

“Ascension, Exaltation, and Patience”
Philippians 2:3-11, Part 3
June 1, 2025
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

We return this morning to Paul’s letter to the Christians in Philippi, and one final time to chapter two, verses three through eleven.

As I’ve mentioned in my previous sermons, there’s a lot going on in this passage as Paul here presents an ethical exhortation, anchored in a theological claim, and oriented towards an eschatological expectation.

A few weeks ago, we focused on the theological foundation of this passage: Paul’s claim about what God is like. And we said that the God of the Bible is truly humble. And because God is humble, he draws close to us when we are laid low, and even in our sin.

The next week, we built on that, by considering the ethical point Paul is making from that theological claim. And we said that since we are made, and being remade, in the image of the true God, we should strive to be like Jesus by pouring ourselves out for others.

Now, this morning, we look at Paul’s eschatological point, about God’s future promises, and how that should shape us now, in our particular moment of redemptive history. And as we’ll see, this is an especially appropriate topic on this Ascension Sunday.

With all that in mind, let’s turn now to our passage: Philippians 2:3-11.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

Paul writes:

^{2:3} Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“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 ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, we rejoice at your word,
like one who finds great spoil.
We know that those who love your law have peace,
and nothing can make them stumble.
And so help us now to pursue a life of faithfulness,
knowing that all our ways are before you.
Grant this, we ask, for Jesus's sake. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:162-163, 165, 167-168]

Introduction

With our call to worship, this Ascension Sunday, we heard the account of Jesus ascending to heaven, where he then sat at the right hand of God the Father, to reign.

As Christians, we believe that Christ has died for our sins. On the third day he rose bodily from the grave. And forty days after that, he ascended to heaven, where he now reigns over the world. And one day, he will return again, to make all things new, and to bring his reign fully to bear over every square inch of this world.

Our text this morning describes both Christ's ascension and his second coming, as the Apostle Paul writes about Jesus in verses nine through eleven that "God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

We live, in a sense, in between verses nine and ten. In his ascension, God has exalted Jesus and bestowed upon him the name that is above every name. That is what happened in Jesus's ascension to heaven.

But, as we look at the world around us, we do not yet see every knee bowing before the name of Jesus, or every tongue confessing that Jesus is Lord.

This is where we find ourselves in this strange time between the ascension and the final coming of Jesus – this strange time between verses nine and ten.

And that is what I want to consider this Ascension Sunday.

And as we reflect on that reality, what we see is that: God has exalted and vindicated Jesus Christ. But we do not yet see the full effects of that on earth. In the meantime, God is patient, and he calls us to be patient as well.

Let me say that again: God has exalted and vindicated Jesus Christ. But we do not yet see the full effects of that on earth. In the meantime, God is patient, and he calls us to be patient as well.

Let's break that down together.

God Has Exalted & Vindicated Jesus Christ

The first thing we see here is that God has exalted and vindicated Jesus Christ.

In Christ, God the Son came to earth in human form. He humbled himself in order to save us, living the life we should have lived, and then dying the death we deserved to die, all for our salvation.

This is what the Apostle Paul described in verses 5 through 8.

But the story of Jesus doesn't end there. Because after all that, God the Father lifted Jesus up, as we read in verses 9: "Therefore," Paul writes, "God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name."

What did this exaltation look like? Well, it contained several things. Among them, our shorter catechism explains: "Christ's exaltation consists in his rising again from the dead on the third day, in ascending up into heaven, in sitting at the right hand of God the Father."

In all these ways, the Father has already exalted Jesus. He raised him from the dead, giving him a new body that will never die again. And then, he lifted Jesus up, bodily, to heaven, in the Ascension, so that now Jesus is seated in the throne room of God, at his right hand.

This is what we believe and confess: that Jesus has already been given, by God, a name that is above every name.

God has exalted Jesus.

And with that exaltation also comes Jesus's vindication.

The world – this fallen and flawed world we live in – rejected Jesus. It denied that he was the Son of God. It denied his goodness and his righteousness. It denied his power and love. It took the Lord of life and declared that he deserved to die. It condemned him.

And once the world had killed him ... the world believed it had won. The world believed it had been vindicated – it had proven that it was right about Jesus all along – he was nothing but a lying, pathetic, peasant who pretended at kingship.

But then ... instead of allowing the world's self-vindication to stand, God the Father vindicated Jesus. He raised him from the dead, giving him not just a resuscitated or even healed body, but a glorified body – a resurrection body – that would never die again. Then, after forty days, God the Father elevated Jesus even further, into his presence, as he ascended into heaven and into the immediate presence of the Father. And from there, he raised him even higher, because Jesus doesn't just reside with the Father in heaven. He reigns with the Father in heaven, at the right hand of God [Acts 7:56].

