

## Two Realities

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Back in the late '90s, the company for which I worked sent me to an internet and technology conference. The conference lasted for most of a week, and in addition to the learning sessions, the main hall of the conference center was filled with display booths for the various companies that were trying to attract potential customers or partners. And so, during breaks, the conference attendees would wander the aisles of the conference center in amazement at what the various companies were doing. And of course, we would collect the T-shirts and bags and other free gizmos that companies aggressively handed out to build brand awareness. It was our loot, basically.

Well, off to one side of the main hall, there was a company promoting its virtual reality technology, and anyone was welcome to try it out. It wasn't free, though. A ticket for 5 minutes of virtual reality was something like \$25, which was a lot of money for a young person back then. But this seemed like a rare opportunity, so I handed over the cash, put on the helmet, and stepped into a virtual world.

Now, those were early days for virtual reality, and a better name for what I experienced would be "virtual approximation." The graphics consisted of lines and very basic shapes. While it was impressive what this company was working on, at the same time, their attempts to model the laws of physics, like gravity and inertia, were imprecise to the point of being disorienting. In fact, there were signs around the company's space, warning that virtual reality could induce nausea. While I was thankfully spared that unpleasantness, I could see why the warnings were there. The way the helmet interpreted movement was slower and more constrained than the way my own nervous system did, and the dissonance between the approximation and the biological reality was unsettling. It was like their formulas were always rounding in the wrong direction, which bothers some of us. While

there was a coolness factor to the technology, when my 5 minutes were up, I was happy enough to take off the helmet and return to a responsive and full-color life, and to go score more loot.

Now, regardless of whether you have ever put on a virtual reality helmet, if you have been called by God and baptized into Jesus Christ, you have experienced different realities, which is what I will be speaking on today. We live in two realities simultaneously, which presents us with some challenges, as we will see. But better understanding these two realities can strengthen and motivate us in unparalleled ways.

To begin, let's return in thought to our baptism, whether that has been within the last year or multiple decades ago. We will use Paul's comments in Romans 6 as a starting point:

**Romans 6:4-7** Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin.

Baptism is a type of death, in which our old life before God's calling is put into a watery grave, and then there is a type of resurrection when we come out of the water. Even as Jesus was resurrected, so we are raised up to a new life. This is done, as it says, so that we should no longer be slaves of sin. The chains are broken, the old reality is put away, and now we have the opportunity and the means to walk in newness of life. We have a new reality, one that is only available to those who have been raised with Christ.

Now, after you were baptized and you were washed clean, how long did you go before sin entered your life again? I'm not looking for answers from anybody, but how long was it before we entertained a thought that was not the epitome of purity and sweetness and light? How long until we uttered something that fell short of God's glory? I won't even toss out a timeframe, lest I embarrass somebody, like myself. But the simple fact is that even

though we were cleared of all the sins of that previous reality, and even though we received the gift of the Spirit of God Himself, we discovered, much to our dismay, that while our sins had been removed, our sinful nature was still present. It was no longer the dominant force in our life, but we soon found that we still had a nature that was not as righteous as we had hoped, and that it would still choose to sin.

So, this is one reality in which the converted live—the reality of the flesh. We are being converted, yet there is still carnality within us, still areas that are not in alignment with the image of Jesus Christ. We have been cleansed, but it seems we cannot go for very long at all before we must seek cleansing again because we have stumbled or fallen short of His standard. This reality is referred to throughout the New Testament in various ways, as the writers urge their readers to overcome, to put away sin, to put off the old man that was buried at baptism and to put on the new, and so forth.

The apostle James says his readers are adulterers and adulteresses because of their friendship with the world. He calls them sinners with dirty hands and doubled-minded ones with impure hearts. He didn't soften his words in calling out the defiled state of these brethren who had been washed clean but who were still dealing with significant problems, including favoritism, destructive words, strife, pride, selfish ambition, and a general apathy toward good works because of a misunderstanding of faith.

Similarly, the letters to the church at Corinth serve as a masterclass in carnality within Christians. Paul takes the Corinthians to task for their rallying behind church leaders and disparaging those who identify with a different leader than their own. He outright calls them carnal and behaving like mere men, implying that they could be doing much, much better. He points out their proud tolerance of blatant sin in their midst and warns that their glorying in the wrong things could leaven the whole congregation. These were immature Christians, still wet behind the ears, still behaving like the world but doing so in the name of Christ. They believed that they had arrived spiritually, but were oblivious to the rotten fruit they were bearing because they were confident they were right.

Yet Paul was an equal-opportunity expositor of sin and carnality, and he did not spare himself. We can all identify with his lament over his own carnality

in Romans 7. We will go through that now—if you would turn there—because it describes the corruption that remained in one even as mature as the apostle Paul.

