

The Ascension Day Reality

Ephesians 1:16–23 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.

Over two thousand years ago, on this very day, the risen Lord Jesus ascended into heaven. Since that time Christians have set aside this day every year to mark the occasion and reflect on the difference it made in the life of every child of God. However, as the years past, the importance of this day in Christians lives has faded from view. Consequently, Ascension Day does not capture the attention like a Christmas or an Easter. That is a loss for the events of this day are as important to our daily lives as any of the other major Christian notes. God brings us together today to remind us of this truth. For the past five weeks our pastors have been leading us through the simple truth that Easter changed everything for us. They told us of the peace and the joy and the security that Jesus has created for us by conquering death and rising to life. On Ascension Day the ascended Lord takes those changes that his victory produced and makes them a reality in our life experience every day.

Consider the way Ascension Day has changed the world in which we live. That change might not be so apparent to us as we look around this world today. When we compare the world in which Jesus lived with the world as it is today, it is hard to see any difference. In Jesus' day the world was filled with war and disease and loss. The Roman armies were conquering every nation in their path. Their soldiers walked the streets of Israel in Jesus' day. People thronged Jesus wherever he went, pleading with him to cure their diseases. And evil stalked his path as he spread the message of God's word and the religious and government powers of that day opposed him. So it was then, and so it seems to be even today.

Turn on the TV news each night and there are continual stories of wars and conflicts the cover almost every part of the globe. Wars and rumors of wars fill the airwaves. And though two thousand years have passed, and there has been huge progress in the field of medicine, disease still stalks the planet. We live in the middle of a pandemic the covers the globe. The television holds it before our eyes and counts the bodies that pile up. Then there are the savage storms that destroy property and spread suffering. The randomness of it all takes our breath away. Two planes take off from an airport. Both have been maintained in exactly the same way. Yet one crashes and all aboard die while the other lands safely. There seems to be no explanation as to why one plane crashes and others don't, why one person gets sick and dies and the person next to them stays healthy. It appears that chaos rules everywhere we look, the same as it seemed in Jesus' day.

Then there is the evil that is so prevalent. If anything, it seems that evil is growing far worse in our world each day. Those of us who have lived a while on earth can remember a time when some actions were recognized by all as being perversion. Now those same behaviors are celebrated as something honorable and natural. This is a world where evil seems not only to be practiced, but actually seems to be winning. That is the world as we see it today. Chaos is the description and evil has the upper hand. It looks as if no one is in charge and there is no rhyme or reason that explains what is happening.

And then we step out of that chaotic evil world and enter the temple of the Lord on Ascension Day. Here the ascended Lord through the Apostle Paul tells us that things are not as we think them to be. In fact, God gathers us together in his house tonight to tell us that all we think we see and all we think we know about this world is actually “fake news.” Our eyes and our ears are telling us that the world is beset with chaos, that no one is in charge, that evil rules the world. Yet what our senses are telling us is not true at all. Paul lays out the ascension reality in these words. 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.**

The ascension truth is that at this very moment, Jesus sits on the throne at the right hand of God ruling this universe. Paul reveals the power Jesus has in this ruling position. He says Jesus is 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.** Right now the risen Lord Jesus sits on the throne of heaven ruling the world. All powers and authorities are completely subject to him. Nothing happens in this world, large or small, unless Jesus himself allows it. That is true for the storms of nature. It is true for the germs that bring disease. It is true even for people who carry out evil actions. Jesus power limits all things and makes them serve his purposes. And he uses this power to work his will for his church and his creation. 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.** Jesus uses his power strictly to accomplish his purposes and make all things work for his goals. From the throne of heaven, Jesus is devoting his attention to doing two things each day. First of all, Jesus is sending warnings to every person on earth that a great day of judgment is coming. Every disaster, every storm of nature, every terrible accident, carries that warning. These are mini judgments alerting the sinful world to the fact that something is terribly wrong between sinful mankind and the God who created us. These judgments call all people to repent, before the great judgment comes. The second thing Jesus is doing is making all the things that happen in this world work as a blessing for the believers in Christ. The ruling Lord “makes all things work together for good to those that love God.” So the world is not controlled by chaos. There is a Lord ruling in heaven who controls all things. Evil is not in charge. The risen Lord is carrying out his Easter victory at this moment.

This is the ascension reality that now is ours every day but seeing that reality is anything but simple. The problem is while our five senses help us see what is happening, we cannot see with our eyes the Lord Jesus as he rules the earth each day. To understand the ascension reality, we must learn to look through the eye of faith. Paul explained the problem in these words. **1 Cor.2:13,14 ... the things that come from the Spirit of God ...**

are spiritually discerned. This is why in our text the Apostle Paul offers an Ascension Day prayer. 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 ...**

Paul prays that God through the power of his word would open our eyes of faith to the new ascension reality. Paul prays that God teaches us to look at this world and all that happens in it through the eye of faith. God calls us to make the first thing we see every morning that the Lord Jesus is ruling this earth today. Therefore all that happens in our lives will be for our good and will work out as a blessing. When this is the first ascension reality that fills our day, the changes Jesus won at Easter become a living reality in our life. Jesus is watching over his children and making all things work as a blessing each day for them. As God reminds us of that truth each day, the changes Jesus worked by the power of his resurrection will become our daily reality. Paul prays that God awaken us to three such realities every day. The first is what Paul calls “hope.”

