

“The Ascension of Christ and the Hope of the Church”

Ephesians 1:15-23

June 2, 2019

Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service

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We are taking a two-week break from our series on the Gospel of John for Ascension Sunday and Pentecost Sunday, to focus on the themes of Christ’s ascending to heaven and sitting at the right hand of God, and then the pouring out the Holy Spirit on the Church at Pentecost.

While it can be overdone, one of the benefits of the historic calendar of the Christian Church is that whatever books of the Bible we may be going through consecutively, or at whatever pace we may be moving through each book, by pausing to note the significant holidays of the Church calendar we walk through the major events of the work of Christ every year.

In the season of Christmas we remember Christ’s incarnation, during the season of Lent we remember his suffering on our behalf, in Easter we remember his resurrection from the dead, on Ascension Sunday we remember his ascending to heaven and taking his seat at the right hand of God the Father, on Pentecost we remember him pouring out the Holy Spirit on his Church, and then the season of Advent, which focuses on the coming of Christ, thematically forms both the beginning and the end of the Church year, as it not only points to Israel’s past anticipation of the Messiah, but also towards our anticipation of his coming to us bodily in the future on the Last Day.

Every year we walk through the story of Christ’s accomplishment of our redemption and we consider what it means for our lives.

And this Sunday we come to Ascension Sunday, as we remember the event forty days after his resurrection when Christ ascended bodily into heaven.

And our text, as we consider that theme, is Ephesians 1:15-23. While the ESV divides these nine verses into two sentences, in Greek it is actually one sentence ... and a fairly complex one [Lincoln, 47]. So as always, please do listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning:

¹⁵ For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, ¹⁶ I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, ¹⁷ that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, ¹⁸ having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might ²⁰ that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. ²² And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

This is the word of the Lord.

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let's pray ...

Lord Jesus Christ,

After forty days you ascended to the right hand of God our Father,
and from your throne in heaven you now rule over your Church.

Rule over us now, by your Word and Spirit.

Instruct us by your word, that we may be your faithful subjects.

Reign in our hearts by your Spirit, that we might obey your word.

And open our eyes to the reality of your reign not only over us, but over all things.

Grant this we ask, for your mercy's sake. Amen.

Our text is one that is often read on Ascension Sunday – it's the standard epistle reading in the Revised Common Lectionary ... and as I thought about it, I was struck by some of the parallels between what Paul knew the church in Ephesus was facing in their time and place, and what we face today as the Church in our time and place.

The church in Ephesus found itself faced with an array of political, spiritual, and moral forces that seemed to be set in opposition to them. And in that setting they very much felt the fact that these other forces seemed to have power in the culture they lived in, while they did not.

One biblical scholar describes it like this – he writes:

“Power is one of the great themes of [this letter to the church in Ephesus]. Perhaps this is because Ephesus itself, and the surrounding area, was seen as a place of power. Certainly in social and civic terms the city was powerful, and was set to become more so. It was a major centre of imperial influence in Paul's day. The Roman emperors were keen to establish and maintain places where their rule could be celebrated and enhanced.

“But it was also a centre of religious power. All sorts of cults and beliefs flourished, and frequently they focused on power: the power of what we might call magic, power to make things happen in the world, to influence people and events, to gain wealth or health or influence for yourself and to bring about the downfall of your enemies. Their world, in other words, was dominated by the ‘principalities and powers’, the various levels of rulers and authorities from local magistrates up to internationally recognized gods and goddesses, and all stages in between.”
[Wright, 15]

The church in Ephesus faced an array of opposing forces, and it was easy from them to feel powerless before those forces.

And the church in the United States – or at least in more secular parts of the United States – can feel the same way. As more and more points of difference between the Christian ethic and the secular ethic emerge, as more and more people find the Christian worldview implausible, as the Church finds itself in a culture of increasing political polarization, as our culture becomes increasingly fixated on this-worldly success, the Church in secular regions like ours can increasingly feel like the church in Ephesus likely did – powerless before opposing forces in the world.