**Romans 7:14** For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin.

As we go through this passage, I want you to notice how Paul upholds the law. He does not denigrate it in the least.

He says here that the law is spiritual. It came from heaven, and it is eternal, as we know from other verses. It is part of the heavenly reality we will cover. He contrasts the spiritual law with himself, and says that he is carnal, or it could be translated that he is unspiritual, or that he is a creature of the flesh.

He takes his lament even farther and says that he is enslaved to sin. That may seem shocking, because we just read in Romans 6 that one of the purposes of baptism is to do away with the body of sin so that we should no longer be slaves of sin. And yet, if we sin again, we are doing the will of sin, and thus, we are sin's slave. That's what Jesus said in John 8: Whoever commits sins is a slave of sin. This is not a permanent condition for us, though, like it is for the world. We have access to the Father, and we can ask for forgiveness and be restored to Him. But if or when we stumble again, we do the bidding of something anti-God, and are thus a type of slave. That is what Paul is describing.

**Romans 7:15-16** For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good.

What distresses Paul isn't God's standard of living, but instead that he has trouble living up to that standard. He had been regenerated. He had been justified; he was given God's Spirit abundantly; he was in Christ and Christ was in him. That spiritual part of him—the mind of Christ that was in him—was bewildered by his own actions. He found himself failing to accomplish the good things he desired to do, and instead doing the things that he hated—the things which his God-given moral instinct condemned.

But in verse 16, he draws a profound conclusion. That is, Paul observes his falling short, and he observes that he does not want to transgress, and what this proves to him is that he actually agrees with the law—that it is good. He sides with the law because he knows that it is right. He knows that it is the proper standard of conduct—that it is a very positive thing. He just baffles himself by sometimes transgressing this standard that the mind of Christ in him declares to be good.

Again, in confessing that the law is good, Paul is upholding it rather than finding a way around it. That is entirely different from someone who works some overtime on the Sabbath because he reasons that it will ease a financial burden. That transgresses the law rather than agrees with it. It is different from arranging for a soberest driver for the upcoming party because one has already given oneself permission to drink too much. That's not agreeing with the law, but rather making provision for the flesh. It is a practical enmity against God's standards, even though one may pay lip-service to the law to feel good about oneself while one does what one wants.

To recap, then, Paul says that the law is spiritual, and that it is good, and that he agrees with it. The law isn't what causes Paul the angst, but rather something inside that chooses, against his better judgment, to transgress that standard. His sinful actions make no sense to him, and yet he admits that they happen.

**Romans 7:17-20** But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.

Here we see more of the carnal reality, which Paul describes twice here as sin dwelling in him, causing him to do what he does not want to do. He isn't making excuses for himself, nor letting himself off the hook. He agrees with the law. He knows that it is sin to transgress the law. He isn't saying it's no big deal. He is simply acknowledging that there was something in him that was corrupt. There was something in him that led him to make wrong choices, even though there was also an awareness of what the right choice

would be. Again, two realities. There was the heavenly, spiritual reality that he truly preferred, but also a fleshly reality that he hated, and which would re-enslave him on occasion.

Now, even though Paul is very forthright in admitting this indwelling sin, this does not mean he was a hedonist or that he lived a debauched lifestyle. He only states the presence of sin, not the severity or the frequency. He was not surrendered to sin, nor accepting of it. Remember, he said he hated doing it. It grieved him. Knowing what we do of his spiritual maturity, I would infer that it was a rare occasion indeed that he slipped and did sin's bidding, but it was enough that he recognized and acknowledged this reality.

**Romans 7:21** I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good.

Paul identifies that there is a principle, or a rule of action, at work concerning something evil within, even though he truly wanted to do good. And remember that back in verse 16, he held the law to be good. Of course, there are other good actions that are not directly spelled out in the law, but living according to the law was part of the good that Paul wanted to do but which he found himself failing to do because of the fleshly reality.

**Romans 7:22-23** For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.

Paul's word choice is quite telling because there are several Old Testament verses he could be echoing with his statement that he delights in the law of God. Psalm 1:2 identifies the blessed man as one whose delight is in the law of the Eternal. Psalm 119 contains 9 references to God's law being a delight to the psalmist, including the statutes, testimonies, and commandments. And finally, Isaiah 58:13 speaks of calling the Sabbath a delight. Those who believe that Paul was against the law are not reading very closely. He was only against trying to use the law for the wrong thing. But because of the spiritual reality of which he was a part, he delighted in the law, calling it good. But there was still this law of sin, or sin principle, or tendency, that was there also, fighting against the conduct that was good.

