

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

ANGELOLOGY

The Doctrine of Angels, Demons, and the Spiritual Realm

UNIT 3: THE ANGELIC ORDERS AND HIERARCHIES

Lesson 8

Archangels, Thrones, Dominions, and Powers

The Language of Angelic Authority in the New Testament

Key Texts: Jude 9; Daniel 10:13, 21; 12:1; 1 Thessalonians 4:16; Luke 1:19, 26; Colossians 1:16; Ephesians 1:20–21

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities — all things have been created through Him and for Him.”

Colossians 1:15–16, NASB 1995

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Introduction

Lesson 7 engaged the three classes of angelic beings that Scripture describes with the greatest visual and symbolic richness: the cherubim, the seraphim, and the living creatures of Revelation 4. These are the beings whose descriptions fill entire chapters of prophetic literature and whose primary occupation is the adoration of God in the immediate divine presence. This lesson turns to the language of angelic authority and rank that appears throughout the New Testament, with particular focus on the two named angels, Michael and Gabriel, and the Pauline terminology of thrones, dominions, rulers, and authorities. Together, these constitute the most direct biblical testimony to the structured, ordered nature of the angelic realm: the evidence that the invisible world is not a formless collection of spiritual beings but an organized hierarchy of personal agents serving under the comprehensive lordship of Jesus Christ.

This lesson also provides the occasion for a direct engagement with the Pseudo-Dionysian nine-fold hierarchy that has exercised such extraordinary influence over Christian angelology from the sixth century onward. The nine-fold system, with its three triads of seraphim, cherubim, and thrones; dominions, virtues, and powers; principalities, archangels, and angels, is not a fabrication from nothing; it is an attempt to systematize what the Scriptures do genuinely say about the ordered nature of the angelic realm. But it is a systematization that significantly exceeds the biblical evidence, and the Reformed principle of this series requires that it be received with appropriate critical appreciation: acknowledging the genuine scriptural data it draws upon while rejecting the speculative architecture it builds from that data.

The governing principle of this lesson, as of every lesson in Unit 3, is stated with clarity by the outline itself: we affirm that the angelic realm is structured and ordered, because Scripture says so; we decline to elaborate beyond what Scripture reveals, because wisdom requires restraint. The angelic hierarchy is real; its precise architecture is unknown; and the most important thing that can be said about every rank and order in the invisible realm is the thing Paul says in Ephesians 1:21, that Christ is “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come” (NASB 1995). The hierarchy exists; Christ is its Lord; and that is the most significant thing the doctrine teaches.

A note on the pastoral register of this lesson: the study of angelic authority structures might seem like the most academic portion of the Angelology series, the furthest from immediate pastoral application. In fact, it is one of the most practically significant. The congregations most vulnerable to spiritual anxiety, to aberrant spiritual warfare theology, and to the confusion of demonic power with autonomous authority are congregations that do not have a clear Christological framework for understanding the invisible realm’s structure. When the church understands that every angelic and demonic power exists within a hierarchy that is comprehensively subordinate to Christ, and that Christ’s supremacy over that hierarchy is not a future achievement but a present reality, accomplished at the cross, confirmed at the resurrection, and displayed at the ascension, the result is not complacency but confidence: the bold, grounded, unfrightened confidence of those who know whose side has already won.

I. Michael the Archangel: The Only Being Scripture Calls by That Title

Chief Prince, Warrior, Protector, and Herald of the Return

A. The Designation “Archangel” and Its Biblical Scope

The designation “archangel” (Greek: *archangelos*, chief angel or angel of primary rank) appears only twice in the entire New Testament. The first occurrence is in 1 Thessalonians 4:16, where Paul describes the return of Christ accompanied by “the voice of the archangel.” The second is in Jude 9, where Michael is specifically identified as “Michael the archangel.” These two occurrences establish two facts: that the category of archangel exists in the biblical angelology, and that Michael belongs to it. What they do not establish, and what the Reformed principle of this series requires resisting, is the claim that “archangel” designates an entire rank of angelic beings occupying a specific position in a comprehensive hierarchy. The biblical testimony is simply that Michael is an archangel; it does not tell us how many archangels there are or what their precise relationship to other angelic orders is.

The extra-biblical Jewish tradition, preserved in texts like 1 Enoch and the Dead Sea Scrolls, names seven archangels (Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Uriel, and others). This tradition exercised influence on some patristic writers and on the Pseudo-Dionysian system, and it is reflected in the Catholic canonical status of the Book of Tobit (which mentions the angel Raphael). The Reformed tradition, following the principle of *sola Scriptura*, confines its angelological claims to the two named angels of the canonical Scriptures, Michael and Gabriel, without affirming or elaborating the extra-biblical tradition of seven archangels. What the canonical Scriptures do not teach, the church is not bound to believe; and what they do teach, the church is not free to ignore.