And when we feel that way, we begin to fear defeat. We fear that we – that the Church – will be defeated. That we, or our children, or our churches, will be overcome by the forces set against us. That those forces will prevail against the Church.

And when we feel that way, what is our tendency?

Well, there are a number of possible responses that we may be tempted towards, but three major ones are despair, accommodation, or retreat.

When the Church faces powerful opposition, we are especially tempted towards despair, accommodation, or retreat, because we fear the defeat of the Church.

Let's take a moment to consider those three responses.

Despair alone can take many forms, but central to it is a loss of hope. We lose hope in the future of Christ's Church. We lose hope that God will bring people to know him and that he will grow his Church through our evangelistic efforts. We lose hope that our young people will continue in the faith or in the life of the Church. We maybe even lose hope in our own ability to persevere in the faith. Or in one form or another, a healthy vigilance in our churches and other Christian institutions becomes twisted into a sort of cynicism or paranoia over whether such structures of the Church will stay true to the faith of Christ. When the Church faces powerful opposition, we are tempted to lose hope and give in to despair.

But when the Church faces powerful opposition, and we fear her defeat, we are also tempted to give in to accommodation. In other words, rather than remaining steadfast in our faith, we are tempted to accommodate the Christian faith to things that we know are contrary to it – things that are contrary to the Word of God as found in the Scriptures. At the heart of accommodation is an attempt to strike a deal with the powers that oppose the Church, in order to preserve the Church. And this too can take a variety of forms. Accommodation can be ethical, as we agree to soften and then eventually discard the clear ethical teachings of Scripture in order to avoid the wrath of a culture that promotes a rival ethic in one area or another. Or accommodation can be theological, as we become willing to modify the Bible's teaching about who God is and how he works, in order to appease those who do not like the particulars of the Christian God revealed in Scripture. Or accommodation can be political, as we trade out the prophetic calling of the Church to speak truth to *all* those in power, and instead seek protection from one political tribe, in exchange for which we implicitly agree to give that tribe a pass on calling out their ethical breaches while focusing our critical powers on that political tribe's rivals. Or accommodation can be a turn to pragmatism, as we embrace the pragmatic goals of our culture for achievement and success, and mute Christ's calling to die to ourselves.

I could go on, but you get the point. Many in the Church, when faced with powerful opposition, are tempted to accommodate the Christian faith to things contrary to the Word of Christ, in the hopes of pacifying those who opposed her.

So, we can be tempted first to despair, second to accommodation.

And third, when the church faces opposition we can often be tempted towards retreat – because we'd rather withdraw than face the risk of defeat in the world.

This can take a number of forms as well, but the pattern it usually follows is one in which the energy devoted towards the outward-facing ministries of the Church – energy devoted to things like evangelism, mercy ministry, and redemptive cultural engagement – when that energy is withdrawn and turned inward, until all the Church's efforts are internal. Rather than doing the

diligent work that comes with the missional calling of the Church, this response is tempted to retreat to a stronghold that feels safer and, frankly, requires less work to maintain.

When the church faces powerful opposition, we are especially tempted towards despair, accommodation, or retreat, because we fear the defeat of the Church.

That is the temptation that many in the Church feel today in our culture, and it is a temptation that many in the church in Ephesus likely felt as well.

That is the problem – that is the temptation.

What does Paul have to say to the Ephesians ... and what does the Holy Spirit have to say to us ... about the solution to that problem, in our text?

Well, to get at that we'll ask our text three questions:

- What does Paul have to say?
- Why is it important for us?
- And how should it affect us?

What does Paul have to say? Why is it important? And how should it affect us?

So first: What does Paul have to say?

One of the key things that Paul has to say to us and the Ephesians is that *the Messiah given to the Church has been given supreme authority over all of creation.*

The Messiah given to us as the Church has been given supreme authority over all of creation.

Let's walk through our text and see how we get to that.

In verses fifteen and sixteen Paul says that he gives thanks for the church in Ephesus and he prays for them. And in what follows he will elaborate on what exactly his prayer for them is.

