

From Now On—Living “In Heavenly Places”

— *Ephesians 4:17-32* —

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It's in chapter one that Paul has told us that God “has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ” (vs. 3). We walk the paths of earth, but we live in the atmosphere of heaven. Christ was resurrected to His divine life that He had laid down voluntarily; but that resurrected life was not merely His—it's ours as well “in Him.” That's how we live “in the heavenly places.” Now we come to the nuts and bolts needed to put together the kind of daily living that our heart cries out for.

In contrast to the thrilling recitals of what the Lord Jesus *has* done for us, and what He *is* doing for us as our great High Priest, Paul now starts telling us how *we* are to live as converted believers in Christ. He is not “laying down the law” as a legalist; he is reminding us of the kind of fruit that genuine faith in Christ always bears. The problem is that we sometimes forget.

This converted life is never a program of works-righteousness, although you may have been confused by some devout people who invent synthetic, legalistic imitations of the real thing. Holy, happy, converted “practical-godliness-living” is always by faith alone—that is, not faith *and* works, but faith *which* works. (The “works” is a verb and not a noun.) The devil can't stop one who believes from doing them.

It's not a new schedule superimposed upon your conversion to Christ, like “fine print” not seen at the beginning of a sales contract. As the Holy Spirit originally motivated your heart to surrender your all to your Savior, so let Him continue to motivate that same surrender moment by moment, day by day. You never have to make tomorrow's battles of faith your struggle today. “As your days, so shall your strength be” (Deut. 33:25). Don't think that having gotten you started in a new life, the Lord Jesus backs off and leaves you to “fly on your own once you get up to speed.” He is more concerned for your victory of faith than you are yourself.

There is no checklist where you tick off “works” item by item which you think you have performed. That can lead to spiritual pride, or equally, to despair, because it's the essence of Old Covenant living. It's deceptive because it appears on the surface to produce results—outward “obedience to the law.”

But New Covenant living is a constant choice to believe the Lord's promises. It's a constant renewal of the distraught father's prayer who prayed because of his demon-tormented son, “Lord, I believe; *help my unbelief!*” (Mark 9:24). You can never perish while you pray that prayer! Even if you live to be 100, you'll still be praying it, but you'll be having victories constantly.

Paul says we are not to climb up to heaven to get righteousness, but the Lord Jesus *descended* from heaven to give it to us: “The righteousness of faith speaks in this way, ‘Do not say in your heart, “Who will ascend into heaven?”’ (that is, to bring Christ

down from above), ... but what does it say? ‘The word is near you, even in your mouth and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith which we preach)” (Rom. 10:6-8). In other words, God has given a measure of faith to every man. Instead of waiting for you to *climb up* into Heaven, the Holy Spirit is *coming down* to where you are. The Good Shepherd looks for and finds His lost sheep.

New Covenant living is the kind of life that Abraham lived. We don’t read that he ever made any promises to God, but he chose to believe God’s promises to him.

They were these:

1. “I will make of you a great nation.” In other words, you will have fulfillment,—super. You will be *somebody* (all this is Genesis 12:2, 3).

2. “I will bless you,” which means simply, make you happy,

3. “And make your name great.” You’ll become all you really want to become, in Him.

4. “You shall *be* a blessing” everywhere you go. In other words, you’ll always be making other people happy. It’s life to the full!

5. “I will bless those who bless you.” God will reward people who help you.

6. “I will curse him who curses you.” This has to be, as part of the blessing on you. You are under the Lord’s special protection.

7. “In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” That’s Christ, of course; but you are “in Christ” now, so you share in that joy.

Responding to these promises is beyond the level of mere emotion; all true obedience is based on the

principle of simply believing these promises, that they are made to you. You ask the Lord to hold you by the hand as you follow Him step by step; He does!

Ephesians 4:17-19:

“This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardening of their heart; who, being past feeling, have given themselves over to licentiousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness.”

