



Sproul, R. C.

Unseen Realities: Heaven, Hell, Angels and Demons

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Nick Norelli

Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

It's nice to take a break from academic tomes and read something geared toward a popular audience every once in a while. R. C. Sproul has been writing books for the person in the pew for decades and *Unseen Realities: Heaven, Hell, Angels and Demons* is the latest in a long line of publications from his pen. As the subtitle indicates, there are sections on heaven, hell, angels, and demons and Sproul covers them all in an easy-to-understand format, employing personal anecdotes, news stories, parables, and most importantly the Bible to explain them.

Everyone thinks about death, or so it would seem, so Sproul gets right to the good stuff in talking about heaven. He discusses a number of common questions, such as, "what is heaven like?" or "will I recognize my loved ones in heaven?" and others that we've all heard or asked a million times. Sproul's approach to answering these types of questions is very evenhanded. He can't say for sure exactly what heaven is like because he's never been there. He can make some educated guesses based on what the Bible says but to go beyond that is just speculation. Sproul made a great point about recognizing loved ones in heaven that I had never considered—he pointed out how at first the disciples didn't recognize Jesus in his glorified body but after they ate with him they did—so it's not out of the realm of possibility to think that we'll recognize loved ones in heaven either.

One thing I greatly appreciated about the first section on heaven was that Sproul wasn't afraid to actually talk about heaven. It seems that all the emphasis these days (in the types of books I read and in a lot of the conversations I have with the "theologically literate") is on the new earth. If someone mentions "going to heaven" then they get scoffed at and treated as if they're some backwoods believer who never made it out of entry level catechesis. People cackle on and on about resurrection and the new earth as if heaven is just some huge waste of time. Sproul certainly doesn't ignore new earth and talk exclusively about heaven, nor does he refrain from commenting on the resurrection that will allow believers to enter their new earthly abode, but he's quite right to point out that heaven, which obviously comes before the new earth, is a lot better than the earth we're living on now, and we should rejoice that one day we'll be there in the presence of God.

When the talk turns to hell, Sproul takes it as an opportunity to get in a few words about God's justice and our sinfulness. He recognizes that hell isn't a topic that people generally like to think about, but it's in the Book, so think about it we must. He believes in a literal hell without taking all language about hell in Scripture literally. In other words, he recognizes that the symbolic language is used to explain hell and if taken literally we'd be faced with an inconsistent picture of hell, e.g., how dark can outer darkness really be if fires are constantly burning?

Sproul's views on varying degrees of punishment are on solid ground (see e.g., Rom. 2:5-8) and it's hard to disagree with his rejection of annihilation, conditional immortality, and universalism. His position is very traditional and seems to result from the plainest reading of Scripture. He made two points that really had me thinking: The first is that being separated from God isn't the same as God being absent. In other words, God, in his omnipresence, is just as present in hell as he is on earth or in heaven, but he's present in a judgmental capacity. The second is that we're ultimately saved from God. If heaven is where the people who are delivered from judgment go, and God is the one judging the wicked in hell, then we're being saved *by* God *from* God.

The third section on angels covers quite a bit of ground. Sproul covers everything from cherubim and seraphim (he doesn't make a hard distinction between them) to Christophanies (pre-incarnate appearances of Christ as the Angel of the LORD) to guardian angels (whom he argues, quite cogently I might add, that we have, although it's likely that we have an entire army at our aid rather than a single angel) to angel worship (don't do it; they're just creatures and only God is worthy of worship). Throughout this section he's challenging the idea made famous by Bultmann that the Bible contains a kernel of historical truth encased in the husk of mythological

ideas. In truth, this is the tenor of the entire book, i.e., that the supernatural is all around us and shouldn't be rejected just because we don't always see it or it isn't considered normal.

The final section on demons is more about Satan than anything else. Sproul notes that he's a deceiver and our adversary as should be expected, but more importantly, he's quick to remind the reader that Satan is a creature and as a creature he's not a match for God. God is sovereign and Satan can't do anything apart from God allowing it. The story of Job is illustrative of this point. So while admitting that Satan is probably more powerful and more intelligent than any human, he doesn't come anywhere close to God, because greater is the one in us than the one in the world (1 John 4:4). He also made a great point about Satan's spatial limitations. As a creature he can only be in one place at one time, so when you think the devil is tormenting you, you can probably rest assured that he's not since he has bigger fish to fry. Chances are it's just a demon come to throw a monkey wrench into your situation.

Unseen Realities is a nice little book that addresses questions that most Christians have. I'd recommend it to believers of all stages. I can't say that I learned a great deal from it but it did give me some food for thought at a few points. There were some things that I didn't necessarily agree with or would have approached differently, like the guiding principle that "there is an uncompromised supernaturalism at the heart of the Christian worldview, and we must not let the world's skepticism with regard to these things affect our belief systems." (9) The irony here is that "the world's skepticism" is what necessitated categories of natural vs. supernatural in the first place. Sproul notes at one point that:

Now we know that after creation, God sustains everything that He made in this world and that He rules over the created sphere. The laws of nature are his laws, and the outworking of history follows the pattern of His sovereign rule. We do not believe that God created everything and then, like the god of deism, stepped out of the picture: that he wound up the clock and now is simply letting it run down according to its own internal, mechanical operation. Rather, we believe that the God who created the universe also sustains that universe. He keeps its existence and rules over it. (105)

This is all very true and very well stated. The result should be that everything that happens, including those things that happen according to the so-called laws of nature, happen because God is at work sustaining his creation. God is always at work within his creation and even if it's more visible or tangible at times (i.e., in his signs or miracles), it's still all quite natural (or

supernatural; pick one and stick with it). I think the distinction that is better made is between physical and spiritual. God is at work in both spheres and it's no more supernatural for him to be at work in the spiritual sphere than it is for him to be at work in the physical sphere.

That's my major gripe with the book. A minor quibble is with an explanation of why the angels in heaven cover their feet with their wings. The explanation is that the feet are a sign of creatureliness so they cover them in the presence of God (see 93-94). But right before this he talks about Moses removing his sandals when standing on holy ground (Exod. 3:5). It makes no sense to say that Moses removed his foot-covering in the presence of God because the ground he stood on was holy but then in the next breath suggest that angels cover their feet because they're in the holy presence of God. My last complaint is with the abrupt ending. It just ended with a chapter on Satan and it seemed to end in mid-thought. A concluding chapter that tied everything together would have been nice. Subject and Scripture indices would have been nice as well. Unfortunately we didn't get that, but what we did get was good enough for me to suggest this book to others.