

THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE
Sermon for the Ascension of our Lord, 2022
Ephesians 1:15-23

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is our Second Reading from before, Ephesians 1:15-23: **For this reason, since I heard about the faith that you have in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's holy people,** ¹⁶ **I do not stop thanking God for you as I remember you in my prayers.** ¹⁷ **I ask the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, to give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, that you may know Him better.** ¹⁸ **I pray that the eyes of your minds will be enlightened, that you may know the hope to which He has called you, how rich His glorious inheritance is among His holy people,** ¹⁹ **and how incomparably great His power is for us, who believe according to the working of His mighty power.** ²⁰ **He worked with that same power in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly realms,** ²¹ **far above all rule, authority, power, dominion and every other name that can be mentioned, not only in this age but also in the one to come.** ²² **He also put everything under His feet and appointed Him as the Head of everything, for the benefit of the church,** ²³ **which is His body, filled completely by Him who fills everything in every way.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Today we are celebrating the ascension of our Lord. This is a major festival in the Church Year. Last Thursday was forty days after Easter. It was on that marvellous occasion when our Lord Jesus Christ, after His resurrection, ascended into heaven. Today, we want to see how this great event connects and ties together the past, the present, and the future work of Christ. Because it does, our Lord's ascension has great importance for us in *our* past, present, and future.

From the book of Acts, we know that Paul had served in Ephesus for three years.¹ However, by the time he wrote this letter, Paul had been in captivity in Rome for almost three years. It is in the section we have today as our text, that we find him bringing together the past, present, and future, both with respect to Christ and to us.

Let's start with the *past work of Christ*.

Paul refers to this past work when he talks about the working of God's great might. He writes how God had **“worked with that same power in Christ when He raised Him from the dead.”** This reference to Christ's death and resurrection - the death of Christ, His past work which He completed on the cross, is the basis for everything that follows from it: Christ's resurrection, His ascension, His being seated at the right hand of the Father, and His coming again. There can be no present or future work of Christ without His past work of dying on the cross as its foundation.

What Paul says here in this part of Ephesians is in the context of what he says elsewhere in the rest of this letter. Elsewhere in Ephesians, Paul makes much of the past work of Christ, His suffering and death, and what that means for us. Paul opens this letter by saying that in Christ, *“we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.”*² Later he says that we have been brought near to God *“by the blood of Christ”*³ and that Christ has made peace and reconciled us to God *“through the cross.”*⁴ You see, the Christ who ascends into heaven is the same Christ who has suffered and died and shed His blood on the cross. This same Jesus is the One whom God has raised from the dead and seated at His right hand. So the past completed work of Christ is the basis for His present and His future work.

That completed work of Christ takes care of *our past*. All our transgressions, all our unsavoury past of which we are ashamed, all our failures and unfaithfulness - all that past is taken care of, cleansed, paid for and atoned by the blood

¹ Acts 19ff

² Ephesians 1:7

³ Ephesians 2:13

⁴ Ephesians 2:16

of Christ. We have been freed from the unfavourable record of our sins, and the slate has been wiped clean by the finished work of Christ. Christ's completed work on the cross covers and cleanses the guilt of our past.

Christ's ascension confirms this completed work on the cross. It shows that the Father approves what the Son has accomplished. God puts His stamp of approval on it by raising Christ from the dead, exalting Him in this glorious ascension, and seating Him with honour at His right hand.

So the ascension affirms the past work of Christ. At the same time, the ascension also points to the *future work of Christ.*

Paul refers to this when he speaks of Christ's authority and dominion **“not only in this age but also in the one to come.”**

The one to come is the age that will commence when Christ comes again, when He returns in glory on the Last Day. The angels at the ascension were very definite about this second coming. They told the eyewitnesses: *“This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come back in the same way as you have seen Him go into heaven”* (Acts 1:11). His coming again will initiate the age to come that Paul speaks of.