In all of this, God the Father has fully vindicated Jesus: in his resurrection, showing that Jesus is in fact the Lord of life, who can overcome death itself; in his ascension, showing that Jesus is in fact, the holy, righteous, and pure One, who can dwell in the immediate presence of God; and in his reign at the right hand of God, showing that Jesus is in fact the true Lord and King of this world.

In all of this, God has exalted and vindicated Jesus – affirming that Jesus is who he said he was – he is who Jesus’s followers confessed him to be.

God has exalted and vindicated Jesus Christ. That’s the first thing we see in verse nine of our text.

We Do Not Yet See the Full Effects of That on Earth

But then, along with that, the next thing we see is that though God has exalted and vindicated Jesus Christ, we do not yet see the full effects of this on earth.

And this comes out in the fact that while the Apostles witnessed with their own eyes God highly exalting Jesus and bestowing on him a name above every name, as described in verse nine ... neither they ... nor we ... have yet seen every knee bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, at the name of Jesus ... nor have we heard every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, as described in verses ten and eleven.

Though God has exalted and vindicated Jesus Christ, we do not yet see the full effects of this on earth.

Now, to be sure, as Christians, we believe – we know – we can have true confidence that the day will come, when that will happen.

Christ will return, with power. He will subdue all his enemies. He will cast out those who have persisted in rejecting him. He will make all things new. And then he and his people will dwell together, forever, in a new heavens and a new earth. That is what’s coming – that is what we look forward to.

But we don’t yet see it.

We don’t yet see every person bending the knee before Jesus – acknowledging with their whole person that Jesus is, in fact, Lord. They should! But they don’t.

And we often fail to do that well too.

We’ve bowed before him today, yes. But did we bow before him in humble prayer from the heart yesterday? Or the day before? Most of us don’t confess his Lordship with our lips nearly as often as we should.

And that’s even more true when it comes to our lives. We each, with our lives, fail to live out the reality of Jesus’s Lordship over us as deeply or as consistently as we should.

And if we – who are Jesus’s followers – fall so short of this ... how much more is it also true that those who ignore or reject Jesus’s claims fail to bow before him and confess his Lordship rightly?

Both the masses and the elite powers of this world so often deny Jesus’s claims. They deny his kingship. They deny that he is Lord. And much of the world goes on, as if Jesus had not been exalted – as if Jesus had not been vindicated by God the Father.

This is the world we live in, between the ascension and the final coming of Christ – between verses nine and ten of our passage this morning.

God has exalted and vindicated Jesus Christ. But we do not yet see the full effects of that on earth.

In the Meantime, God Is Patient

So we live in this odd in-between time – this age between the ascension and the final coming of Jesus Christ.

And that has a number of implications worth considering. But one, which I want to focus on this morning, is that in the meantime – in this odd, in-between time – God is patient.

And that’s worth reflecting on.

David Baily Harned helps us reflect on what biblical patience is. And he describes four aspects of the Christian virtue of patience.

One aspect of patience, he explains, is calm endurance in the midst of suffering – the ability to endure suffering without sinful discontentedness. [Harned, 111,113]

And we see that trait in God. We see it most clearly in the sinless endurance of Jesus, as he faced the suffering of his earthly ministry, and the ultimate suffering of the cross.

But there’s also a sense in which we might say that this aspect of patience continues to be displayed by God even today. Now, things get complicated when we try to speak of God “suffering,” but a helpful way to put it might be that, on some level, God is displeased with the world as it is, in its rebellion against him. And yet, he continues to endure it, rather than wiping the world away to nothing. That itself is a striking theological truth to consider. Our all-powerful God chooses to endure things that displease him...for the good of others.

But God’s patience extends even further.

Another aspect of patience that Harned describes is oriented even more towards other people. It is forbearance or long-suffering under personal provocation. It’s self-control, restraint, and tolerance in bearing with the faults and shortcomings of others. This would include bearing with sins of others, though not condoning them. [Harned, 111-112] Of course, we see this aspect of patience clearly in God, as every minute of every day, he exercises patient forbearance and long-suffering towards us – towards Christians for their sin and their fickle hearts, and towards non-Christians for their overt rejection of him.

God, once again, is patient ... with you ... when you provoke him.

How often do you really think about that?

A third aspect of patience, Harned explains, is oriented towards time. It's the ability to wait for something expectantly, without rage or discontentedness. [Harned, 112]

God looks forward to the day described in verses ten and eleven. In whatever sense that we can speak of God within time, we can say that he looks forward to the day when "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

God, in some sense, waits for that day with eager expectation.

