

Introduction

How many of you know the term **"thin places?"** That term was one that the Celtic peoples of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and England used. Thin places meant to them actual locations on earth where what they called the **"Other world,"** a non-material world, was more near and could be experienced. The landscapes of the countries I just mentioned were dotted with monuments, markings, and ruins that stated, **"This is a thin place. This is holy ground."** Well, the Celtic peoples were wrong about the location of the thin places. The truth is that every place is a thin place and that's what I'm going to preach about today.

The Two Worlds

In 2 Kings 6:8-17, a nation called Aram was at war with Israel. It was losing that war, however, because God was revealing its secret battle plans to Israel through Elisha the prophet. When the king of Aram found out about that, he sent a **"great army"** to capture and silence Elisha and his attendant who were in the city of Dothan. Please note that this was a natural army, an earthly army, of soldiers, weapons, horses, and chariots.

But Elisha wasn't afraid, at all, and explained to his attendant why in verse 16, **"For those who are with us are more than those who are with them."** His attendant had no idea what he was talking about until Elisha prayed and God opened his eyes in verse 17. He then saw what Elisha did, what verse 17 describes as a **"mountain full of horses and chariots of fire"** surrounding and protecting them. Please note that this wasn't a natural or earthly army but a spiritual or heavenly one, an army of angels.

This narrative illustrates two profound truths.

First, two worlds exist. One is the natural world. This world is comprised of material realities, the things we can perceive with our senses. Those realities include cancer cells, promotions, layoffs, money, vacations, slander, and the criticism and praise of people to name a few.

The other world is the spiritual world. This world is comprised of heavenly realities, things that we can't perceive with our senses. Those realities include God, His angels, and the organizing principles and powers of His kingdom. So, that's what our narrative illustrates. Those two worlds exist and the spiritual is just as real as the natural is.

It illustrates a second profound truth. The spiritual world is right here. Notice where the army of angels was. It was where Elisha and his attendant were. That illustrates what many other texts teach. The spiritual world isn't far off. It's right here as close to us as the material world itself is. Or, adopting the Celtic term, every place on earth is a thin place. Last week, I played football with my grandsons Malachi and Eli. The field on which we played is a thin place. I sat in my office and wrote this sermon. My office is a thin place. A family member of mine had a tooth pulled. The dentist's office is a thin place. You and I live, move, and exist in a world that's permeated with glorious spiritual realities - God, His angels, and the organizing principles and powers of His kingdom. *Literally nothing stands between those realities and us.*

Soaked with Secularity

The problem is most people think and live as if that isn't true. They're like Elisha's attendant in verses 15-16. An army of angels surrounded him but he didn't grasp it. He was blind to it. Most people today are just like that. Our Western civilization in America and Europe is presently in the advanced stages of what Max Picard called "**the flight from God.**" It considers the very idea of a spiritual world that is just as real as the material world is insulting and absurd.

Let me tell you the story of a young woman named Rosa Lee. Rosa came home from a party one evening and upon entering her home, immediately sensed someone's presence. She was frightened and looked all over the house but found no one there. She eventually went into her bedroom to get ready for bed when, suddenly, she heard a voice say, "**Rosa Lee.**" It startled her and she turned around to see who it was but

again saw no one there. She then heard the voice again, "**Rosa Lee.**" This time she asked, "**Who is it? The Lord?**" "**Yes, Rosa Lee,**" the voice answered, "**It's time for you to know me.**" Whereupon, Rosa Lee fell to her knees and decided to follow Jesus.

The American Psychiatric Association publishes what it titles *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, also called the *DSM*. This manual is used by clinicians, researchers, regulation agencies, companies, and policy makers around the world. Here's what's revealing. Before 1994, the *DSM* classified all religious conversions and visions as signs of mental disorder. But the current version has reclassified some (not all but some) of those religious experiences. They're no longer psychiatric illnesses but just "**problems of living.**" That's what the drafters of the manual think. Poor Rosa Lee. She may or may not be mentally ill but she at least has a problem of living.

That's typical of our current Western culture. Dallas Willard hit the nail right on the head in describing it. It's "**soaked with secularity.**" That means that it acknowledges only the material world in its thinking and living. It's totally blind to the spiritual world.

Now, that isn't true of professing evangelical Christians. They aren't totally blind to the spiritual world. But many are partially blind to it. They don't see what they should. They've assimilated to one degree or another the secularity of our current culture and are, as a result, blind to much if not most of the spiritual world.

I told the Rosa Lee story to a long established Christian from another church, who dismissed it outright as a valid experience. It was psychological not supernatural, he said. God didn't really speak to her. She just imagined He did. God speaks only through the Bible today and any Christian who believes or experiences otherwise is deluded.