In verse seventeen and into eighteen he prays that God will give the church in Ephesus wisdom and knowledge by the Holy Spirit and open their eyes to see what is true. And what is the truth he wants them to see and know? He lists three things in verses eighteen and nineteen:

- “the hope to which [God] has called” them
- “the riches of [God's] glorious inheritance in the saints” and
- “the immeasurable greatness of [God's] power towards [those] who believe.”

Now – those three things are connected: the hope and the glorious inheritance are assured to the Church because of God's power towards believers. And going on, Paul focuses on that power.

He says towards the end of verse nineteen and into verse twenty that this power of God is aimed towards believers “according to the working of [God the Father's] great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places.” So this power that God works towards us is rooted in the same power by which God not only raised Jesus from the dead, but also lifted him up at the ascension into heaven, and seated Jesus at God the Father's right hand – a position of honor, power, and authority, as reflected in Psalm 110.

So, Paul wants the Church to know that the hope they have that is rooted in the power of God – the same power of God that raised and exalted Jesus Christ. And now he goes on to focus on Jesus’s position. In verse twenty-one and into twenty-two he says that Jesus Christ has been elevated to a place of authority “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And [God the Father] put all things under [Christ’s] feet.”

Now, we said earlier that the church in Ephesus was surrounded by people who had or who claimed power: both worldly power and religious power. And the church in Ephesus was tempted to feel powerless before them, and to fear defeat as they looked on at the powers around them.

And so, Paul here reminds them of the significance of Christ’s ascension and his being seated at the right hand of God the Father. Paul reminds them that Jesus Christ is not just waiting around for the second coming. He is still working. He has been given authority. And he has not just been made one more authority among many – no, he has been given authority over “all rule and authority and power and dominion” – those in the physical realm and those in the spiritual realm, those present in this age and those in the age to come. He is above them all. And he is not just slightly above these other powers, but Paul tells us in verse twenty-one that he is “far above” all these other powers. Drawing on Psalm eight verse six he declares that far from them being superior or even equal to Christ, God has put all other powers under Christ’s feet.

That, Paul says, is the position of Jesus Christ today. *That* is Jesus’s role right now. He is reigning at the right hand of God the Father. The ascension of Christ that we remember today is not just an interesting story that tells us why Jesus isn’t walking around the earth today – it’s not mainly a story about where Jesus went *from* ... it is mainly a story about where Jesus went *to*. He went *to* the right hand of God the Father, to be given authority over *all of creation*. And that is where he is today.

But Paul’s not done. In verse twenty-two and following we read “And he put all things under his feet” ... “and gave him” ... “as head over all things” ... “to the church” ... “which is his body, the fulness of him who fills all in all.”

Now ... the word order of the sentence makes it a bit complicated, so let’s break it down just a little bit more. Paul says that God the Father put all things under Jesus’s feet, and then, he took Jesus, the one who was now head over all, who occupied the role of supreme authority in the universe, and he *gave him to the Church*.

That God the Father has given Christ to the Church for the Church’s good is not new. But we normally think of God giving Christ to the Church as its Savior, or him giving Christ to the Church as its Lord ... but Paul now reminds us that God the Father has also given Christ to the Church as the supreme ruler of all of creation.

The supreme authority of the universe, who sits on the throne of heaven at the right hand of God, has been given to the Church, as a gift.

That is the answer to our first question: What does Paul have to say? Paul is telling us that the Messiah given to us – the Messiah given to the Church – has been given supreme authority over all of creation.

And that leads to our second question: Why is that important?

Why is that important for us?

It's important because if that is so, if the Messiah we've been given as the Church has been given supreme authority over all of creation – *then we know that he is at work in all things for the good of his Church.*

It's important because it means that Christ is at work in *all things* for the good of his Church.

And that might seem obvious if you've been a Christian for a period of time ... especially if you've been a Presbyterian for a while. But I suspect that if someone were to look at how we often think, and speak, and act, then it might not seem that obvious to other people that that is what we believe.