**Romans 7:24-25** O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin.

It is evident that Paul was distressed by the tendency he saw within that caused him to act in ways that he hated. He uses the word “wretched,” which is the same word Christ uses in the letter to Laodicea. The difference is that Paul recognized his own wretchedness, while the Laodiceans do not. Paul’s focus was on God, and when he compared himself and what he observed within his flesh with the perfection he had encountered in his Savior, he was grievously dismayed, which is the only logical response. The Laodiceans, though, are focused on themselves and their circumstances, and because they do not have a clear view of God, they cannot see the contrast between His perfection and their own wretchedness. In contrast to Paul, their spiritual state does not weigh on them because their focus is physical, and in the physical realm, they are doing just fine.

What we see here is Paul mourning, as is described in the Beatitude, but also receiving comfort. Notice from this passage that his hating the sin wasn’t enough—he knew needed deliverance, and he knew that was coming. While he awaited that final deliverance, he would continue to serve the law of God with his conscious will, even though the tendency to sin remained in his flesh, ready to break out and bring him back into captivity, if only briefly.

Paul paints a realistic picture of what he saw within himself. Even though he had been washed clean and put into Christ, he still wrestled with a corrupted nature, which he calls evil. This fleshly reality is one shared by all Christians. The specifics and severity may differ, but the continuing presence of the carnal nature is universal. A newly baptized, third- or fourth-generation Christian, largely protected from the course of this world, may not have the same sinful habits as an older, first-generation Christian who has been dragged from the mire, protesting all the way. But regardless of our background, I John 1:8 says that if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

We could go through many verses that further illustrate this physical reality, because the epistles are filled with such indicators. They may not be as clear as what Paul laments here, but every admonition and exhortation to grow, to overcome, to put off the old ways and to put on Christ—each one underscores that our journey is far from over when we come out of the waters of baptism because we still have a nature that chooses to transgress the law. But what God is doing is instilling His nature in us, and His nature is one that won't sin.

In addition to the reality of our carnal nature, another aspect of the physical reality is life and what it consists of—our relationships, our occupations, our activities, our histories, our circumstances. These are all part of the physical realm. Now, contrary to what some of the Gnostics believed, just because something is physical does not automatically make it bad. At the end of the sixth day of creation, it says that “God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good.” However, what isn't good is when the physical reality is more important to us than the spiritual reality. Our minds have been opened to something far greater than what registers with our physical senses, and with that revelation comes the obligation to prioritize that priceless gift above the physical reality, even though we have obligations here as well. And so, we have these two realities that we walk in simultaneously.

Now we will turn our focus to the spiritual or heavenly reality. It is a reality that cannot be seen, except through the eyes of faith. But it is the reality of God and His purpose and His sovereignty, and what these things mean for those who are in Christ.

Even though our spiritual eyes have been opened, we still naturally gravitate toward using the physical senses God gave us. The physical reality seems more real to us than the spiritual reality, yet the reverse is actually true. The realm of God and what He is drawing us into is reality, and the things we can discern with our physical senses, as vivid and stimulating as they may be, are but a faint echo and shimmer of the heavenly reality. And so, we must exercise the spiritual implements God has given us to keep peering into the darkness, and to strain our spiritual eyes to recognize what is of God. We must train our minds to recall the fullness of the higher reality, because we are prone to forgetfulness.



**Hebrews 11:3** By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible.

The word translated “worlds” is *aionas*, and it is better translated as “ages,” as the marginal note suggests. Because we have been given the eyes of faith, we understand that all the distinctive epochs of time were prepared by the word of God, so that the things we discern with our senses have their origin in the invisible. Faith informs us that there is a Supreme Architect of what has come before and what lies ahead, Someone who knows the end from the beginning, and knows how to bring each one of us to that good end.

Faith is the conviction of things not seen, but it is that conviction that must be reinforced constantly because the things that are seen are always wearing away at us, always pulling us towards the immediate, towards the material, towards the flesh, and into slavery. That conviction in the power and majesty of what is not seen is refueled by what we read in this book, because faith comes from the word of God. Not just seeing the words, but recognizing their divine source and power to change us, because they are spirit and they are life.

Because of various experiences, we may struggle with seeing God and His nature as they truly are, and we may struggle with seeing ourselves as God sees us. We may have a hard time reconciling what we see around us, or what we have seen in the past, with the nature and character of God as a force for good. And so, part of the struggle between our two realities is not allowing the physical reality, whether in circumstance, happenstance, or lack of understanding, overshadow what is written about God and His dominion and His purpose.

Peter reinforces this principle in II Peter 1:

**II Peter 1:19-21** And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts;

knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.