B. Michael in Scripture: Warrior, Prince, and Herald

Michael (Hebrew: *Mikha’el*, “Who is like God?”) is the only angel named in the canonical Scriptures who bears the explicit title of archangel, and the biblical portrait of his ministry is coherent and consistent across the Old and New Testament occurrences. In the book of Daniel, Michael appears as the patron angel of Israel, the “chief prince” whose intervention in the cosmic conflict over Persia allowed the angelic messenger to reach Daniel: “Then Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I had been left there with the kings of Persia” (Daniel 10:13, NASB 1995). In Daniel 10:21, the angelic messenger tells Daniel that “there is no one who stands firmly with me against these forces except Michael your prince.” And in Daniel 12:1, Michael is described as “the great prince who stands guard over the sons of your people”, the guardian of Israel who will “arise” at the time of the final tribulation.

In Jude 9, Michael is described in his confrontation with the devil over the body of Moses: “But Michael the archangel, when he disputed with the devil and argued about the body of Moses, did not dare pronounce against him a railing judgment, but said, ‘The Lord rebuke you!’” (NASB 1995). The restraint Michael exercises in this confrontation, appealing to divine authority rather than pronouncing his own condemnation, is not a sign of weakness but of proper creaturely submission to the authority of the Lord in whose name he acts. And in Revelation 12:7–9, it is Michael who leads the angelic host in the war

against the dragon: “And there was war in heaven, Michael and his angels waging war with the dragon. The dragon and his angels waged war, and they were not strong enough, and there was no longer a place found for them in heaven” (NASB 1995).

The portrait that emerges from these passages is of a great warrior angel whose specific function in the economy of the angelic realm is the defense of God’s people against the powers of evil, a function he exercises under the authority of the sovereign God, not by independent initiative or autonomous power. Michael’s greatness, like the greatness of all the holy angels, is the greatness of perfect service in perfect submission. He fights; he wins; he protects; and he does all of it in the name of the Lord whose rebuke he invokes rather than his own.

II. Gabriel: Herald of the Messianic Age

Entrusted with the Most Significant Announcements in the Entire History of Redemption

Gabriel (Hebrew: Gavri’el, “God is my strength” or “Strong man of God”) is the second of the two named angels in the canonical Scriptures, and while he is never given the explicit title of archangel in the biblical text, his function in the economy of revelation is one of surpassing importance. He is the angel entrusted with the most theologically significant announcements in the entire *historia salutis*: the interpretation of Daniel’s visions of the end of the age (Daniel 8:15–26; 9:20–27), the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist to Zechariah in the temple (Luke 1:11–20), and the annunciation to Mary of the birth of the Son of God (Luke 1:26–38).

Gabriel’s self-identification in Luke 1:19 is remarkable and theologically suggestive: “I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news” (NASB 1995). The phrase “stands in the presence of God” (Greek: *ho parestekos enōpion tou theou*) describes a position of immediate divine proximity and continuous readiness, the posture of a servant who is always near the master, always available, always attentive to the divine commission. Gabriel does not come from a distance to deliver God’s message; he comes from the divine presence itself. His word is the word of one who has just been in the company of the sovereign Lord of the universe, and the authority with which he delivers it reflects that proximate origin.

The consistency of Gabriel’s assigned function across his appearances in Scripture is striking. He is always the bearer of revelation, of the divine word that interprets the meaning of what God is doing in history and announces the redemptive acts that are about to unfold. In Daniel 8–9 he interprets the visions of the ram and the goat and explains the seventy weeks. In Luke 1 he announces the two births that inaugurate the messianic age. He is, in the most precise sense, the angel of the gospel, not because he proclaims the gospel in the apostolic sense but because he bears the divine word that prepares the ground for it. The angel of the annunciation who tells Mary “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High” (Luke 1:32, NASB 1995) is the same angel who told Daniel “Understand the vision, for it pertains to the time of the end” (Daniel 8:17, NASB 1995). From the eschatological visions of the exile to the incarnational announcement in Nazareth, Gabriel is the continuity, the servant who carries the divine word across the centuries of prophetic preparation to its fulfillment in the one event toward which all prophecy pointed.

“I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.” Luke 1:19, NASB 1995

III. Thrones, Dominions, Rulers, and Authorities: The Pauline Language of Angelic Rank

How the Apostle Paul Describes the Structured Hierarchy of the Invisible Realm

A. The Pauline Terminology and Its Occurrences

The most systematic New Testament treatment of the hierarchical structure of the angelic realm is found not in an angelological treatise but in two of Paul’s most Christologically dense letters: Colossians and Ephesians. In Colossians 1:16, within the great cosmic Christology that opens the body of the letter, Paul lists four categories of invisible beings among the things created through and for the Son: “whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities” (Greek: *thronoi ē kyriotētes ē archai ē exousiai*). The same four categories appear, slightly rearranged, in Colossians 2:10 and in Ephesians 1:21, where Paul speaks of Christ being raised “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come” (NASB 1995). Ephesians 3:10 adds that the manifold wisdom of God is to be made known to “the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places” through the church.

The same Greek terms appear in Ephesians 6:12 in a context that is clearly demonological rather than angelological: “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.” The overlap between the angelic and the demonic usage of these terms is theologically significant: it suggests that the hierarchical structure of the angelic realm is mirrored in the hierarchical structure of the demonic realm, that the organization of the fallen angels preserves something of the structural order of the unfallen realm from which they fell, and that the believer’s spiritual conflict is not against a disordered mob of autonomous demonic spirits but against an organized, ranked, hierarchically structured force of spiritual evil.