It seems to me that we Christians are often good at applying this idea to our individual lives ... but not quite as good at applying it to the life of the Church as a community, as a corporate body, as an institution.

Let me explain what I mean: When we or another Christian close to us face some sort of challenge or hardship – when someone gets sick, or loses their job, or even loses a loved one, then we often comfort ourselves and others with the knowledge that God is in control, that Christ is on the throne, and that as Romans 8:28 says, God is working all things together for the good of his people. And we will state that, and we will preach it to ourselves and to others. And we will proclaim that truth even if we cannot see how whatever happened could work for good. We recognize it as something that is true, but that we need to cling to by faith.

But I don't notice the same tendency to point out that Christ is at work for good when it is the Christian Church as a body or institution that faces challenges or trials in our society.

When cultural forces challenge the claims of the Church or political forces challenge the liberty of the Church, or heresies threaten from within the Church, or division and schism threaten the unity of the Church ... you don't hear as many Christians reminding one another that Christ is at work *in all things* for the good of his Church. When the culture challenges a Christian understanding of some aspect of human life, or the powers that be in our society threaten to punish the Church for some aspect of her confession, you don't hear a lot of talk about how Christ must be orchestrating *all of this* for the good of his body, the Church. Instead ... often the same people who would tell an individual Christian facing a trial that God must be somehow working in it for their good ... that same person will respond to a threat towards the Church with the kind of despair, accommodation, or retreat that we discussed a moment ago.

And so, Paul is reminding the Ephesians and us, both that Christ is the supreme authority over all of creation, and that God the Father has given Christ to the Church to use that authority for the Church's good.

One commentator explains Paul's words in this passage like this – he writes: “Christ as cosmic Lord has been given to the Church [...] and Christ's supremacy over the cosmos is seen to be for the benefit of [...] ‘the Church’ [...] [For] all the supremacy and power God has given to Christ he has given to be used on behalf of the Church.” [Lincoln, 66, 70]

While Paul asserts in this text Christ's Lordship over both the Church and the cosmos, those are not just two parallel truths, but the second is subordinate to the first: Christ's Lordship over the cosmos *is to be used in service to his Lordship over the Church.* [Lincoln, 79]

And when we look back over Church history we can often see this.

In the first century and beyond, the early church faced local persecution from time to time, which could be mild ... or could be quite severe. The small and powerless Church would find itself the target of those who seemed far more powerful, from a human perspective. And yet ... rather than collapse, the Church grew. Rather than bringing an end to evangelism, the public martyrdom of Christians drew new people to the faith – people wanting to know what these Christians were willing to die for. As Tertullian put it, “the blood of the martyrs [was] the seed of the Church.” The truth was that even in those persecutions, Christ had authority over the worldly powers that were aimed against the Church, and he was at work, even through that worldly opposition, for the good of his Church.

In the second century a man named Marcion attacked the Christian Scriptures and sought to reduce the sixty-six books of the Bible to only eleven books. The controversy rocked the Church. It also was the catalyst that led the Church to robustly affirm its faith in the Hebrew Scriptures, to clarify the canon of the New Testament, and to develop its understanding of the relationship between those portions of God's word. *Christ was at work even through that worldly opposition, for the good of his Church.*

In the second and third centuries the Church was attacked by pagan philosophers, who called a number of key Christian beliefs into question and caused many to question their faith ... and God used that challenge to raise up defenders of the faith, the apologists, who then helped the young Church as a whole to grow in its understanding and articulation of the reasonableness of the faith of Christ. Christ was at work even through that worldly opposition, for the good of his Church.

In the third and fourth century Arius challenged the identity of Christ and the nature of God, denying Christ's deity and the doctrine of the Trinity. The movement ripped deeply into the heart of the Church, challenging her adherence to biblical truth, challenging her peace, and challenging her unity. But through that trial the Church articulated a deeper understanding of what the Bible teaches on the nature of Christ and the triune nature of God. Through that trial, the Church's understanding of God deepened. Christ was at work even through that heretical opposition, for the good of his Church.