When we hear or read the word “prophecy,” we may think of what is written in books like Isaiah or Daniel, and that is correct, but we can also broaden the meaning. Prophecy is not only about foretelling the future, but also forth-telling. That is, any inspired speaking or writing, such as what we are reading today, is prophecy. Of course, prophecy includes what is going to happen to Edom and Libya, but much more than that, Peter says we would do well to heed any and all of the inspired writings because they did not come by human impulse but by means of the Holy Spirit. It is another application of the truth that the things that are seen—meaning the words that we read now—have their source in what is unseen but which is powerfully and inexorably directing events towards a tremendous purpose.

And so, Peter urges us to be attentive and to take heed to the inspired word because it is how we will be able to see through the darkness that surrounds us, including our own incomplete understanding, until the day breaks through the gloom and the Morning Star rises.

If I can borrow from the old quip, who are we going to believe: God, or our lying eyes? If God’s word says one thing, but our experience or limited understanding says another, Peter says to hold on to what is written above anything else because it is confirmed, and it will get us through until we can see more clearly.

Romans 8:6 says that to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Likewise, Philippians 4:7 speaks of the peace of God that surpasses or transcends all understanding. We can have a conviction about what is not seen that gives us peace, regardless of whether we understand something fully. It is a peace that does not make sense if we are looking at circumstances physically, because our hearts would tell us to be troubled. Yet what is not seen is greater than our hearts, and when we trust in the unseen reality, we can have that peace because we trust that the same divine Architect who framed all the ages and what they are leading to can certainly oversee and arrange what happens in our little blip of time.

We will pick up a foundational principle from Romans 4:

**Romans 4:17-18** (as it is written, “I have made you a father of many nations”) in the presence of Him whom he believed—God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did; who, contrary to hope, in hope believed, so that he became the father of many nations, according to what was spoken, “So shall your descendants be.”

My focus here isn't on Abraham but on God's words to Abraham. God told him, “I have made you a father of many nations.” Paul narrates this vignette by saying that God “calls those things which do not exist as though they did.” Several translations say that God calls into existence, or calls into being, things that do not exist. In other words, if God speaks it, it is as good as done, even though it may take many generations to unfold. He frames the ages and brings them to pass.

This is the principle also found in Isaiah 46:10-11, which I will read to you:

**Isaiah 46:10-11** Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure,’ calling a bird of prey from the east, the man who executes My counsel, from a far country. Indeed I have spoken it; I will also bring it to pass. I have purposed it; I will also do it.

If God has spoken it, it is reality to Him, and thus, it is reality. But when we become too focused on the material, or on our present circumstances, we lose sight of the reality that incredible things are taking place because God has spoken. The fact that we cannot see them doesn't mean they aren't there. It means we need to change our focus from the life we think we want to the life that God is giving to us, even though His methods don't always make sense to us. If we had our way, we would already be in the Promised Land. But God's thoughts and ways are vastly higher than ours, and when we trust Him and submit to His reality, we can have peace, even though part of us objects that it knows a better way.

This is the essence of walking by faith rather than by sight. God and all of His activities are more sure and dependable and effective than anything we mortals could ever come up with. We know this intellectually, but we are still challenged daily to live by that knowledge.

Now we will start looking at our place within the heavenly reality, beginning in Colossians 1:

**Colossians 1:12-14** giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.

Events in the world are grievous and distracting, and our own circumstances may drag us down as well. But if we will look through the eyes of faith, there is every reason to be filled with hope. Not with mere wishes, but with a confident expectation of the good that will come. It says that the Father has already qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance. Maybe in this life we don't have two pennies to rub together, yet the reality is that there is an inheritance awaiting us that will more than make up for any lack in the present.

In addition, God has delivered us from the dominion of darkness, and transferred us into the dominion of light, the Kingdom of His Son. We have a divine King, one who is more active in safeguarding us and our future than we can possibly know, at least on this side of the resurrection. We still must deal with human kings and other leaders, but the reality is that they are subject to our King. They could not possibly be in positions of power without His approval, and He will turn their hearts according to what He wants done. This does not mean that everything the human leader does is from God, but it does mean that our unseen King brings His purpose to pass regardless of the will of the leader we can see.

Just look at what our King did with and through Cyrus by stirring up his spirit to command the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild His temple. We don't have to fear the human kings, the governors, the rulers. We have to

be subject to them when their dictates don't go against God's law, but they only have authority because our King has granted it to them. He is the one we should fear because He is the one who orders life. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego got this reality. Their conviction was evident to all when they defied the idolatrous command of a king because they trusted in what he couldn't see, at least not at first. The heavenly reality was more real to them than the furnace they were threatened with, and God was with them in the fire.

So, we are citizens of the heavenly dominion, under the guidance of a truly benevolent King, subject first to the laws of that Kingdom, and also under overwhelming obligation to conduct our lives in a manner that fittingly represents and honors Him.