Many professing Christians have that point of view. They believe that the spiritual world exists. But they also believe that it's far off and can't be experienced now. They believe it did touch them when they were saved and will touch them again when they die and go to God. But

it's far off and doesn't touch them in between.

The problem is that point of view reduces Christianity to what secularists contend it is - nothing but a sociological and psychological tool. It turns it into what Paul called religion without power – a stale rationalism that's devoid of passion and effect.

See the Spiritual World

So, don't be soaked with secularity. See the spiritual world instead. That is our calling today. See the spiritual world.

Let me quickly say that the ability to see the spiritual world is a process. We don't get it all at once in an event. It forms over time. Toward the end of his life, Brother Lawrence said this: **“What comforts me in this life is that I now see Him by faith; and I see Him in such a manner as might make me say sometimes, *I believe no more, but I see.*”** Do you grasp his experience? He began with faith that gradually, over the years, grew into sight.

It will be the same for us if we do what Elisha did. Notice the contrasting emotional states of Elisha and his attendant in verses 15 and 16. His attendant feared. He was **“scared to death”** as we say it now. Why? It's because he took only the material world into account – the army of Aram. But Elisha felt safe and secure. Why? It's because he took the spiritual world into account as well – the army of angels. He knew the heavenly army was far greater than the earthly one.

That teaches us how we eventually come to see the spiritual world. We take it into account as surely as we do the material world. We take it into account that way by doing two things.

First, we descend into the particulars. We study the Bible and the universe and learn as many of the details of the spiritual world as we can. Followers of Jesus never die. God forgives us in the same measure that we forgive others. Aging is a process of gaining not losing. God measures generosity by how much we keep not give. God's way of overcoming evil is with good. Jesus is pleading our case to Father God.

God has an infinitely joyous and abundant life of which our world and life are a significant part. Those are just samplings of the particulars that comprise the spiritual world.

We take the spiritual world into account by doing a second thing. We think and live as if the spiritual world is just as real as the material world is. We think about, perceive, interpret, desire, and act as if the particulars we've learned about the spiritual world are true.

I'm 62 years old and every time I throw the football around with my grandsons, I feel like my arm is going to fall off. I see a particular of the material world – my earthly body is fading. But I also see a particular of the spiritual world. As my earthly body fades, my resurrection body approaches. I do two things. I purposely think about that second particular and I interpret my earthly body fading in light of it. The result is that my earthly body fading doesn't bother me at all.

Or a person slanders me. I see the particulars of the material world – the wrongdoer and the damage done to my reputation. But I also see the particulars of the spiritual world – God as my vindicator and the wrongdoer as one whom He loves. I then act consistently with those second particulars. I treat the slanderer kindly.

That then is how we come to see the spiritual world. We take it into account as surely as we do the material world. We descend into its particulars and then think and live as if they're true.

Our Lives Depend on It

That's our calling and here's why we desperately need to answer it. Our lives depend on it. Every kind of life lives from a certain world that is suited to it. It's called to that world by what it is. That's true of earthworms, for instance. Earthworms don't have lungs. They breathe through their skin. So, they have to live in a moist environment but not too moist. Too much moisture or exposure to the sun prevents them from breathing and they die. Every kind of life lives from a certain world that is suited to it. It's in that world that its well-being lies.

Notice I said **“every kind of life,”** which includes human beings, you and me. We live from a certain world that is suited to us. We’re called to it by what we are. It’s in it that our well-being lies. In our case, that certain world is the spiritual one. We flourish, therefore, when we live from it and flounder when we don’t.

In his book *The Doors of Perception*, the celebrated atheist Aldous Huxley observed this: **“Most men and women lead lives at the worst so painful, at the best so monotonous, poor and limited that the urge to escape, the longing to transcend themselves if only for a few moments, is and always has been one of the principle appetites of the soul.”** Notice what this confirmed atheist observed. First, one of the principle appetites (desires) of human beings is to transcend this material world. And second, they live lives that are monotonous and poor at best and horribly painful at worst if they don’t. Huxley of course believed that we can’t transcend the material world. The best we can do, he contended, is to discover some kind of drug that will relieve the monotony and pain without doing more harm than good.

But we know better don’t we. There is a spiritual world that is suited to us. We can, therefore, transcend the material world by living from it. And we overcome the monotony, poverty, and pain of ourselves and our environment when we do. We thrive biologically, psychologically and spiritually. You can see then why I said what I did about seeing the spiritual world by taking it into account. Our lives depend on it.

Conclusion

Poet and priest Gerald Manley Hopkins wrote a poem over 100 years ago with a captivating title “Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places.” I’d like to sum up what I’ve preached about today by adapting that title to it. The whole universe is God’s playground. He plays (is present and active) not just in 10,000 places but in every place. So, no matter where you are, remember this. The spiritual world is there. That place is a thin place. Think and live accordingly.