B. What Paul’s Language Affirms and What It Does Not

The Pauline terminology of thrones, dominions, rulers, and authorities affirms, with apostolic authority, that the angelic realm is structured and hierarchical. This is not a peripheral point; it is a direct apostolic claim about the nature of the invisible world, and it should be received as such. The invisible realm is ordered, ranked, and organized, not a formless collection of spiritual energies or an undifferentiated mass of spiritual beings but a genuine hierarchy of personal agents with different ranks, different functions, and different degrees of authority and power. This much the biblical text clearly teaches, and the church should affirm it without embarrassment or qualification.

What the Pauline language does not do is specify the precise architecture of that hierarchy. Paul does not tell us how many ranks there are, how the ranks relate to each other, what specific functions each rank

performs, or how the Pauline categories map onto the cherubim and seraphim of the Old Testament or the archangels of Jewish tradition. The terms he uses, thrones, dominions, rulers, authorities, powers, are listed in varied order across his letters, without a fixed sequence that would suggest a rigorous hierarchical taxonomy. They appear to be conventional terms for angelic rank that Paul employs to make the Christological point he is making in each context: that the invisible realm is structured and real, and that Christ is Lord of all of it. The speculative elaboration of these terms into the nine-fold hierarchy of Pseudo-Dionysius, or into any other systematic architecture that assigns specific functions, relationships, and positions to the Pauline categories, goes beyond what Paul himself was doing with them.

IV. The Pseudo-Dionysian Nine-Fold Hierarchy: Assessment and Correction

What the Medieval Synthesis Got Right, What It Got Wrong, and Why the Distinction Matters

A. The System and Its Scriptural Basis

The nine-fold hierarchy of Pseudo-Dionysius, discussed in detail in Lesson 2, organizes the angelic realm into three triads of three orders each: the first triad (seraphim, cherubim, thrones), the second triad (dominions or lordships, virtues, powers), and the third triad (principalities, archangels, angels). Each triad is arranged in descending proximity to the divine light, with the seraphim at the summit and the ordinary angels at the base, and each order receives illumination from the order above it and transmits it downward in a hierarchical emanationism derived more from Neoplatonic philosophy than from biblical exegesis.

The scriptural materials that Pseudo-Dionysius draws upon are genuine. The seraphim of Isaiah 6, the cherubim of Ezekiel, the Pauline categories of thrones and dominions and rulers and authorities, the archangels of 1 Thessalonians 4:16 and Jude 9, these are all genuine biblical data, and Pseudo-Dionysius's attempt to organize them into a coherent system reflects a legitimate theological aspiration: the desire to understand the structure of the invisible realm as completely as the biblical data permits. The problem is not the aspiration but the execution, specifically, the degree to which Pseudo-Dionysius allowed the Neoplatonic philosophical framework of hierarchical emanation to supply the organizing principle that the biblical data itself does not provide.

B. The Reformed Corrective

The Reformed corrective to the Pseudo-Dionysian system is the same corrective that the Reformation applied to every instance of speculative excess in the medieval theological tradition: a return to the biblical data, a rigorous assessment of what the data actually warrants, and a refusal to elaborate beyond that warrant however intellectually satisfying the elaboration might be. Applied to the nine-fold hierarchy, the corrective affirms what Scripture teaches, that the angelic realm is hierarchical, that thrones and dominions and rulers and authorities represent genuine ranks of angelic power, that Michael is the archangel whose function is the defense of God's people, and that seraphim and cherubim are real orders of beings near the divine throne, while refusing to affirm the specific architecture that Pseudo-Dionysius constructed from these materials.

Calvin's treatment of the angelic hierarchy in Institutes I.14.4–5 is characteristically precise: "Scripture mentions principalities, powers, dominations, thrones, archangels, and angels. It says that Christ has been set above all of these. But the hierarchical order that Dionysius sketched out is nothing but fantasy" (author's paraphrase). Calvin's conclusion is not that the angelic hierarchy does not exist but that the specific form Pseudo-Dionysius assigned to it is a human construction rather than a divine revelation. The hierarchy is real; the nine-fold taxonomy is invented. And the church's obligation is to receive the real and refuse the invented, not to collapse the two into each other by either wholesale acceptance or wholesale rejection.

There is also a practical reason for the Reformed insistence on this distinction. The Pseudo-Dionysian hierarchy did not merely satisfy theological curiosity; it provided the conceptual framework for the medieval tradition of angel veneration and prayer to angels, the practice of directing devotion toward specific angelic orders as intermediaries between the believer and the divine presence. When the hierarchy is elevated to the status of revealed truth, the veneration of specific orders as objects of devotion follows naturally. When the hierarchy is recognized as a human construction, the devotion directed toward it lacks its warrant, and the Christological principle of Hebrews 1 reasserts itself: the angels are servants, not mediators; Christ is the one mediator, and all angelic ministry is the expression of His lordship, not a supplement to it.