We could of course go on and on. But instead, let me note two things.

First, we can see these examples pretty clearly ... but that is with the advantage of centuries of hindsight – hindsight that those going through them would not have had. They could not see the benefits that would come as the outcome of their struggles. They had to walk by faith, not sight – faith that Christ was at work through the trial they faced, even when they could not see it.

We too will not usually be able to see what Christ is doing in the midst of the trials the Church faces today. We too must walk by faith, not by sight, believing that Christ is at work.

Second, while we can list many past examples where we *can* now see how Christ worked through trials and opposition, there are still cases where we *cannot* see it. There are still historical cases where we have to confess that Christ was at work even though we have no idea how. So, Tertullian could look at the persecutions in the ancient world in the Roman Empire and say that the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church ... but the persecution of Christians in Japan in the seventeenth century effectively stamped out the Church in that country. So how was *that* for the overall good of the Church? How was Jesus working through *that* for the good of his Church? I don't know. Here again, we must hold to our confession by faith, and not by sight.

In the same way, so often today we cannot see what Jesus is doing in and through the challenges the Church faces, the challenges over which he is still sovereign. We can try to guess, but we don't know, and at times we are genuinely perplexed.

Our calling though, as Paul reminds us, is to continue to trust that Christ has authority over all of creation and that he is working for the good of his Church. That is Christian faith. That is biblical wisdom.

J.I. Packer puts it like this – he writes:

“The real basis of wisdom is a frank acknowledgement that this world's course is enigmatic, that much of what happens is quite inexplicable to us, and that most occurrences ‘under the sun’ bear no outward sign of a rational, moral God ordering them at all.” [Packer 104-105]

He goes on:

“The truth is that God in his wisdom, to make and keep us humble and to teach us to walk by faith, has hidden from us almost everything that we should like to know about the providential purposes which he is working out in the churches and in our own lives.” [Packer, 106]

God has arranged things so that often we cannot see the good that he is doing – we cannot make the connections ourselves. But even when we cannot see, it is still true that he is working for good.

So, first: What does Paul have to say? That the Messiah given to us – the Messiah given to the Church – has been given supreme authority over all of creation.

Second: Why is this important? It's important because it means that Christ is at work in all things for the good of his Church.

And finally, third: How should this affect us?

How should these truths affect us?

And here we must consider that whereas fear of defeat leads us to despair, accommodation, or retreat (as we said earlier), knowing and believing that the Messiah given to us has supreme authority over all of creation and is at work in all things for the good of his Church – that knowledge enables us to face powerful opposition with: hope, steadfastness, and diligence.

It should affect us by causing us to face powerful opposition with hope, steadfastness, and diligence.

Let's take just a moment on each of those.

First, whereas fear of defeat leads us to despair, knowledge that Christ is ascended and is on the throne leads us to hope.

This hope, to be clear, is not a hope rooted in wishful thinking, but a proper confidence in a future outcome – a firm conviction, based on a knowledge of Christ's lordship, that as Christ said before his ascension in Matthew 28 he will never leave us nor forsake us, and as Christ promised in Matthew 16 the gates of hell will not prevail against the Church.

This hope is also not the hope of pompous self-confidence, the belief that *we* are too smart to be led astray, or that *we* are too righteous to be tempted away ... but it is a hope rooted in Christ's ability and desire to guard, defend, and work for the good of his people.

It is the quiet confidence of faith that does not need to despair or catastrophize, *or* to sugarcoat the challenges we face but that instead looks at the promises of God, looks at the past faithfulness of God, and walks towards the challenges ahead with both realism and with a confidence that Christ will work all things for the good of his Church.

Whereas fear of defeat leads us to despair, knowledge that Christ is ascended and is on the throne leads us to hope.

Second, whereas fear of defeat leads us to accommodate ethically, theologically, politically, or pragmatically, knowledge that Christ is sovereign leads us to faithful steadfastness.