Paul is asking these people to be thoughtful and *choose* by the grace of the Lord to cooperate with Him. A very wise person has written, “The knowledge of your broken promises and forfeited pledges weakens your confidence in your own sincerity, and causes you to feel that God cannot accept you; but you need not despair. *What you need to understand is the true force of the will.* This is the governing power in the nature of man, the power of decision, or of choice. Everything depends on the right action of the will. The power of *choice* God has given to men; it is theirs to exercise. You cannot change your heart, you cannot of yourself give to God its affections; but you can *choose* to serve Him.”¹

There is no limit to the number of times you can choose aright! If some temptation comes at you

¹ *Steps to Christ*, p. 47.

often, make the choice a thousand times a day to say “No!” Jesus did; that’s how He “condemned sin in the flesh” (Rom. 8:3, 4).

What happens to someone who is “alienated from the life of God”? The resultant “ignorance” produces naturally that “hardening of their heart.” It happens all the time, as it did long ago in Paul’s day. Those Gentiles went to the games in the amphitheaters to watch men kill each other, and they enjoyed watching Christians, men and women, thrown to the lions. The people loved the excitement and the flirting with death, so they would watch it. Human hearts today become so hard that they can someday watch Christ being crucified and laugh. Sexual sensuality goes with the love of violence, and becomes a driving obsession.

Ephesians 4:20-24: “But you have not so learned Christ, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in righteousness and holiness.”

Thank God, here comes that wonderful word, “But ...” God so loved the world that He sent His Son into this cesspool of iniquity. We “learned Christ” like we learn a new language. It is He Himself who has been teaching us. Like a tree shedding leaves in autumn, we drop these worldly ways one by one as the Holy Spirit convicts us of this and that. Hearts as hard as granite are “renewed” and become human again. The very mind has a new

life; you stop and think a moment and you realize, *you are a new creation!* You discover that “true holiness” is the only way to live a happy life. You repent that you so often shied away from it, and resisted it.

Let’s count up what Paul is asking these people to remember:

1. *Stop* walking like the other Gentiles do. You have a new heart now.

2. *Put off* your former conduct, like you put off a worn-out, shabby, last year’s coat. Just *put it off!* Don’t pull it out of the garbage can again.

3. “*Be renewed* in the spirit of your mind.” In other words, stop resisting the Holy Spirit as He renews your mind. Constantly He is trying to give you “the mind of Christ” (Phil. 2:5).

4. “*Put on the new man* which was created according to God, in righteousness and true holiness.” Put off your old, put on the new. Putting on the new is easy once you have put off the old; that’s the only struggle you have. Once you see how “the world” crucifies Christ afresh, you can’t be enticed any longer to follow its ways.

Jesus tells us that He is sending the Holy Spirit to us each one, individually and personally. The Lord has untold billions of people (and angels) to care about, but no matter, He attends to you as if you were the only one He has on earth. He is infinite; but because He is, He can attend to the finite, which is you.

Ephesians 4:25-28: “Therefore, putting away lying, each one speak truth with his neighbor, for we are members of one another. ‘Be angry, and do not sin’:

do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil. Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need.”

After nearly 2000 years, you would think that we shouldn't need this down-to-earth, practical instruction! But we do. Jesus was the very soul of sincerity; when He would meet you on the sidewalk and say “Good morning,” He meant it, and you knew it. When He asked, “How are you?” He really cared. (Often we never wait to learn how our person is whom we have asked.) Verse 25 is just simple Christlike love across the back fence. Love which is alive sees Christ by faith in each other person.

The Bible doesn't say it's a sin always to be angry. A person who can't get angry is probably a wimp. But the anger is always under strict control of love, which is why you never want a day to pass without making a particular wrong right as far as possible. Satan constantly tries to intrude but you never give him permission, and he *can't* intrude unless you do give him permission! We can be sure that the Lord is very angry watching all the injustice going on in this world. The more like Jesus we are, the more angry we are at injustice to innocent people. And we are also angry at injustice shown to Jesus Himself. He doesn't deserve to be “crucified afresh”! Paul is emphatic: “*be angry!*” Just don't sin at the same time. Don't be a dishrag wimp.