"Far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come." Ephesians 1:21, NASB 1995

V. The Christological Supremacy: Christ Is Lord of Every Order

The Most Important Truth About the Angelic Hierarchy Is Who Stands Above It

A. Colossians 1:15–20 and Ephesians 1:20–23

Every Pauline reference to the angelic hierarchy, thrones, dominions, rulers, authorities, powers, is embedded in a Christological argument. Paul does not enumerate the angelic orders to satisfy theological curiosity about the invisible realm; he enumerates them to make a specific point about the One who is their Lord. In Colossians 1:16, the thrones and dominions and rulers and authorities appear as items in a list whose purpose is to establish that everything in the created order, without exception, without remainder, without qualification, was created through Christ and for Christ. The angelic hierarchy exists because Christ made it. It is sustained because He holds it together (Colossians 1:17). It serves the purposes of redemption because He has determined it so. And it is comprehensively subordinate to Him because He is before all things and above all things.

In Ephesians 1:20–23, Paul locates Christ's comprehensive supremacy over the angelic hierarchy within the framework of the resurrection and ascension: God raised Christ from the dead and seated Him "at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come, and He put all things in subjection

under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all” (Ephesians 1:20–23, NASB 1995). The supremacy of Christ over the angelic hierarchy is not a future hope; it is a present reality, accomplished and established at the resurrection and ascension. Every angelic order, named and unnamed, thrones and dominions and rulers and authorities and every other name, is already under His feet.

B. The Pastoral Significance of Christ’s Supremacy

The pastoral significance of the Christological supremacy over the angelic hierarchy cannot be overstated for a congregation that is prone to either spiritual anxiety or spiritual complacency about the invisible realm. For the congregation susceptible to spiritual anxiety, the congregation formed by territorial-spirits theology, by the elaborate demonologies of the charismatic tradition, by the sense that the powers of darkness are formidable and autonomous, the truth of Ephesians 1:21 is the most directly stabilizing doctrine in the entire Angelology series: Christ is already “far above” every power, every dominion, every principality, every authority. The demonic hierarchy is not an autonomous rival power; it is a defeated, disarmed, comprehensively subordinated force operating within limits that the sovereign Christ permits and that He will terminate when His purposes are complete.

For the congregation susceptible to spiritual complacency, the congregation that has dismissed the reality of the spiritual realm as ancient superstition and lives as though the visible world is the only real one, the truth of Ephesians 6:12 is the necessary corrective: “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (NASB 1995). The angelic hierarchy is not only the holy side; there is a demonic hierarchy that is organized, ranked, and active in the opposition of the gospel and the affliction of God’s people. The believer who lives as though spiritual conflict is not real is as spiritually unprepared as the believer who lives as though the demonic powers are autonomous and undefeated. Both errors are corrected by the same Christological truth: the powers are real, they are hostile, and they are defeated, and the One who defeated them is the One in whom the believer stands.

VI. The Reformed Principle Applied: Structured Order, Restrained Elaboration

The Final Word on the Angelic Hierarchy: Affirm What Scripture Reveals, Nothing More

The conclusion that this lesson reaches, and the conclusion toward which the Reformed engagement with the angelic hierarchy has consistently pointed since Calvin, can be stated in a single compound proposition: the angelic realm is genuinely structured and hierarchically ordered (Scripture teaches this, and it should be affirmed without apology), and the specific architecture of that hierarchy exceeds what Scripture has revealed (and should therefore not be elaborated with the confidence that belongs only to revealed truth). This is not a position of theological uncertainty about the existence of the hierarchy; it is a position of epistemological humility about its precise form. The hierarchy is certain; the taxonomy is not.

The practical corollary of this position is equally clear: the Christian has every reason to be grateful for the ordered, hierarchical angelic realm that serves the purposes of the sovereign God, and no reason to direct specific devotion toward any particular order within it. The thrones and dominions and rulers and authorities exist and serve; they were created through Christ and for Christ; they are held together by Christ; and they are comprehensively under the feet of the Christ in whom the believer stands. This is enough to know, and knowing it is enough to produce the confidence, the gratitude, and the worship that the doctrine of the angelic hierarchy is designed to generate.

The letter to the Colossians provides the summary that this entire unit of the series has been building toward. In Colossians 2:9–10, Paul writes: “For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority” (NASB 1995). The believer is “complete” in Christ because Christ is “head over all rule and authority.” The angelic hierarchy, with all its ranks and orders, its thrones and dominions and principalities and powers, its cherubim and seraphim and archangels, is under the head in whom the believer is complete. The comprehensiveness of Christ’s lordship over the invisible realm is not a doctrine that stands alongside the doctrine of union with Christ; it is the cosmic foundation of it. You are complete in Him who is head over all. That is enough. That is everything.

“For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority.”

