shares about Jesus in this last section of chapter one. The FIRST being that after He raised Him from the dead, ***"He seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly realms."***

And what does "at His right hand" mean? "At His right hand" means "by His side" or "in His immediate presence." But even moreso, the right hand signifies the place of sovereign rule and power. / The royal scepter which signified a king's power / and authority / and right to rule / was held in his right hand and used whenever he sat on his throne and enacted or ratified royal edicts or decrees.

Thus, in keeping with nearly all ancient cultures, both the OT and NT assign special significance to the right hand as the hand of unthwartable power and sovereign strength. It is the right hand with which God wages war and delivers His people. Thus we can read of the overthrow of the Egyptian armies in Ex. 15:6: ***"Your right hand, O LORD, was majestic in power. Your right hand, O LORD, shattered the enemy."***

It is with the right hand stretched out that God laid out the heavens (Is. 48:13). It is with the right hand that one threatens or accuses another. It is with the right hand that God holds us fast with a grip no one can break. And when God upholds us with His right hand -- no harm can come to us.

The right hand is the hand of honor and privilege. When the sheep and are separated from the goats on the day of judgment, the sheep will be placed on God's right hand, and the goats on His left hand. / It is also the hand which God dispenses His blessings, and when it is withdrawn they cease.

So what does this verse tell us? The same thing Phil. 2:5-11 tells us: That as a result of Jesus self-emptying obedience in **"taking on the form of a man and being born in human likeness"** and then **"humbling himself unto death, even death on a cross"** (as the sinless atoning sacrifice for sin) God not only raised Him from the dead, but exalted Him to His right hand -- the place of absolute power and sovereign authority over all things in heaven and on earth.

In fact, the NT authors tell us it was the fulfillment of Ps. 110:1 where it says of Jesus: **"The LORD says to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'"**

---

And please note: It's all in the past tense. God "seated Him" (past tense) at His right hand the day He ascended to heaven -- and He's been exercising that sovereign power and authority ever since. Christ is reigning at God's right hand and is in the process of disarming and subduing and conquering or destroying every one of His enemies!

"For He must reign," says Paul in 1 Cor. 15:25, **"until He has put all His enemies under His feet."** Christ will not just reign when He returns (as some Christian groups wrongly teach) He already is and has been for 2000 years.

It's military imagery where a conquering king would place his foot on the throat of his defeated enemy as a sign of His conquest. And thus M. J. Harris can say: **"The Resurrection proclaims that He lives -- and that forever; and the Exaltation proclaims that He reigns -- and that forever... Whenever the NT describes the present state of Christ He is portrayed not merely as an inhabitant of heaven, but enthroned monarch."**

Right now, and for almost 2000 years now, Christ has been ruling and exercising God's sovereign power, control, might and authority.

Do you believe it? That is what Scripture declares. But sometimes when we see injustices and evil and sickness and war and death and disasters and acts of terrorism or genocide, it's hard to believe it can be true -- is it not?

When a child die of cancer or we see gross inequalities, or evil seeming to get the upper hand, do we not struggle to believe Christ is "reigning"?  
Do we not have the tendency to think that if Jesus were reigning then everything would be as it should be?

For many those kinds of things have piled up and made them question how Christ could possibly be exalted to the place of supreme authority.  
It may not make us question the fact that He's alive forever because of His resurrection / but it can certainly make us question that He's been reigning since the resurrection because of His exaltation.

---

And thus Harold Hoehner's statements are helpful when he says: ***"At the present, the manifestation of His control is not always evident to us, for there are many inequities, injustices, disasters, unholy actions, and evidences of outright defiance against Christ and God. However, Christ is exercising control without it being obvious to humankind. Without His control, things would be much worse. Hence, He has the right to exercise His control but chooses not to fully exercise it immediately in every instance of violation against God's holy character. God does have a plan and everything must follow according to that plan, which will culminate at Christ's return, where the exercise of His control will then be VERY evident."***

---

Then **SECONDLY**, we come to those things over which the exalted Christ now exercises His sovereign power and control. What are they according to verse 21? They are, ***"every rule and authority, power and dominion (literally "lordship"), and every title that can be given not only in the present age but in the one to come."***

It's an obvious parallel to chapter six, where Paul tells us to ***"put on the full armor of God"*** so we can ***"take our stand against the devil's schemes. For our battle,"*** he says, ***"is not against flesh and blood, but against the authorities, against the dark powers of this world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."*** Which means -- whether we like it or not -- that these "rulers," over which Christ has been exalted, are, as Hoehner puts it, ***"angelic and also evil in character."***

They are powers which seek to ***"rob us of our spiritual benefits,"*** he says, and prey on believers, ***"both individually and corporately."***

In fact, if we were more aware of the battle going on in the spiritual realms all around us / and how those dark powers or entities influence events / and oppress people / and play on our thoughts / and disrupt our moods / we'd be more likely to fight them (with the full armor of God) rather than succumbing to them / or going along with them.

---

LISTEN: Temptations that seemingly come out of nowhere, don't come out of nowhere! Terrible thoughts and violent desires -- the desire to hurt or abuse or maim or betray or abandon a loved one -- do not come out of nowhere. Nor can they be put off entirely to one's past life-experiences.

Psychologists always seem to be amazed when a school shooter or some other horrific crime takes place, and they discover the perpetrator was raised in a functional, non-abusive home environment, and shows no sign of mental illness -- *as if there can be no other explanation for evil behavior.*

---

Folks: There are times when I get frustrated, and moody, and react out of my own sinful impatience, selfishness and lack of love. Believe me, I am not one who "sees a demon behind every stone." Yet I have had experiences (and I've shared some of them with some of you, though this is not the place to repeat them) which can only be explained as demonic in origin.