Paul speaks expressly about our future in that age to come. He wants us to know **“how rich His glorious inheritance is among His holy people.”** That glorious inheritance is our future! It's what's in store for us! An inheritance is something you do not hold in your hands now, but it is ours, nonetheless. We are in line for that glorious inheritance; we have its title. It is stored up in heaven for us, in safekeeping. No one can touch our inheritance or take it away from us. You and I are the rightful heirs because we have been baptised as children of God through Christ, co-heirs with Christ, the Son of God. And so what Christ receives, we receive! Jesus was raised from the dead, and so we shall be raised from the dead. Jesus was carried up into heaven, and so we who trust in Him likewise shall be carried up into heaven. Therefore, the ascension shows us our future and what's in store for us, and it is *glorious!*

That then brings us to the *present*, and this is where the ascension serves as the bridge between the past and the future. It connects Christ's past and future work, and it connects our own past and future, for the ascension tells us what Christ is doing now, for us, and that in turn fills us with hope in our now, in our present.

What is Christ doing now, during this time between His ascension and His coming again? Paul tells us. He says that God has **“seated Him (Christ) at His right hand in the heavenly realms,²¹ far above all rule, authority, power, dominion and every other name that can be mentioned, not only in this age but also in the one to come.²² He also put everything under His feet and appointed Him as the Head of everything, for the benefit of the church.”**

Our risen and ascended Lord right now is seated at the right hand of God. The right hand is the position of high honour and all authority. God has highly exalted Christ and given Him great glory because Christ has accomplished His saving mission and has been set as head over all things. All things have been put under His feet. *“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me⁵,”* the risen Christ once declared. Jesus truly is *King of kings and Lord of lords.*⁶

So realise this: Christ Jesus right now is ruling all things for the sake of His church! This means that *all things* are under His control and for our good. Some of us wonder what direction our nation is heading in. What does its future have in store? It may look like life is going downhill: Health problems, financial problems, family and relationship problems, chaos and confusion and shifting from one crisis to another. But listen: the rise and fall of nations, all the tumultuous events that play out in our world, in our own personal lives, the whole course of human history - all of it is under Christ's control. Christ is ruling all things **“for the benefit of the church”** so that she may carry out her mission, *which is the spread of the Gospel.* For the good of His people, for the sheep of His flock whom He loves and cares for so deeply, *for our good* - this is how Jesus is exercising His authority right now, in the present.

Christ Jesus has ascended into heaven, and now He is seated at God's right hand, head over all things, with all things under His feet. This present work of Christ fills us with hope, even amid our present circumstances, whatever they may be. That's what Paul is telling us today in his prayer for us. He prays for **“the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the**

⁵ Matthew 28:18

⁶ 1 Timothy 6:15

glorious Father, to give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, that you may know Him better. ¹⁸ I pray that the eyes of your minds will be enlightened, that you may know the hope to which He has called you, how rich His glorious inheritance is among His holy people, ¹⁹ and how incomparably great His power is for us, who believe according to the working of His mighty power.”

God’s will for us is that we may know Christ - know Him in an intimate, relational, practical way, and grow in our knowledge of Him, having the eyes of our minds enlightened so that we may clearly see what the big picture is, from God’s perspective. And with that, then, **“that you may know the hope to which He has called you.”** What is hope? Hope is faith projected into the future. Hope is believing firmly in what is in store for you, what the future holds for you. It’s knowing that God holds your future. Hope is the present knowledge of your future inheritance. Let me repeat that: Hope is the present knowledge of a future inheritance, the inheritance that awaits us in heaven. And this firm, sure, certain hope - as sure as Christ’s own resurrection and ascension - this hope is what sustains us amid all the ups and downs of our lives. This hope acts as our anchor in the storms of life. It holds us steady so that we are not shaken or overwhelmed. God wants us to have this hope, to know this hope, with every fibre of our being. Christ’s ascension is a sure sign that we have this hope to hold on to.

Dear friends, the ascension of our Lord connects the past, present, and future of Christ’s work. It confirms His completed work on the cross. It points to His future return, and it leads us to realise that right now, in the present, Christ is ruling all things for the sake of His church.

So His ascension has great meaning for us, for our past, present, and future. The sins of our past have been wiped away by the shed blood of Christ. We have a glorious future inheritance laid up for us in heaven, and we have a firm hope in our present, whatever our circumstances, knowing that Christ is ruling all things for our good and the good of His church. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR ASCENSION DAY

Lord God, heavenly Father, You are our strength and our song. We praise You that You have prepared salvation for us in Jesus, Your Son. We praise You for His life on earth as a human being like us, full of grace and truth. We praise You that You have revealed Yourself and Your love in Him. We thank You for Jesus’ death and resurrection. We praise You that our Lord, who has offered Himself as a perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world, is now at Your right hand. Give us Your Spirit’s power to believe all that He has taught us, and to do all that He has commanded us. Accept our thanks for His miracles and deeds of mercy.