Colossians 2:9–10, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Archangel	Greek: archangelos (chief angel, angel of primary rank). The designation used in the New Testament for the highest rank of named angels. The term appears twice in the canonical Scriptures: in 1 Thessalonians 4:16 (the voice of the archangel at Christ's return) and in Jude 9 (Michael the archangel). No other angel is explicitly given this title in the canonical text. The extra-biblical Jewish tradition identifies seven archangels by name (Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Uriel, Saraqael, Raguel, and Remiel, as in 1 Enoch 20), but this tradition is not part of the canonical biblical witness and should be held accordingly.
Michael	Hebrew: Mikha'el ("Who is like God?"). One of two named angels in the canonical Scriptures; the only one explicitly identified as an archangel (Jude 9). Michael's biblical profile is that of the great warrior and protector of God's people: the chief prince who helps the angelic messenger reach Daniel (Daniel 10:13), the prince who stands guard over Israel (Daniel 12:1), the one who rebukes the devil over the body of Moses (Jude 9), and the commander of the angelic host in the war against the dragon (Revelation 12:7–9). His name, a rhetorical question affirming the incomparability of God, is itself a theological statement about the nature of the service he renders.
Gabriel	Hebrew: Gavri'el ("God is my strength" or "Strong man of God"). One of two named angels in the canonical Scriptures; never given the title archangel in the biblical text but entrusted with the most significant revelatory announcements in the historia salutis. Gabriel interprets Daniel's visions (Daniel 8:16; 9:21), announces the birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1:11–20), and announces the birth of Jesus to Mary (Luke 1:26–38). His self-identification as one who "stands in the presence of God" (Luke 1:19) indicates a position of immediate divine proximity and continuous readiness for divine commission.
Thrones (Thronoi)	Greek: thronoi (thrones). One of the Pauline categories of angelic rank, appearing in Colossians 1:16 alongside dominions, rulers, and authorities. The term suggests a high order of angelic dignity and authority. In Pseudo-Dionysius's nine-fold hierarchy, thrones occupy the third place in the first triad (after seraphim and cherubim). The Reformed tradition affirms thrones as a real category of angelic rank while declining to specify their precise position in a hierarchical architecture beyond what Paul's usage indicates. All thrones, like all angelic orders, were created through Christ and for Christ and are comprehensively under His lordship.

Term	Definition
Dominions / Lordships (Kyriotētes)	Greek: kyriotētes (lordships, dominions). One of the Pauline categories of angelic rank, appearing in Colossians 1:16 and Ephesians 1:21. The term derives from kyrios (lord) and suggests angelic beings of lordly authority or governance in the invisible realm. In Pseudo-Dionysius's system, dominions (or lordships) head the second triad. Paul's usage does not specify their function beyond including them in the comprehensive category of invisible beings created through and for Christ and subordinate to His resurrection supremacy.
Rulers / Principalities (Archai)	Greek: archai (beginnings, rulers, principalities; singular: archē). One of the Pauline categories of angelic rank, appearing in Colossians 1:16; 2:10; Ephesians 1:21; 3:10; 6:12; and Romans 8:38. The term refers to beings of primary or ruling authority in the invisible realm. Significantly, archai appears in both the angelological context of Colossians 1:16 (created through Christ) and the demonological context of Ephesians 6:12 ("our struggle is against the rulers"), indicating that the hierarchical structure of the demonic realm mirrors that of the angelic realm, and that fallen angels retain something of the ordered structure they possessed before their fall.
Authorities / Powers (Exousiai)	Greek: exousiai (authorities, powers; singular: exousia). One of the Pauline categories of angelic rank, appearing alongside rulers and principalities in Colossians 1:16; 2:10; Ephesians 1:21; 3:10; 6:12. Exousia refers to delegated authority or rightful power. Like archai, exousiai appears in both angelological and demonological contexts, suggesting that both the holy and the fallen angels possess a structured authority that reflects the ordering of the invisible realm. Christ's supremacy over all exousiai (Ephesians 1:21) encompasses both the holy authorities who serve Him and the fallen authorities He has disarmed (Colossians 2:15).
Celestial Hierarchy	The title of Pseudo-Dionysius's treatise (c. late 5th–6th century AD) organizing the angelic beings into three triads: Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones (first triad); Dominions, Virtues, Powers (second triad); Principalities, Archangels, Angels (third triad). The system draws on biblical data (Isaiah's seraphim, Ezekiel's cherubim, Paul's Colossian categories) but organizes them according to a Neoplatonic framework of hierarchical emanation that the biblical texts themselves do not supply. The Reformed tradition, following Calvin, acknowledges the biblical data the system uses while rejecting the speculative architecture it imposes upon that data.
Principalities and Powers	The conventional English translation of the Pauline phrase archai kai exousiai (principalities and authorities/powers). In its most concentrated and practically significant use (Ephesians 6:12), the phrase describes the organized demonic hierarchy against which the believer's spiritual warfare is conducted: "against

Term	Definition
	the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.” The structured, hierarchical character of the demonic opposition to the gospel is the mirror image of the structured angelic realm, an organization that makes the spiritual conflict more serious than if it were merely random spiritual opposition, and that makes Christ’s comprehensive supremacy over all such powers (Colossians 2:15) more pastorally significant.
Sola Scriptura	Latin: Scripture alone. The Reformation principle that the canonical Scriptures are the sole final and sufficient authority for all theological claims. Applied to angelology, sola Scriptura requires that claims about the structure, ranks, and functions of the angelic realm be grounded in and bounded by the biblical testimony. It is the primary methodological safeguard against the speculative elaboration that produced the Pseudo-Dionysian hierarchy and its modern equivalents. Sola Scriptura does not prohibit theological inference from biblical data; it prohibits theological claims that exceed the data’s evidentiary warrant or that substitute philosophical frameworks for the biblical witness.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the angelic realm is genuinely, really, and significantly ordered, that the invisible world is not a formless spiritual energy field but a structured hierarchy of personal beings with different ranks, different functions, and different degrees of authority. Paul's language of thrones and dominions and rulers and authorities is not decorative; it is apostolic testimony to the organizational structure of the invisible realm, and the church should receive it as such. The angelic hierarchy is part of the creation that God made through Christ and for Christ, and its ordered structure reflects the wisdom of the Creator who ordered it.