Ephesians 1 powerfully describes more of the heavenly reality and our place within it:

**Ephesians 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 in Christ,

We may look at our physical circumstances, and depending on our frame of mind, we may not feel very blessed. Yet this prophetic word, which is more sure than our own senses, says we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, or in the heavenly realm. This is what comes from being in Christ—being in union with Him because we have been baptized into His death and raised in newness of life. That union bestows upon us blessings that we don't truly grasp, let alone fully appreciate. But they are reality.

Our responsibility, then, is to allow this truth to shape how we see our circumstances rather than the other way around. If we spend more time thinking about it lacking, we probably won't feel all that blessed. But if we believe what is written here, we will be convicted that we are, in fact, richly blessed in the heavenly realm, and we will start to be more aware of God's work in our lives.

**Ephesians 1:4-6** just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved.

God calls those things which are not as though they are. He brings them into existence with His word. He inhabits eternity, and we only have a vague notion of what that even means. And even before the foundation of this world, He picked us out for Himself as His own. We were predestined or foreordained to be adopted as His own children through Jesus Christ.

Maybe we have a hard time connecting with these words if we are struggling to pay the bills and put fuel in the car. Maybe this seems impossible because of our concepts of time and our beliefs about free moral agency. Maybe we simply cannot believe that He would want us after all the ways we have messed up. This is why it can be such a challenge to walk in these two realities at the same time. God's word tells us things that we cannot fully connect with, yet we must still accept them and trust in them to walk by faith through our physical reality and be at peace. Because we have been put into Christ, we are accepted. We are foreordained to adoption. These are incredible blessings.

Now, this does not mean we cannot lose these things—indeed, we can, if we stop believing. We can blind our spiritual sight through a material focus, even on things that are not by themselves wrong, but simply less important and less valuable than what we already have in the dominion of our King. This is what happened to Demas, Paul's traveling companion. It doesn't say Demas rushed into a life of sin. We might infer that he became a degenerate heathen, but it only says he forsook Paul because he loved this present age. Not the world, but the age. Something in the present was more important to him than the future God had opened to him. The aspect of the present age that he loved may have been innocuous. But he loved something about the present more than he loved what was already his in the heavenly reality, and it affected the way he reasoned and thus, made decisions.

Maybe Demas was tired of life on the road, with its discomforts and dangers. Maybe he just wanted to fit in, and not to be a pariah in every city he entered with Paul. Maybe he wanted the first century equivalent of a house in the suburbs with a white picket fence. That's not a bad thing, if you like picket fences. We don't know exactly what he loved. What we do know is that the road God has placed us on is narrow and difficult, and it may appear that life is better for everyone else. That is the physical reality for those who share in the heavenly one.

On one of Paul's evangelistic campaigns, he went back through Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, and it says he strengthened "the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, 'We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.'" Paul knew what he was talking about with his mention of tribulation, because the last time he was in that same area, the Jews stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead.

Because we have signed up with God, we have hardship because we are now facing stalwart enemies in the world and in our own flesh. We also agreed to let the Creator dismantle and completely remake us. Tribulation and pressure are just par for the course.

We may not be thrilled with aspects of our present circumstances, but we can agree that we've still got it pretty good, especially when we factor in the honor and privilege that we have to be known by the Father and the Son, and to have Them constantly working on our behalf as They frame the age to come and our place within it. Nothing in the present age is worth more than the spiritual blessings we have already been given, which include God's promise to make us complete so we can share eternity with Him. Esau gave up his inheritance for beans. We recognize his folly and shortsightedness, yet we each may imitate him in our own way if we focus more on the material than the spiritual.

Please turn with me to I Peter 1, where we find another reference to the two realities:

**I Peter 1:3-5** Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

In the heavenly reality, we have a new beginning with an infinitely better spiritual parentage than we had before. Because of whom our Father is now, we have a hope, meaning a confident expectation of future good. We have an inheritance that is undefiled and incorruptible reserved for us. It isn't going away. It won't fade in time. The unseen Power in heaven ensures its availability. He does not guarantee that we will inherit it, because, like Esau, we can settle for something far less valuable. But God is safeguarding an inheritance for us that immeasurably surpasses what this life can possibly hold.

Peter goes on to say that we are kept by the power of God, through the faith that He has given us, until we inherit that final salvation. We have everything going for us—we just have to keep following the course that God has set before us to its conclusion.

In the world of sports, the commentators evaluate the rankings and the relative strengths of the various teams. Sometimes, when an especially strong team plays, the commentator will say something like, “This is their game to lose.” What he means is that, for all intents and purposes, the game is determined, and that team will win, as long as they keep applying themselves. In other words, there is no good reason for them to lose, though it is possible that they could become overconfident, or apathetic, or lose their heads and turn on each other. But if they just keep performing the way they typically do, the game is theirs. It is almost a foregone conclusion. They just need to stay focused on the fundamentals, and exercise the skills they already have, and hopefully not trip up their teammates.



