

Three-dimensional faith: Hebrews 2:10-18

by [Brad R. Braxton](#) in the [December 12, 2001](#) issue

While vacationing in Orlando, Florida, my wife and I visited the “Terminator 2 Show” at Universal Studios. We entered the studio and received special 3-D glasses. When we peered through the glasses, the length and width of the images on the movie screen were deepened and our experience enhanced.

The glasses created the illusion that every action in the film was directed toward us. By adding another dimension, our experience seemed richer and more complete. After all, a 3-D picture is more comprehensive than a two-dimensional one. In fact, we often use the idiom “3-D” to refer to experiences whose effects are more far-reaching than usual.

Despite all of the technological wonders, however, the Universal picture was still *artificial*. By contrast, Paul declares that the revelation of Christ makes a *real* difference in at least three different dimensions: the personal, the communal and the cosmic.

Christ effects a phenomenal personal transformation in Paul himself. Even when he is imprisoned, Paul celebrates God’s free gift poured upon him in his commission to be an apostle. Using key words such as “mystery,” “revelation” and “servant,” he alludes to a life-changing encounter with Christ that provides him a new, “three-dimensional” identity (Eph. 3:13). His captivity in a jail is actually part of his calling card, for Paul is not just any prisoner. He is a prisoner of and for Christ!

Paul’s imprisonment has great symbolic significance. As a special envoy of Christ, he recognizes that, just as Jesus suffered on behalf of others, so too the apostle suffers for the salvific benefit of the gentile converts.

Paul considers his suffering to be a badge of honor and a means of achieving solidarity with the sufferings of Christ. Paul may desire parole from his physical imprisonment, yet even if he walks out of jail as a “free man,” he is still bound in obedient servitude to Christ. Because of his personal transformation, Paul serves a lifetime sentence as a “prisoner of Christ.”

The second dimension that Christ has transformed is communal existence. God brings *all* of God's children to glory. In Hebrews 2:12, Jesus responds to this with, "I will proclaim your [God's] name to my brothers and sisters."

Since Christianity is now predominantly a "gentile movement," we often forget that Christianity began as a Jewish "messianic reform movement." The issue of whether and how to include gentiles as "brothers and sisters" was a matter of sizable debate, and there was hostility between the two groups.

But Paul declares gentile believers in Christ to be full and equal members of God's people: "The gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body and sharers in the promise . . ." (Eph. 3:6). He uses Greek words that contain some form of the preposition meaning "together with." The gentiles are "together with" the Jews as heirs, persons together in the same body, and those receiving the promises. The hostility and stereotypes that drove chasms between these ethnic groups are to be relinquished in favor of ecclesial unity.

Finally, Paul asserts that God's work in Christ even alters the power dynamics in the cosmic realm. Paul declares that the church's responsibility is to make the wisdom of God known "to the rulers and authorities in heavenly places." To contemporary sensibilities, such language may seem fanciful. Yet for many first-century Mediterranean people, the boundaries between the visible and invisible worlds were porous. Some even believed that visible realities, including political rulers and world regimes, were simply manifestations or emanations of power sources that existed in the invisible, cosmic realm. According to Helmut Koester, "the mastery of life [in the ancient world] . . . depended on whether one could secure the favor of those otherworldly powers and share in their benefits. The belief in the [cosmic] power was primary."

Paul's word of hope is that Christians no longer have to fear the cosmic powers opposing them because those forces have received the news of God's eternal plan—news announcing the sovereignty of God and the eventual elimination of the evil impact of these rulers and authorities.

Rather than view Paul's words as "ancient mythology," the Christian can use Paul's cosmic language to discuss the considerable "forces" that impinge upon and despoil human community. Our contemporary "rulers and authorities in heavenly places" may not simply be "demons" but instead corporate and political practices that result

in a profoundly unfair distribution of the world's resources.

In recent months, Americans have realized that evil is a parasitic cosmic force that needs human conduits to implement its dastardly deeds. But although the negative cosmic forces sometimes appear to have succeeded, God's action in Christ allows us to confidently believe that the loving, peaceful and just purposes of God will triumph.