We must also believe that this hierarchy, however it is precisely structured, is comprehensively under the feet of Jesus Christ. The resurrection and ascension accomplished what the cross secured: the comprehensive subordination of every angelic and demonic power to the One who is "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come" (Ephesians 1:21, NASB 1995). This is not a metaphor. It is the apostolic description of the actual state of affairs in the invisible realm, and the believer who has internalized it will approach the spiritual conflict from a posture of established confidence rather than anxious struggle.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

Let the portrait of Michael press itself upon your understanding of faithful service. Michael the archangel, the great warrior, the chief prince, the defender of God's people, does not pronounce condemnation on the devil in his own name. He says: "The Lord rebuke you." The most powerful named warrior in the angelic host operates under the authority of the Lord he serves, appealing to that authority rather than asserting his own. His greatness is the greatness of perfect submission. His power is the power of directed creaturely agency. His victory is the Lord's victory executed through his hands. Let this model of powerful, unselfconscious service in the name of another press upon your own understanding of what faithful ministry looks like: not the assertion of one's own spiritual authority but the deployment of the Lord's authority in humble, obedient, persistent service.

Let Gabriel's description of himself, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I have been sent", shape your own self-understanding as a servant of the divine word. You are not Gabriel; you do not stand in the immediate divine presence in the sense he does. But you have been given the same word he was sent to carry, the gospel that his annunciation to Mary announced and whose content Paul defined as "the power of God for salvation" (Romans 1:16, NASB 1995). The servant who carries the divine word carries the authority of the One who sent it, not his own authority. Let that truth both humble and embolden you: humble you, because the word is not yours; embolden you, because the word is not your own and its effectiveness does not depend on your eloquence or persuasive power.

C. *For the Hands: What Must We Do?*

- **Read Colossians 1:13–20, 2:9–15, and Ephesians 1:15–23 as a continuous theological argument.** Identify every reference to the invisible hierarchy of powers in these passages. Then identify every Christological claim made in relation to those powers. What is the cumulative picture these passages paint of the relationship between the angelic hierarchy and the lordship of Christ? How does Paul's Christology function as the organizing center of his angelology, and what does this model for the way Christology should always function as the center of the church's engagement with the invisible realm?
- **Trace Michael's appearances in Scripture chronologically: Daniel 10:13, 21; 12:1; Jude 9; Revelation 12:7–9.** For each appearance, identify the specific context, the specific action, and the specific theological significance. What emerges as the consistent pattern of Michael's ministry? How does his ministry in each context reflect the broader theology of the angelic realm established in Unit 2, particularly the angelic ministry of protection, deliverance, and warfare in the service of God's redemptive purposes?
- **Read Calvin's Institutes I.14.4–5 in full, his treatment of the angelic hierarchy and his critique of the Pseudo-Dionysian system.** Note specifically the distinction Calvin draws between what Scripture affirms about the angelic orders and what Pseudo-Dionysius adds to that affirmation. Then ask: does Calvin's critique eliminate everything in the Pseudo-Dionysian tradition, or does it retain the genuine scriptural data while rejecting the speculative architecture? And what principle of theological method does Calvin's approach model for the pastor who must distinguish between revealed doctrine and theological construction in other domains as well?
- **Evaluate your congregation's actual functional theology of the invisible realm.** Not the formal theology your congregation would affirm if asked, that Christ is Lord of all powers, but the operative theology that shapes their prayer, their experience of spiritual conflict, and their response to difficulty. Do they pray with the confidence of those who stand in Christ who is "far above all rule and authority"? Or do they live with the anxiety of those who feel that the powers of darkness are formidable, autonomous, and barely held at bay? What specific teaching, from this lesson and from the broader series, would most directly address the gap between formal and functional theology in your congregation?
- **Pray Ephesians 1:15–23 as an intercessory prayer for your congregation.** Paul's great prayer in Ephesians 1–3 is specifically a prayer that God's people would know the power that raised Christ above every rule and authority and power and dominion, and would understand that the same power is at work in them as believers. Pray this prayer for specific members of your congregation, those who most need the confidence of Christ's comprehensive supremacy over the invisible realm to be a living reality in their hearts and minds rather than a theological proposition in their heads. Pray for yourself: that the truth of Ephesians 1:21–22 would shape your own posture in ministry and in spiritual conflict with the same force that it shaped Paul's.