We can think of our future salvation in a similar way. It is ours to lose. Though it is quite possible to fall away, there is no good reason for us to lose it because of all that we have going for us—all the blessings and gifts that have been bestowed on us, and especially because of Whom it is that wants to see us finish victorious. He's carrying us through the whole way—that is part of the spiritual reality. We just have to keep cooperating with Him in the circumstances He sets before us, or perhaps the ones we create for ourselves through our choices. Either way, He's with us, as long as we don't neglect this great salvation.

**I Peter 1:6-9** In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls.

The physical reality intrudes once again in the form of grievous trials. Peter says they last for a little while, though it may feel like an eternity when we are in the midst of a tough trial. Again, this is a hard road, and it requires perseverance and fortitude and a realistic expectation of what our lives will consist of because of our calling. In this passage, Peter identifies trials as a means of testing the genuineness of our faith, our conviction, our trust — whether the spiritual reality is real enough to us to carry us through the hardship; whether we trust more in what cannot be seen than what can. What cannot be seen involves more than just the fact that there is a God, but also the concrete reality of what He is doing with us, and His willingness to move heaven and earth to accomplish His desire for us.

And so, we wait for the visible revelation of Jesus Christ, the *apokalypsis*, when we can *finally* see the One we love, the One we have been trusting is leading us to something better than we have and what we are right now. Our ability to weather the tough physical reality depends on how real the unseen

reality is to us. Hebrews 11:27 says that Moses endured—he persevered—like one who gazed on Him who is invisible. The spiritual reality fuels us for, and leads us through, the physical reality.

Please turn with me to II Corinthians 4:7. As we go through this, notice how Paul mentions aspects of the physical reality but also answers them with elements of the heavenly reality:

**II Corinthians 4:7** But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.

The “treasure” is described in verse 6 as the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. These things have been revealed to us, but the rest of the world is blinded. Paul says it is necessary that this light, this illumination, be held in earthen vessels—in jars of clay—to show that this all-surpassing power that emanates from the unseen, heavenly realm can only come from God and not from ourselves. Part of the mighty witness on Pentecost in Acts 2 was that the miracle was performed through rough fishermen from the backwaters of Galilee, not through Greek orators. It is befitting that the light should be manifest to the world in bodies of weakness so God will be magnified and not His servants.

**II Corinthians 4:8** We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair;

Being hard-pressed on every side is part of life, particularly for those who have accepted God’s offer. Yet because of Who we are in union with and Who is watching out for us, we are not crushed. He will not allow us to be tried or tested beyond the abilities He gives us. Now, our flesh will try to convince us that things are too hard, and that God has given us more than we can bear. But remember what we have read. God says He will not do that. Our flesh says He will. Who do we believe? If we look at things carnally, we will side with our flesh, and then blame God if we choose to give up. But if we look through the eyes of faith, and remember all that is unseen, we know that God’s word is true, that God can be infinitely trusted, and that He will help us through whatever we are facing.

In the physical realm, we may be perplexed, and we often are. There are things that simply don't make sense—things we don't understand, things we wish we had clarity on. But because of our place within the heavenly realm, we are not in despair. We can have internal peace even without having everything sorted out because we know in whose hands our lives are held. We can acknowledge the perplexity and keep moving, trusting that God will make things clear when the time is right.

**II Corinthians 4:9** persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed—

Most of us have not suffered persecution like the first century church experienced. But even in the forms of persecution we do experience, we are not forsaken, even as they were not forsaken. The presence of adversity does not mean God is absent. If we are in union with Christ, He is right there in the fire with us, unseen, moderating it so it will not be too much, and directing it so it will have the effect He desires for the purposes that He is working out for all involved. Persecution does not at all indicate He has forsaken us. On the contrary, if we are doing good and suffering for it, it simply means the world has enmity toward Christ in us, which proves He is with us. If He wasn't, the world would love us. In Acts 5, the apostles were beaten for their testimony about Christ, and they rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for Him. They did not feel forsaken, because the heavenly reality meant more to them than the opinions of mere men. Like Paul, they were struck down, but they could not be destroyed because they belonged to a King who wouldn't allow it. He had more ways for them to serve, and He was still perfecting them.

**II Corinthians 4:16-18** Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

Paul had a strong vision of the reality of God and the future He has in store for each of us, and it allowed Paul to see the physical reality in its proper place and valuation. And, indeed, it has value because it is part of God's purpose that we experience life in the flesh before He causes this corruption to put on incorruption. Paul was not advocating asceticism or any such thing. Like Solomon, he knew that there was a time for every purpose. But he retained the right perspective on his physical life, having tasted the heavenly gift, and having received God's Spirit, and having tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and that was where his focus remained as he sojourned through the physical life God gave Him.