Spectacular corporation embezzlement is the news of almost every day. Even within church organizations it sometimes happens. Africans have

sometimes claimed that London was built with wealth stolen from them in colonial days, especially days of slavery. To what extent First World people enjoy their luxury at the expense of Third World people, the most enlightened economist will find it difficult to estimate. But God's angel economists have it all tabulated accurately.

The only safe way to prepare for the final judgment is to count all that we possess as not ours, but only *lent to us* temporarily to be used in trust for those less fortunate than ourselves. If you own a piece of property, don't call it “mine.” Abraham did not possess even a foot of real estate, and he is our “father.” When Jesus died, He had no money to bequeath. All He had was His robe, which the soldiers gambled for.

“Steal no more”! A good prayer to pray is, Lord, give me the grace from your much more abounding store, to realize that I can claim nothing in this world as really mine!

Ephesians 4:29-32: “Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers.

“And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ also forgave you.”

It is more difficult to obey verse 29 if we are constantly engrossed in modern media entertainment, because the “corrupt

communication” of modern popular speech becomes ingrained within us, unconsciously. If we don’t want to talk like “Babylon,” we must “come out of Babylon” (Rev. 18:1-4). But we can’t leave the world, and we are not to become hermits. What can we do?

Paul’s counsel would be: resolutely control your radio, TV, DVDs, and CDs. Do not *let* your heart dictate worldliness to you. A prayer that God loves to hear and He loves to answer is the one that asks for a new heart that loves honesty and purity: “Create in me a new heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me” (Psalm 51:10). Our heavenly Father loves us; He will welcome every one into the New Jerusalem who could possibly be happy there. Life now is simply learning to be happy there.

Every time an impure or filthy expression would escape your lips, check it immediately. Agree with the Holy Spirit that He shall remind you if you forget. Be ready at the slightest moment to respond to His conviction.

Plead with the Lord to enable you to say something always that will be helpful to people. This is number seven in those Genesis 12 promises to Abraham (and to you!)—“you shall *be* a blessing.”

Paul tells us here that the Holy Spirit is not an idea; He is a Person with feelings just as we have them. He can be grieved and insulted. It takes a rare friend to come back to see you again if you have insulted him in your home. Such a person usually just stays away from now on. (You asked for it!)

The Holy Spirit is a Gentleman. If you insult Him, He doesn’t bring down a firebolt on you, He simply walks away. He’s the One who “seals” you for eternal life; it’s a grievous loss for eternity if you drive Him away from you. Even a church can “grieve” the Holy Spirit; He simply walks away. It becomes like the Temple in Jerusalem after Jesus said, “Your house is left to you desolate” (Matt. 23:38). The architecture and the music are still beautiful, the people are still smiling, and unless you are alive “in Christ” you won’t even notice His absence any more than the ancient Jews did up until 70 A.D. when the Temple was destroyed finally.

In the previous verse, Paul says that our emotional outbursts “grieve the Holy Spirit of God, whereby [we] are sealed unto the day of redemption.” In other words, there is a grave possibility that we may negatively “seal” our eternal destiny by one of these sudden unsanctified outbursts.

Time to fall on our knees and beg Mary’s Defender for a new heart that can be cleansed—down into its buried unconscious roots.

Just remember that the cleansing process may take longer than a day; it’s a discipline that takes time, but is no less certain if you are sincere in asking for it.

So, again we come up to that little word that is so meaningful: “LET” all these evil things “be put away from you.” “LET this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.” “LET him who stole, steal no more.” Lay them all on the Lamb of God, and LET

Him bear them away, for the word “to forgive” in the original means “to bear away” what was evil.

Then Heaven begins here on earth: “Just as God in Christ” forgave you, so now His forgiveness flows out from you to others around you. To be “tender-hearted,” ladies and gentlemen, is not wimpishness; it’s simply the spirit of the King of kings and Lord of lords.