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- Before working through the discussion questions, reflect on this: do you approach the topic of the invisible hierarchy, the angelic and demonic ranks, thrones and dominions and rulers and authorities, with more curiosity, more anxiety, or more confidence? And does the level of confidence you bring correspond to the level of Christological certainty that Ephesians 1:21 warrants? Where is the gap, if there is one, and what would close it?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read Daniel 10:10–21 carefully. Who is the angelic speaker, and what does he reveal about his own struggle to reach Daniel (vv. 12–13)? Who came to help him, and what title is given to that helper (v. 13)? What does the reference to the “prince of Persia” and the “prince of Greece” (vv. 13, 20) suggest about the relationship between the heavenly conflict and the earthly political history of the kingdoms involved? How does the designation of Michael as “your prince” (v. 21) illuminate Michael’s specific role in relation to Israel?
- Read Jude 9 in its context (vv. 8–10). What is the specific behavior that Jude is rebuking in the false teachers he describes (v. 8)? How does Michael’s example, refusing to pronounce a railing judgment against the devil but appealing instead to divine authority, function as the counterexample? What does this text reveal about the proper posture even the most powerful holy angel maintains in the presence of spiritual authority and conflict? And what does this imply about the claims of some contemporary spiritual warfare teachers to pronounce binding judgments against demonic powers in their own authority?
- Read Colossians 1:15–20 and identify every claim Paul makes about Christ’s relationship to the angelic hierarchy. What does “by Him all things were created... whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities” (v. 16) establish about the origin of the hierarchy? What does “in Him all things hold together” (v. 17) establish about its sustaining principle? What does “all things to reconcile to Himself” (v. 20) establish about its ultimate destiny? And what does the cumulative argument of the passage establish about the relationship between the angelic hierarchy and the lordship of Christ?
- Read Ephesians 1:18–23 carefully. What specific power is Paul praying that the Ephesians would know (v. 19)? How does Paul describe the expression of that power in the resurrection and ascension of Christ (vv. 20–21)? What is the scope of the powers over which Christ is seated (v. 21)? And what is the relationship between Christ’s headship over all powers (“head over all things”, v. 22) and the church’s identity as “His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all” (v. 23)? What does it mean for the church to be the body of the One who is head over every angelic and demonic power?
- Read Ephesians 6:10–13. How does Paul describe the nature and origin of the believer’s spiritual conflict (v. 12)? What does the phrase “world forces of this darkness” suggest about the scope

and organization of the demonic opposition? How does the command to “put on the full armor of God” (vv. 13–18) relate to the Christological supremacy established in Ephesians 1:20–21? What is the connection between standing in Christ who is above all powers and wielding the armor that comes from that same Christ in spiritual conflict?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson argues that the Pauline terms for angelic rank (thrones, dominions, rulers, authorities) affirm the hierarchical structure of the invisible realm but do not specify its precise architecture. How does this distinction, between affirming that the hierarchy exists and declining to specify its exact form, apply the Reformed principle of restraint to the specific domain of angelological taxonomy? Does Paul’s varying order of the terms across his letters support the lesson’s claim that he was not imposing a fixed hierarchical sequence?
- Michael’s restraint in Jude 9, refusing to pronounce condemnation in his own name and appealing instead to divine authority, is described by the lesson as “not a sign of weakness but of proper creaturely submission.” What theological principle does this behavior embody? How does Michael’s restraint in the face of the devil contrast with the behavior of the false teachers Jude is rebuking? And what specific implication does this have for the kind of spiritual authority that believers, preachers, and spiritual warfare practitioners may legitimately claim and exercise?
- The lesson identifies two pastoral errors that the Christological supremacy of Ephesians 1:21 corrects: the anxiety of those who treat demonic powers as formidable and autonomous, and the complacency of those who dismiss the spiritual realm as unreal. How does the same theological truth, that Christ is far above all rule and authority and every name that is named, address both errors simultaneously? What is the specific mechanism by which the truth of Christ’s comprehensive supremacy produces confidence (against anxiety) and sober vigilance (against complacency)?
- The lesson argues that the Pseudo-Dionysian nine-fold hierarchy “significantly exceeds the biblical evidence” but is not a fabrication from nothing, it draws on genuine scriptural data but organizes it according to a philosophical framework the biblical data itself does not supply. Is this distinction, between building on genuine scriptural data and exceeding the scriptural warrant, a clean one? How do we know when we have crossed from legitimate theological inference from biblical data into speculative construction? What methodological principles help draw the line in this specific case?
- The lesson closes with Colossians 2:9–10: “and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority.” What is the logical relationship between these two clauses, between the believer’s completeness in Christ and Christ’s headship over every power? Why is the believer’s completeness grounded in Christ’s comprehensive supremacy rather than, say, in the believer’s own spiritual development or moral achievement? And what does this connection imply about the place of angelology and the doctrine of the invisible powers in the broader framework of the doctrine of salvation?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- The lesson observes that “the most practically significant” lesson of the angelic hierarchy is “who stands above it.” How does this truth, that Christ is already seated “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion”, change the experiential posture of your spiritual conflict right now? Identify a specific context in your life or ministry where the powers of darkness feel most formidable or most resistant. How does the truth of Ephesians 1:20–21, taken as a description of the actual state of affairs in the invisible realm, change the way you engage that specific context?
- Gabriel’s self-description, “I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I have been sent”, models the combination of proximate divine relationship and commissioned service. The lesson applies this to the preacher and teacher of the Word: you carry a word whose authority is not your own. Evaluate your own practice of preaching or teaching against this model. In what ways does your preaching reflect the confidence of someone who carries divine authority (the authority of the Word itself)? In what ways does it reflect the anxiety or self-reliance of someone who feels that the word’s effectiveness depends on their own performance?
- The lesson notes that congregations influenced by elaborate territorial-spirits theology tend to approach spiritual conflict with anxiety about the formidable autonomy of the powers. Does this describe your congregation or any part of your ministry context? What specific teaching, from this lesson or from the series as a whole, would most directly address that anxiety with the Christological confidence Ephesians 1:21 warrants? And conversely, is there also a functional naturalism, a practical dismissal of spiritual conflict, that needs to be addressed? Which pastoral need is more urgent in your specific context?
- Michael’s example in Jude 9, appealing to divine authority rather than his own, challenges any form of spiritual authority that operates in the minister’s own name. Is there any area of your ministry or spiritual warfare practice where you are tempted to operate on the basis of your own spiritual authority, gifting, or experience rather than on the basis of the Lord’s authority mediated through His Word? What would it look like to bring that area into conformity with Michael’s model: powerful, persistent, unflinching, but always in the name of the Lord whose rebuke alone is sufficient?
- This lesson concludes Unit 3 of the Angelology series, completing the treatment of the holy angels across six lessons (Lessons 3–8). The next unit turns to the fall of Satan and the demonic realm. As you prepare for Unit 4, what questions about the holy angelic realm remain unresolved for you? And how has the teaching of Units 2 and 3 together equipped you to engage the darker subject matter of Units 4–6 with the Christological confidence and the Reformed methodological discipline this series has been modeling throughout?