And as he does ... he waits for it patiently – without rage or discontentedness.

A fourth aspect of patience, Harned explains, is related to effort. It is, he says, "constancy in labor, exertion, or effort" – also known as perseverance. [Harned, 112]

And this we see in the ongoing work of God as well. Whatever may come, he remains faithful. He is always working; he is always arranging all things for the good of his people. And in his constancy we see one more way that God, in this period of redemptive history, displays his patience towards us, as he works for our good.

And in all these ways, God shows his patience throughout the Bible, and throughout redemptive history.

From the moment God made humanity, he displayed his patience towards us, calling our First Parents to fill and subdue the world, while he patiently and lovingly waited for them to fulfill his purpose for them.

When humanity rebelled against him, his patience took on even more depth. Rather than clearing them away and starting over, God patiently bore with humanity's shortcomings. He exercised forbearance even though they deserved condemnation.

And then, he patiently enacted a plan for redemption, calling Abraham, forming Israel, rescuing them, establishing them, and in the fullness of time, coming to his people in the person of Jesus Christ.

Then in his earthly life, his ministry, and his death on the cross, he showed the greatness of his patience, enduring suffering faithfully, bearing again and again with the shortcomings of others in love, persevering in his calling without giving up, and waiting expectantly for his vindication and exaltation, without resentment.

And now, after his resurrection and ascension, that patience of God continues to be at work, in this time between the ascension and the final coming – between verses nine and ten.

To us it may at times feel like inaction on God's part. But the Bible tells us that it is God's patience, rooted in love.

The Apostle Peter explains this, writing: “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”

The Lord is not slow to finish what he started. But he is patient. He does not wish that anyone should perish, and so he waits, that more might repent. He continues to bear with the sin and rebellion of humanity with patience, so that more might turn towards him, and come into his kingdom. He continues to wait patiently for the day when he will dwell with his people forever. And he continues to work in the world with patient persistence, towards the goal of bringing all who are his into his kingdom.

In this time between the ascension and his final coming, God displays his perfect patience.

That patience is rooted in love – on what is best for us, his creatures. Because, as Paul reminds us: “Love is patient.”

God’s patience is rooted in love. But it’s also fueled by his certain knowledge of what is to come.

God is not anxious or worried about the present, because he already knows, and has himself determined, the future. He knows, without any doubt, that the day is coming when “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow ... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.”

Unwaveringly confident in that future, and filled with love, God is then able to be patient with us, and with this world, in this time between verses nine and ten.

God has exalted and vindicated Jesus Christ. But we do not yet see the full effects of that on earth. In the meantime, God is patient.

God Calls Us to Be Patient as Well

That is a striking truth about God.

But another truth then comes along with it.

Because just as God is patient in this in-between time, he calls us to be patient as well.

As God’s children, we are called to be like our Father.

We are called to be patient, like God is.

We’re called to be patient, first, with a world that ignores, or rejects, or wrongs, or even slanders Jesus our Savior.

It can be hard to believe what we believe – to believe that Jesus Christ is the One through whom all things were made; the One who holds all of creation together by the word of his power; the One who came to earth, and died to save us; the One who reigns now on the throne of heaven – it can

be hard to believe all these things ... in a world that disdains or simply disregards the person, and the work, and the claims, of Jesus Christ.

But what our text this morning reminds us of is that we can be Christian in an unchristian world without despair or anxiety, because we know that Jesus Christ will be vindicated all across the earth. We know that Jesus Christ will be exalted all across the earth.

We, too, know the end of the story ... because God has told us how it will end, with every knee bowing and every tongue confessing ... and so we need not be anxious or lose hope when the world around us ignores our Lord.

But instead, knowing the end of the story, and knowing the heart of God, we can share in his non-anxious patience ... and we can love others as he has loved us, pouring ourselves out for them.

We can live out a faithful patience that is rooted in a love for those around us – with such a strong desire that they should repent and believe ... that we willingly accept waiting a bit longer before Jesus comes to make all things new ... if it means that God will give them a bit more time to repent and believe.

And we are able to do that without distress or anxiety because we really do know the end of the story. And so we need not fear. We need not panic. Because the end has been told to us.

These are the implications our text has for our own patience when the world, and its people, resist our Lord.

But that same patience should also extend to when the world, and individuals in it, reject us.

Because when Jesus returns, we know that he will set all things right ... including every wrong done to us. And if we really believe that ... then we can wait patiently for his coming justice, rather than impatiently grasping at status or vengeance now, just as verses three and four of our text suggest.

