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# *The* HEAVENLY PLACES

By Rudy D. Gonzalez

PAUL'S TEACHING ON spiritual warfare in Ephesians 6:10-20 is harrowing. He challenged Christians to put on their spiritual armor and stand firm against rulers, authorities, world powers of darkness, and evil spiritual forces "in the heavens" (Eph. 6:12).<sup>1</sup> Ponder it—the believer's struggle reaches beyond the known world into heavenly dimensions, which means the believer engages in a struggle of cosmic proportions.

The phrase "in the heavens" or, "in the heavenly places" occurs five times in Ephesians (1:3,20; 2:6; 3:10; 6:12).<sup>2</sup> While we are hard pressed to find similar phraseology elsewhere in the

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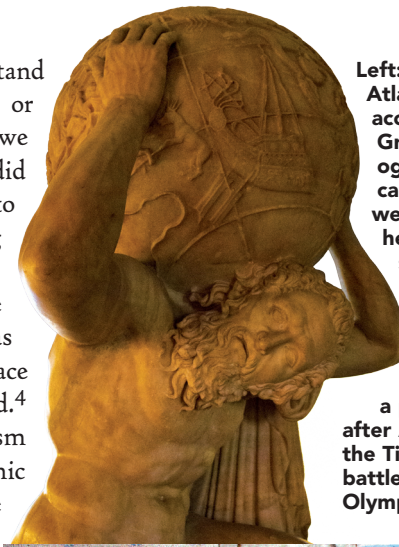
New Testament,<sup>3</sup> Paul's usage is understandable and yet breathtaking in its implications.

The first four references are decidedly uplifting. The apostle Paul reminded believers of the blessings God had bestowed upon them "in the heavens," the place where Christ is seated at the right hand of God (vv. 1:3,20). Furthermore, believers were also privileged to be seated with Christ in the same heavenly domain (2:6). The fourth reference (3:10) took the reader from the blessings in Christ to the mission they were to undertake, to proclaim the gospel beyond earthly subjects "to the rulers and authorities in the heavens." Paul saw believers engaged not just in the day-to-day affairs of life but also in the heavenly realm, a place not visible to the eye, yet just as decisive to a believer's call and witness.

**Below: Theater at Ephesus; during Paul's ministry in Ephesus, many converted to Christ and turned away from worshipping Artemis. These new believers no longer needed objects that honored Artemis. The silversmiths were incensed at the**

**loss of revenue, so they drug two of Paul's traveling companions, Gaius and Aristarchus, to the theater to confront them (Acts 19). Paul understood that the believer's battle is against spiritual forces "in the heavens" (Eph. 6:12, CSB).**

As we continue to understand this phrase, "in the heavens" or "in the heavenly places," we should remember that Paul did not introduce such ideas into a world devoid of competing concepts. To be sure, Greek mythology mentioned the "heavens" as pillars that Atlas carried and as the dwelling place for the gods that Zeus ruled.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, early Gnosticism posited the existence of cosmic spheres that lay between the divine realm and the material world. According to gnostic understanding, this "cosmic architecture" teeming with malevolent beings, worked to sever and separate humanity from the divine.<sup>5</sup> Further, although the Torah condemned such practices (Deut. 4:19; 17:1-6), astrology remained an ever-present allure. Astrology encouraged the worship of astral bodies and the superstitious belief that their placement in the heavens and their alignment drove the fate of individuals and nations. For the Hellenistic world the skies provided fertile ground for their vain imaginations. In this



**Left: Statue of Atlas, who, according to Greek mythology, had to carry the weight of the heavens on his shoulders. His father, Zeus, gave him this assignment as a punishment after Atlas led the Titans into battle against the Olympian gods.**



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ GB HOWELL (35/65/67)

**Above: At the ancient city of Hammat, which is just south of Tiberias, are the remains of a grand synagogue dated to the 5th cent. A.D. On the**

**synagogue floor is a mosaic with the signs of the zodiac. This was a common decoration in the synagogues of ancient Israel.**







**Above: Basalt relief depicts a winged demon; Hittite; dated to the 8th cent. B.C.**



**Above right: The**

**archangel Gabriel in Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, Turkey. He is holding a standard in his right hand and a globe in his left.**

environment, Abraham's offspring also had something to say.