¹⁸ **having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you ...** Hope is hard in this dark and fearful world. Every person in this room has more than a little experience with the feeling that we are facing situations in which hope is impossible. In fact, it is likely that many of us can name such moments happening in our lives right now. While each situation that fills our hearts with hopelessness is different, the basic elements are the same. We see the size of the problem we are facing, and then we measure that problem against the intelligence and strength we have to overcome the problem. When the problems are huge and our strength is small, hopelessness fills our souls.

But the Lord of heaven this day urges us to see the new reality that is ours. We need never feel hopeless again. Jesus is ascended. He rules in heaven right now. While our strength and intellect might not be able to create a solution for what we face, there is no problem so large that Jesus cannot resolve it. This is the Lord who cured the lame and healed the leper and gave sight to blind men. The ascended Lord is the one who stood by the side of a man named Jairus just as he was told that his daughter had died and there was no hope. Jesus told him, **“Do not be afraid! Only believe!”** Then Jesus raised his daughter to life. The ascended Lord is here today to teach us that there is no situation in our lives so difficult, no problem so large, no moment so terrifying, that we have no hope. The Ascended Lord stands by our side. We can face every moment knowing that all will be well.

Now on the surface, this truth is one that we all understand. Even now we can all easily accept that there is no problem so large Jesus can’t solve it. We know that this is a Lord for whom “nothing is impossible.” Yet knowing that Jesus has all power, and believing that he will use that power for our benefit, is an entirely different conversation. In fact, the devil works hard to make us think that the problems in our life and the things that fill us with fear are evidence that God is not with us. The Bible tells us that when the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon to tell him God favored him, Gideon once asked, **“If God is for us, then why has all this happened to us.”** Like Gideon, in the face of hardship and loss and fear, we wonder if God has turned his back on us. That is when it is time for the ascended Lord to again remind us of our new reality. Paul says it lies in the simple truth at we recognize each day what he calls **“... the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints ...** Pay close attention to the word “inheritance.” Too often we are tempted to skip over that word, viewing it as simply a reference to some future benefit in heaven earned for us by the Lord. And it surely does refer to that. But it also teaches us about our reality now. Jesus has created for us **“a glorious inheritance in the saints.”**

The Lord who ascended into heaven has chosen us as his dear children. We through faith in Christ are members of God's family, treasures valued by God himself. Knowing this, we can be sure each day that God is on our side. He promises **"I will never leave you nor forsake you."** He assures us that **"he is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."** God treasures us each day and is always eager to bless us. Jesus has earned God's favor for us once and for all. No hardship in our life can change that truth or convince us God has forgotten about us. No reminder of our sinful condition can alter this truth. Jesus has risen from the dead and won forgiveness for all sin. In God's eyes we are his holy, chosen children. As such we can be sure that the Lord who rules the universe is completely on our side every day and is eager to fill our lives with his blessings. This is our ascension reality.

Consequently, Paul points us to the final reality that is ours. Paul identifies this as ... **the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe ...** Because Jesus has ascended into heaven and now rules from the right hand of God, you and I possess an incredible **"power."** It is the same power God demonstrated when he defeated death by raising his Son to life on Easter Sunday. That power is at our disposal through the privilege of prayer. The ascended Lord says, **"The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective."** Our ascended Lord today says, **"Ask and it shall be given."** It is most likely that everyone in this room tonight can sight prayers they have prayed in the past which seemed to go unanswered. So when God tells us to "ask and it shall be given," we by experience know that God is not telling us he will simply fulfill every request we make. With this promise God is revealing his attitude toward our prayers. God is announcing as our Father in heaven that he is eager to give us whatever we ask for. That is his first option for any prayer we pray. So the ascension power reality that is ours each day is to know that God is eager to hear our prayers and eager to grant them.

And in truth there are only two answers that God will give our prayers. The first answer is that God will grant us what we are asking. That is his first option. However, since God is much wiser than we are, and since God knows better than we do what is best for us, there will be times when God will answer our prayer by giving us something even better than we are requesting. Those are the only two answers God gives his children. Either the risen Lord will give us what we are asking for, or he will give us something even better.

Now that does not mean we will always instantly understand how God's answer to our prayers is somehow even better than what we asked for. Our senses are not always going to be able to explain the ways of God or the wisdom of God. But just because we do not know how God's answer is better, does not mean that it is not better.

Consider one example from the Bible. Remember the Israelites in the desert when the Lord sent snakes among them? The Israelites repented and prayed to the Lord to take the snakes away. The Lord instead told Moses to make a serpent of bronze and hang it on a pole. He told the Israelites when the snakes bit them to look at the bronze serpent and trust that the Lord would heal them. God did not take the snakes away. In his wisdom he used them as an opportunity to test the faith of his people. That was an answer even better for them than granting their request. And while it is likely that some of the Israelites struggled to see how having snakes bite them is a better answer than taking the snakes away, we can be sure when those same children of God got to heaven and saw the wisdom of God in action, they thanked God for choosing that answer.

That is how God answers prayer. He is eager to give us exactly what we ask for if that is best. But if God in his wisdom knows of a better answer, he does that instead. We may not understand at the time why God chose a different answer, but in heaven we will see the Lord's wisdom and thank him. So it was with the Israelites and so it will be for us. So use the power that is at your disposal. The Lord of heaven on the throne of God is eager to hear your request and eager to give you are asking for or something even better. This is the power that is yours each day.

The Ascension Day reality. The world right now is controlled by Jesus sitting on the throne of heaven. All things are subject to him and he works all things for the good of his people. This truth fills us with hope each day. We know that Jesus is on our side and works for our good. That gives us power to face each new day and know all is well. This is the power that is ours right now. These are our realities with the Lord ascended to the right hand of God. Each day we have hope and support and power as the Lord who rules the universe makes all things work together for our good.