Because this is part of what it means to believe that Jesus really is our King. As our catechism puts it, Christ's kingship consists in his "subduing us to himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all his and our enemies." [WSC #26] Jesus will conquer all the enemies of his people.

Now ... that's not about his giving us success in the petty or sinful disputes we get into with other people. But it is about how he will handle those who truly are our enemies – who sinfully and unrepentantly seek our harm. The Lord will, at his return, conquer them.

And in that ... we will be vindicated. We will be exalted.

And that knowledge that full vindication is coming – that full exaltation is coming – should enable us to endure slander and lowliness in this life ... just like Jesus.

When others think ill of us, we can often get frantic about it. We can panic, and be distressed, as if it's up to us to set the record straight here and now or it will never be set straight at all. But that's not true. Jesus assures us that we, as his people, will be vindicated. Whenever we are overlooked,

whenever we have been disregarded, whenever we have been slandered or sinned against, God will, in the end, clear our name and reveal to all where we have been faithful.

That doesn't mean we can't or shouldn't defend our reputation now. But it means we can make such a defense with peace and patience, knowing that whether our efforts succeed or fail, in the end, and for eternity, we will be vindicated ... because Christ will vindicate us.

It also means that when we are laid low and suffering because of the brokenness or sinfulness of this world, again, we need not despair, or seek to claw our way up, grasping at the status we think we deserve. Because Jesus will, in the end, exalt us. He will claim us as his people, and he will lift us up, where we have been low.

And again, that doesn't mean we can't or shouldn't seek our just place in the world now – not at all. But it means we can seek such that justice with peace – peace that whatever happens in this life, in the end, and for all eternity, we will be exalted, far above where we deserve to be, because of Christ's mercy to us in the gospel.

Moreover, it means we can have assurance and patience that God will reward us when we pour ourselves out for others.

That is, in many ways, Paul's largest point here, that as we pour ourselves out for others like Jesus did, God will lift us up and reward us, as he did with Jesus ... though we, too, may need to wait patiently until Jesus comes back before we receive our reward in full.

This is the vindication and exaltation coming to us as God's people. And because we know it is coming – we know it is certain – we can be patient, just like God is patient, whether it's about how the world treats us, or how the world treats our Lord as we pour ourselves out for others.

God has exalted and vindicated Jesus Christ. But we do not yet see the full effects of that on earth. In the meantime, God is patient, and he calls us to be patient as well.

Conclusion

I mentioned this a few years ago ... but my mother likes watching professional tennis. And for many years she was especially a fan of Rafael Nadal. Before his retirement, there was a time when she would follow him in all the major tournaments and loved watching his matches. And during the height of her interest, she told me about a funny thing she often did.

She said that when Nadal had a particularly difficult match coming up, rather than watching the match live, she would usually record it. Then, when it was over, she'd look up online what the final outcome of the match was. And if Nadal had won, then she'd watch the recording of the match.

She explained to me, essentially, that that let her watch the match with excitement and anticipation, but without anxiety or fear. There was still excitement and suspense for her. She didn't know how Nadal was going to win. She didn't know how each set would play out. She didn't know who would win each individual game within the match or what would happen with the next point. She didn't know what was going to happen next ... but she did know the final outcome. She knew he

would win. And that gave her a peace and a patience with the match ... even when things looked bad for Nadal. The excitement and suspense for her was not in whether or not he would win, but in the question of how he would win.

Our text reminds us that we find ourselves in a very similar position.

We know the final outcome. Jesus will win. His vindication will be seen by all, his exaltation will be complete, his glory will fill the earth, and as it does, he will also vindicate and glorify and reward all who have trusted in him.

We may not know what will happen today ... or what will happen tomorrow. Or how each story line of our lives, or of history, will play itself out.

But we do know how it all ends. In the end, Christ will return, and “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

In the end, Christ, as our King, will conquer all his and our enemies.

And so, we need not fear. We need not be anxious. We can be patient, just as our Lord is.

We don't know what will happen next. We don't know what the road between here and there will look like. But we do know the final destination of our own lives, and of this world.

And in that, we can have peace. With that, we can be patient.

God has exalted and vindicated Jesus Christ. We do not yet see the full effects of that on earth. But one day we will.

Therefore, brothers and sisters, let us engage with the world with loving patience ... just as our Lord does.

Because we know, in the end, the victory will be his.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Fee, Gordon D. *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*. NICNT. Grand

Ferguson, Sinclair. *Let's Study Philippians*. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1997.

Harned, David Baily. *Patience: How We Wait Upon the World*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1997.

McDonough, Sean M. Introduction and notes to Philippians in *The ESV Study Bible*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008.

Wright, N. T. *Who Was Jesus?* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of “Reformed Catholicity”), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a

source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.