And most often they've come at a time when I myself / or the church I've been pastoring / is making spiritual progress. It's true. In fact, it's happened so many times I can almost predict when it's going to happen again!

After all, if Satan exists (and the Bible says he does) and his evil intent is to thwart the will of God / and frustrate the redemptive purposes of God in the lives of His chosen people, then you can be pretty sure that when God starts to do something wonderful, it will not go unopposed for long.

In fact, did you know that nearly every cult that has ever arisen has arisen in times of revival in the church? Did you know that the First Great Awakening in America, died out (or lost all its vitality and momentum) primarily because

people succumbed to the temptation of going to foolish, unbiblical and fanatical extremes. A competitive, "I'm more spiritual than you form of righteousness" took root and people began seeking spiritual experiences more than God Himself (which is nothing but idolatry).

And though some have said, "Strange fire is better than no fire at all," Church history bears witness to the fact that strange fire can burn, singe and hurt. Because unlike God's holy fire, strange fire is fueled by a different spirit -- Satan and his minions who enflame spiritual pride and selfish ambitions and seek to divide -- often disguising themselves as "angels of light" who don't tempt us with "overt evil" per se, but with virtues or good things taken to excessive extremes.

That's what sin often is -- little more than something good, or healthy taken to excess or extremes. Eating is good and necessary, but gluttony is sin. / Sleep is good and necessary, but sloth is sin. Work is good and healthy for us, but workaholism is sin -- and nearly as destructive as alcoholism (even though our culture lauds it).

Yes, my friends, if we were just a little more aware of the reality of Satan and his schemes, we'd be better able to discern between temptations that originate with the flesh and temptations of satanic or demonic origin.

---

So, although I've said it before, I say it again: The Christian life involves a battle. A battle with sin, evil, Satan and the demonic. In fact, that's why many people steer clear of the Christian faith. Because they know it involves a struggle and they don't want to engage in a battle.

Many of you can testify with me that the greatest struggles and battles in your life did not come before you were a Christian, but after you'd been born again. Before I became a Christian there was no intense battle because I gave into temptation nearly every time!

It wasn't until AFTER I came to Christ and I began seeking to earnestly resist temptation / and began trying to break old ingrained sinful habits / and sought to say no to ungodly passions / and started trying to do what Paul admonishes



us to do in II Cor. 10:5 where he tells us to **"take every thought and make it obedient to Christ"** that the real struggle and war began.

Because that's no easy task, my friends. Try it and you'll realize very quickly that you're engaged in an intense spiritual battle. For when you do so, the alarms will begin to go off in the domain of Satan, because it will mean you're taking your faith very seriously, and therefore he'll send out his minions to seek to dissuade and discourage you from engaging in such a God-pleasing and God-honoring endeavor.

---

Yet here's the Good News Paul shares in this passage: God has already seated Jesus **"far above all rule and authority; power and dominion..."** A power, as we see from v. 19, that is for **"us who believe."**

It was given to Christ, that He might share it with us. It was given to the HEAD that it might flow down to and through His BODY -- the Church! If you are a believer, you will fight and wage war with Satan. But you will never fight alone. And if you're wise, and heed this passage, you'll never fight in your own feeble strength or the pitifully limited power of the flesh when He offers you the assistance of His power.

---

Which brings us to the **LAST** truth Paul shares in these verses. That God has **"placed all things under His feet and appointed Him to be head over everything for the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills everything in every way."**

You want to know why Paul lived such a victorious life? Because the "eyes of His heart" had been opened to see not only that those powers existed (and thus he should be aware of them), but that, "God placed all of them under His feet (past tense) shortly after His resurrection.

The same is true of the verb in verse 20, where we were told: **"He seated Him (past tense) at His right hand"** -- the position of divine authority, unthwartable power and sovereign control. And **THAT** is the central point of this passage! Not just that Jesus *will reign*, but that He *does reign* as sovereign Lord over everything in this universe. There is **NOTHING** that does not fall under His dominion, Lordship, authority or power! He **already** reigns supreme.

He already has His foot placed on the neck of ALL His enemies! He's already holding them down to the ground (so to speak) and if they are allowed to do anything, it is only by His sovereign permission.

Which means that NO ONE and NO THING in all creation can do anything, without the sovereign permission of Jesus! Nothing can happen to you in this life unless your Savior who loves you and redeemed you, permits it.

His feet are placed upon the neck of the powers and principalities. He reigns supreme over them all even now. And thus if they have the ability to do anything, it is only because Jesus has loosened the foothold He had on them enough to allow them to do what was done.

Painful and hard as any trial in this life may be, it cannot come our way or break into our life unless it first passes through the filter of Christ's sovereign oversight of the universe.

---

THAT is what we need the "eyes of our hearts" (or understanding) enlightened to be able to see -- that Jesus is Lord over all! He is Head over everything, "for the Church." / He rules over everything and ordains everything He ordains, "for the Church" -- to grow and purify and teach and train and sanctify us.

In fact, it would probably be best if we stopped using personalized language like, "He's my Lord." NO! He's the LORD! He's Lord over the universe and everyone in it. And it's true whether they accept it or not!

And some day, "every knee will bow and every tongue confess" that Lordship -- some bowing willingly, and others forced against their will to kneel and admit it by the sheer, undeniable weight of truth from seeing Him on His throne.