It leads us to faithful steadfastness towards Christ for several reasons, one of which being that if these claims are true, then faithful steadfastness towards Christ is the only rational response.

Think about it like this: People accommodate that which they think is wrong in order to gain more power in a situation. But if we see with the eyes of faith, we must recognize that by turning away from Christ towards a worldly power, we trade a greater power for a lesser one. If we compromise the ethics or the spiritual truth claims that Jesus calls us to, in order to appease the culture around us, then we are like a person that betrays the favor of their king in order to appease a group of low-level bureaucrats who oppose that king. We have weakened our position, not strengthened it. If we compromise or misuse our Christian convictions in exchange for protection from one political tribe against another, we are like a servant of the king who forsakes the command of the powerful king who commands a royal army, in exchange for a promise of protection from a local sheriff. We have weakened our position, not strengthened it. We might feel more secure at first ... but we're not.

In both cases, we may get some initial ease from such a trade ... but in the long run, we have given up a greater help for a lesser one. We have given up a sure long-term security for the illusion of short-term safety. Such a choice is not only unfaithful, it is irrational.

With a conviction that Christ our Messiah sits on the throne of the universe, our persistent, dogged holding on to the truths and the commands that Christ gave us is rational steadfastness ... not irrational stubbornness.

Whereas fear of defeat leads us to accommodate the Christian faith to that which Christ has opposed, knowledge that Christ is sovereign leads us to faithful steadfastness.

Finally, whereas fear of defeat leads to retreat, knowledge of Christ's power on our behalf leads to diligence.

One might suppose that the assurance of the Church's good and her victory through Christ's sovereign power might make us passive – but that is not the case.

The soldier caught in a battle he feels is hopeless is the soldier who considers retreat – who longs to withdraw and hide from the battle.

But the soldier who knows that victory is coming is spurred on to fight with diligence.

It is the very picture we sing of in the fifth verse of “For All the Saints”:

“And when the strife is fierce, the warfare long,
Steals on the ear the distant triumph song,
And hearts are brave again, and arms are strong.
Hallelujah! Hallelujah!”

When the battle seems difficult ... when the battle feels unwinnable ... when we are tempted to give up, to lose hope, to retreat ... the fact that Christ is on the throne, that he is sovereign over all of creation, and that *he will have the final victory*, is to come to our ears like a victory song in the distance. The picture is one of soldiers fighting and they hear in the distance that the battle is already won. And as they hear it, they do not withdraw from the fight before them, they don't pull back from the enemy that still stands in their way, but they press on with more energy, more enthusiasm, more diligence – because they know the battle is won. They know the victory is theirs.

If we believe that Christ sits on the throne, then when we are hard pressed, rather than being tempted to retreat, we will remember Christ's victory and power, and be all the more diligent in the struggle, knowing the victory that awaits us.

What does Paul have to say to us in our text? That the Messiah given to us – the Messiah given to the Church – has been given supreme authority over all of creation.

Why is this important? It's important because it means that Christ is at work in all things for the good of his Church.

And finally: How should these truths affect us?

They should affect us by causing us to face powerful opposition with hope, steadfastness, and diligence.

When we face opposition, we long for all the help we can get. We long for every resource to be at our disposal. And increasingly the Christian Church in the Western world feels such opposition.

In that context, the story of the ascension of Christ can feel to us like a loss, if we think about it. We lament that Christ is not physically here with us – not in the thick of the fight with us. We struggle with the fact that we cannot see, and hear, and reach out and touch our Lord. We are

frustrated that we cannot point others – especially those who doubt him – that we can't point others to the risen Christ in the flesh.

And in some ways those feelings are valid, or else we would not rejoice so much at Christ's return.

But we must remember that Christ's ascension is less about where he left than it is about where he went. Because where he went changes everything.

And where did he go?

As the Apostle Paul tells us: God the Father "raised him 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 above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things 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."

We are the Church. Christ the sovereign Lord has been given to us.

Let us hold firmly on to that truth as we face the challenges ahead.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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