We will see another comparison of physical and spiritual realities, this one not as positive:

**I Corinthians 5:6-8** Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

Because the Corinthians were in union with Christ, God considered them unleavened. It is another way of describing Christ's righteousness being imputed to them. God looked at them and He saw Christ. That is one way to understand why Paul says they truly are unleavened. Another way to understand it is to remember that God calls things that do not exist as though they did. God sees the end, and if the Corinthians would follow through on their salvation to its conclusion, they would have the same unleavened, uncorrupted nature that Christ has. Either way you look at it, Paul gives incredible encouragement by describing those who have been brought into the heavenly realm as being truly unleavened.

Yet the physical reality was that, though they had been baptized, there was a significant amount of carnality, of leavening, remaining within them. Just in these few verses, Paul mentions improper glorying, malice, and wickedness, and the rest of the epistle reveals many other leavened behaviors. In the

spiritual reality, they were unleavened because they were in Christ, which is what Paul reminds them of as a motivation to clean up their acts. It's as though Paul says that they truly are unleavened, but they need to start acting like it in the here and now. They needed to change to match the forward-looking spiritual reality. They needed to live up to the righteousness that had been imputed to them.

There is some irony within this, because it seems the Corinthians were attempting to live in the heavenly reality, but they were even doing that in a carnal way. We can see this in the previous chapter:

**I Corinthians 4:8-10** You are already full! You are already rich! You have reigned as kings without us—and indeed I could wish you did reign, that we also might reign with you! For I think that God has displayed us, the apostles, last, as men condemned to death; for we have been made a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are distinguished, but we are dishonored!

As we say today, the Corinthians thought they had arrived. They had a taste of the heavenly gift, and they were already climbing onto their thrones, already reigning in their own minds, to the point that God's appointed servants were beneath them. They weren't using the gifts that had come from God to edify the Body, but to distinguish themselves and enhance their own positions. They were ascendant in their own minds, and Paul had to bring them back to earth for their own good because they were not truly living in accordance with the spiritual reality. In the heavenly reality, humility comes before honor. But Paul says they were behaving like they were already kings and overflowing with spiritual riches. They were living in a fantasy they created that gave them justification for treating others as beneath them. It is true that we are in preparation for leadership, and they caught a glimpse of this future in the gospel of the Kingdom, but they were blinded to the reality of their own carnal condition that was wreaking all manner of havoc in their relationships.

The Proverbs give us some insight into this circumstance:

**Proverbs 30:21-23** For three things the earth is perturbed, Yes, for four it cannot bear up: For a servant when he reigns, a fool when he is filled with food, a hateful woman when she is married, and a maidservant who succeeds her mistress.

These are things that disquiet the earth, and one of them is a servant or a slave who reigns. It indicates someone of a base spirit, who, after getting some authority, makes life unbearable for those in his realm. He is unprepared to use his position in a way that is fitting, and the result is that he disturbs the order of society because he still thinks like he did in his former state, with all his unrealized desires, but now he has power. Someone of a base spirit reasons according to what benefits him, regardless of how it affects the people in the realm. At best, everyone else will be an afterthought. At worst, they will be pawns to be manipulated or otherwise used for his own ends. Now, the earth bears a great deal of weight, but this says that when such a person has authority, or presumes to (like in Corinth), the earth itself cannot bear up because the situation is so burdensome.

This is what was happening in Corinth. God had called the weak and the base, those who had been enslaved by the world and its ways. God had given them gifts and a glimpse of the spiritual reality. However, an upgraded position does not automatically upgrade character, and the character of the one acting determines whether the fruit will be good or bad. The Corinthians had gotten ahead of themselves, like a slave becoming king, and the result was turmoil and disquiet because they approached their gifting and their position before God with the same carnal mindset they had in the world.

The lesson for us is that our calling by God, and our individual gifting by Him, does not give us any room for boasting because we didn't do anything to deserve what has been given, whether in opportunities or in abilities. Comparing ourselves and our gifts to others and their gifts is an exercise in futility, and can only lead to the strife and competition that was on display in Corinth. They were newly freed from being servants of Satan, yet acting like kings. Jesus Christ was a King, yet He conducted Himself as a servant, in lowliness, and with the power available to Him under precise regulation. He walked in both realities flawlessly.

Now, there are many passages we could turn to for further glimpses into the unseen reality and its movements. We could go through Romans 8, and especially the last half, which testifies of God's love for us and His willingness to do and provide all that is needed to bring about His will in our lives. And because of who He is, His will for us can only be described as "good." His vision for us may differ from our vision for ourselves, and thus, the two realities may clash while He turns us to be of the same mind, but when His work is done, we will wholeheartedly agree with every fiber of our being that it is good.