By Your Spirit, help us to claim His sacrifice for our salvation, and to trust in Him for the gift of eternal life. As we now celebrate His ascension to Your right hand, give us constant joy. Enable us to centre our devotion on our living Lord on heaven’s throne, ruling all things for the good of His Church and His children. Lift our minds to heaven where our Lord Jesus lives to pray for us. Give us confidence in His compassion, and in His power to bless.

Lord Jesus, continue to be present with us, as You have promised. Be present with us as You move us to witness to Your saving love to people everywhere, that Your Gospel may be proclaimed to all nations. Establish Your kingdom of grace in every land. Turn the hearts of people in every corner of the world to faith and obedience, so that every knee may bow and every tongue confess that You are both Christ and Lord.

Lord Jesus, with all things under Your feet, keep our land in righteousness and peace. Give us leaders who love and honour You. May Your Spirit hold sway in all schools, and in all institutions of learning and research. Bless all hospitals and places of mercy; and make Your healing touch evident in them. Protect us from war, disease, and every calamity; spare us from greed, rebellion, and lawlessness. Give all in our land a true love of piety and peace.

We pray for all who are suffering in any way, especially for those who are sick. Give them trust in Your love, and teach them to pray in patience and hope.

Lord Jesus, seated at God's right hand, preserve our faith and love during life's little day, and strengthen us to watch and pray for Your return. Make us glad that, when You come again, You will come to receive us to Yourself for ever. We offer these prayers, Christ our Lord, in Your name, which is far above every other name. Amen.

THE ASCENSION OF OUR LORD

Acts 1:1-11

¹ In my former book, Theophilus, I have written about everything that Jesus began to do and to teach ² until the day when He was taken up to heaven, after He had given Instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom He had chosen.

³ After His suffering, Jesus also showed these men, through many convincing proofs, that He was alive. He was seen by them during a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. ⁴ While He was eating with them, He ordered them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait for what the Father had promised. He said, "You have heard about this from Me. ⁵ For John baptised with water, but not many days from now you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit."

⁶ Therefore, when they met together, they asked Him, "Lord, are You at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

⁷ He told them, "It is not for you to know the times or events that the Father has set by His own authority. ⁸ However, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the farthest parts of the world."

⁹ After He had said this and while they were watching Him, He was lifted up and a cloud took Him away from their sight. ¹⁰ While they were gazing into the sky as He was going, suddenly two men in white clothes stood beside them. ¹¹ They asked, "Men of Galilee, why are you standing and looking up into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come back in the same way as you have seen Him go into heaven."

Ephesians 1:15-23

¹⁵ For this reason, since I heard about the faith that you have in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's holy people, ¹⁶ I do not stop thanking God for you as I remember you in my prayers. ¹⁷ I ask the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, to give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, that you may know Him better. ¹⁸ I pray that the eyes of your minds will be enlightened, that you may know the hope to which He

has called you, how rich His glorious inheritance is among His holy people, ¹⁹ and how incomparably great His power is for us, who believe according to the working of His mighty power. ²⁰ He worked with that same power in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly realms, ²¹ far above all rule, authority, power, dominion and every other name that can be mentioned, not only in this age but also in the one to come. ²² He also put everything under His feet and appointed Him as the Head of everything, for the benefit of the church, ²³ which is His body, filled completely by Him who fills everything in every way.

Luke 24:44-53

⁴⁴ He told them, "These are the very words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, namely, that everything written about Me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled."

⁴⁵ Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶ He told them, "This is what Scripture has said: 'The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and, based on His name, repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.' ⁴⁸ You will testify to these things.

⁴⁹ "I am sending you what My Father has promised. Wait here in the city until you are armed with power from above!"

⁵⁰ He led them out to where Bethany lay ahead of them. Then He raised His hands and blessed them. ⁵¹ While He was blessing them, He left them and was taken up to heaven.

⁵² They knelt in worship of Him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. ⁵³ They stayed continually at the Temple, praising God.