Prayer Focus

Open this lesson's prayer time with a reading of Ephesians 1:15–23, Paul's great intercessory prayer for the Ephesian church, with its culminating vision of the risen and exalted Christ seated "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come." Read it slowly, allowing the scope of Paul's vision to press itself upon the imagination: the same power that raised Christ from the dead and seated Him above every conceivable angelic and demonic authority is the power that is available to and operative in those who believe. The hierarchy of the invisible realm, whatever its precise structure, is already under the feet of the One in whom the believer is "made complete" (Colossians 2:10). Let this truth form the register of the prayer that follows.

Pray Paul's prayer itself as your opening act of intercession, not merely reading it but praying it, for yourself and for your congregation, with the specific petitions Paul articulates: that God would give a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him (Ephesians 1:17); that the eyes of the heart would be enlightened to know the hope of His calling, the riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints, and the surpassing greatness of His power toward those who believe (1:18–19). These are not abstract blessings; they are the specific theological knowledge, the knowledge of Christ's supremacy over every power, the knowledge of the believer's completeness in Him, the knowledge of the power already available, that this series has been designed to cultivate. Pray that God would complete the work this study has begun.

Give thanks specifically for Michael and Gabriel, not as objects of devotion but as the most vivid named expressions of the angelic ministry that this series has been tracing throughout. Thank God for Michael: the chief prince who stood guard over God's people through the Babylonian exile, who withheld judgment when the devil contested the body of Moses, who will lead the angelic host at the final conflict, and who models the kind of powerful, submitted, authority-referencing service that every believer is called to in his own measure. Thank God for Gabriel: the one who stands in the divine presence and is sent with the divine word, who interpreted the prophetic visions that pointed toward the Messiah, who announced the births that inaugurated the messianic age, and who models the combination of proximate divine relationship and commissioned gospel proclamation that every preacher and teacher aspires to.

Pray for the church in her engagement with the invisible realm, for the wisdom to hold the biblical balance that this lesson has described: acknowledging the genuine, organized, hierarchical structure of the angelic and demonic realms without elaborating beyond the biblical testimony, and grounding the whole of that acknowledgment in the comprehensive supremacy of Jesus Christ. Pray against the twin errors of spiritual anxiety (which overestimates the autonomy of the powers) and spiritual complacency (which underestimates their reality). Pray for the congregations and the pastors who are most exposed to the first error: those formed by territorial-spirits theology, by elaborate demonologies, by the sense that the powers are barely held at bay. And pray for those most exposed to the second: those whose functional naturalism has effectively dismissed the spiritual realm from their operational worldview. Both need the same medicine: the full, unqualified truth of Ephesians 1:21.

Close with the Colossian doxology that brings this unit to its conclusion: “For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority” (Colossians 2:9–10, NASB 1995). Pray it as a confession of faith, as an act of gratitude, and as the theological foundation from which you will enter Unit 4’s engagement with Satan, the demonic realm, and the nature of spiritual warfare. The powers are real; they are hostile; they are defeated; and the One in whom you are complete is their Lord. That is enough. That is everything.

“Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind.”

Colossians 2:18, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Daniel 10:10–21; 12:1; Jude 8–10; Revelation 12:7–9; Luke 1:11–20, 26–38; Colossians 1:13–20; 2:9–15; Ephesians 1:15–23; 6:10–18; 1 Thessalonians 4:14–17

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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