In Jewish thought, the "heavens" encompassed the domain of spiritual forces that included not only the highest heavens as the dwelling place of God and His angels, but also the lower heavens as the abode of wicked spiritual forces.<sup>6</sup> Despite such views, however, Paul's teaching was unique. For the apostle the distinctive element was this—Christ had conquered death and the grave; and by virtue of His resurrection, He is the sovereign Lord, at the right hand of the Father and is ruling with Him over all the heavens (Eph. 1:20-22; Col. 2:12-15).<sup>7</sup>

Alas, and despite the glorious privileges enumerated in the first four references, Paul's fifth usage describes a battle which every believer faced (Eph. 6:10-20). Again, this was no battle against "flesh and blood," but a fight

against wicked spiritual forces of evil also "in the heavens" (v. 12b). One might wonder whether this conflict happens in the same celestial sphere where the Christian's spiritual blessings are located. To answer this, consider all five cases where Paul spoke of "the heavens." In these he used a compound term (Greek, *epouranos*), rather than the normal word for heaven (*ouranos*), thereby suggesting a "super celestial" sphere, what we might call the highest of heavens. The implication is compelling. Despite some who locate this confrontation to lower spiritual arenas, where demonic activity is acknowledged,<sup>8</sup> the grammar does not make such a distinction. Rather it supports the view that all of it, the blessings, the standing in Christ, the proclamation of the mystery of the gospel, and yes, the believer's battle happens in the same celestial sphere. But do other biblical texts support such a view?

The apostle acknowledged Satan to be the ruler of the "atmospheric domain" or "air" (2:2), but this was hardly the highest of heavens. Zechariah 3:1 however, placed Satan accusing a believer

in the presence of the angel of the Lord (Job 1:6; 2:1), certainly in the heavenly court. Paul expressed a similar concern of the enemy accusing Christ's followers (1 Tim. 5:14). Revelation 12:7-11 is conclusive however; for despite its many interpretive challenges, it corroborates the reality of a celestial conflict at the highest levels of heaven and the believers' victory in the struggle (see Rev. 12:11).

Considering again our text, Paul reminded believers of the spiritual battle, which reached to the highest precincts of heaven. The filling of the Holy Spirit was essential (Eph. 5:18), as was prayer and spiritual discernment (6:18-20). But unlike earthly battles, where outcomes could remain in doubt, the victory was already won in Christ, who reigns over all the heavens, and will make His enemies a footstool under His feet (Ps. 110:1; Acts 2:34-35; Heb. 10:13). ❖

1. Unless indicated otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from the Christian Standard Bible (CSB).

2. The Ephesian phrase "in the heavens" or "in the heavenly places" is consistent, all datives of sphere, focusing on location, the highest celestial sphere. See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 153-54. See also Leon Morris, *Expository Reflections on the Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 15.

3. In 2 Corinthians 5:1, Paul used the regular Greek word *ouranos* for an otherwise similar construction; see also Hebrews 8:1 and 9:23.

4. Hans Bietenhard, "οὐρανός" (*ouranos*, heaven) in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, gen. ed. Colin Brown, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 188.

5. Hans Jonas, "Gnosticism" in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. in chief Paul Edwards, vol. 3 (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 336-42.

6. S.D.F. Salmond, "The Epistle to the Ephesians" in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 384.

7. 12.44 in Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 147-48.

8. See for example Kenneth S. Wuest, *Wuest's Word Studies from the Greek New Testament*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 384.

Rudy D. Gonzalez is dean of the William R. Marshall Center for Theological Studies and professor of New Testament at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, campus at San Antonio, Texas.