We could go through more of Ephesians 1 and into chapter 2, which proclaim the greatness of God's power toward us who believe, and how He has seated Christ at His right hand, far above all principality, power, might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come...and that He has also made us sit in the heavenly places—the heavenly realm—in Christ Jesus. We still live our lives as physical beings, but we have also been blessed with faith to see that there is far more to our lives than what our physical senses can detect. This is why we are urged to walk by faith rather than by sight. We must get our bearings each day according to the spiritual reality first, and use that rare understanding and conviction to then navigate.

With these things in mind, let's think about how to apply them. Please turn with me to Luke 18:

**Luke 18:1-8** Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart, saying: "There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God nor regard man. Now there was a widow in that city; and she came to him, saying, 'Get justice for me from my adversary.' And he would not for a while; but afterward he said within himself, 'Though I do not fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow troubles me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.' " Then the Lord said, "Hear what the unjust judge said. And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?"

In an absolute sense, we know the answer to Christ's question, because we know that there will be some alive at Christ's return who will be changed into spirit beings, and thus, who have been faithful to the end. So, faith will not have died out. But the real question is whether He will find true faith in us.

This parable presents a contrast between a human judge, who does not care about anybody's interests but his own, and the righteous, divine Judge, who will give true justice when the time is right.

The protagonist is the widow. The symbol of a widow is one of powerlessness and defenselessness because she does not have anybody on which to depend. Likewise for us, God has called the weak and the base of the world, not the powerful and well-connected. We don't have political connections or wealth to ensure that events and circumstances turn out in our favor. If we had wealth or influence, we might be able to work things out on our own, and we wouldn't need to pester the Judge. But since we don't have those things, like the widow, we have no other recourse but to continue to send our petitions.

The parable depicts an answer or a relief that is so long in coming that all hope of deliverance fades. Christ intimates that the time of the end will be longer and more wearying than perhaps we anticipate, and thus, a steady walk of conviction in the unseen will be paramount as the days get darker and the solutions of mankind continue to fail.

Absolute trust in the unseen is necessary well before we get into Jacob's Trouble, as we endure trying situations, perhaps with health problems, family problems, financial problems, with isolation, and with no end in sight. These are physical realities for many among us, and the danger is that because we are faced with these things for so long, they will become more real to us than the unseen reality and all that it entails and signifies. If that happens, our spiritual eyes will become dull, like they were before conversion, and our faith will wane.

Many of us have seen this happen with people who appear to have fallen away. And it may not be over for them, either. If the final buzzer hasn't



sounded, and if they have not committed the unpardonable sin, the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable, though the longer that people wander, the harder it is to return because of the habits that develop. Even so, it probably wasn't starvation or homelessness or fear of death squads that caused them to neglect the great salvation that was confirmed to them, too, and which is theirs to lose.

What has caused so many to stumble has been a material focus. By "material," I don't necessarily mean wealth, but rather, putting more weight on the physical reality than on the unseen and spiritual reality, like Demas—thinking more about one's present circumstances than about the divine Architect who has framed the ages, including the age to come. Think about this: Our focus indicates where we find or derive our strength. Those with wisdom focus on their relationship with the Almighty, as the parable instructs. Yet if our focus is on ourselves, what happens when we are shown to be powerless? If our faith has been in a man or an organization of men, what happens when those things go the way of all the earth? Or, if we feed our mind on the failings, foibles, and fallibility of God's other servants, what strength could we possibly have when things really get difficult?

There is great danger in thinking more about what one does not have than about the magnificent process of spiritual creation that God is continuing in us, though it involves discomfort. If you have ever worked with clay or maybe Play Doh, you know that the creation of a masterpiece requires squeezing and rolling and folding the material over on itself, again and again. And it requires great heat to make it permanent. The Master Potter sees the finished product—it is the clay that has the limited understanding of what is taking place.

So, in this parable, Jesus compels us to answer for ourselves whether He will find us operating according to the heavenly reality, or whether we will have given up because relief never seemed to arrive, or the road seemed too long or too difficult, or because we lost sight of all that we have going for us, or because we believed the voices, human or spirit, that whisper that God isn't treating us fairly.

Salvation is ours to lose. We have it in our grasp, and God has given all that is needed for us to finish our course victorious, so there is no good reason to

lose it. The real question is whether we want it. It is a question that we really need to evaluate, because our knee-jerk answer is that of course we do. But our true answer is given in what we focus on—on our physical reality or the unseen one, because that is what we will turn our life toward.

We will close with Colossians 3:1-4:

**Colossians 3:1-4** If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.