

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

Ephesians 1:15-23

May 17, 2026

Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service

Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

As has become our custom the last few years, we will pause our regular sermon series for the next three weeks, to observe Ascension Sunday, Pentecost Sunday, and Trinity Sunday. Then we'll return to our series in Philippians.

One of the benefits of observing the holidays from the historic Church calendar is that whatever books of the Bible we may be going through each year, it ensures that each year, we will still walk together through the major events of Christ's work.

A few weeks ago we celebrated the resurrection of Jesus on Easter. Now, just over 40 days after Easter, we remember Christ's ascension up to heaven. Next week, on the day of Pentecost, we'll remember Christ pouring out the Holy Spirit on the Church. And finally, the week after that, we'll reflect on how these events and others reveal to us God's triune nature, and what that means for us as Christians.

But for today, our focus is the ascension of Jesus Christ. And to help us reflect on that, we'll be looking at Ephesians 1:15-23.

As we do, please do listen carefully. This is God's Word for us this morning.

The Apostle Paul writes:

¹⁵For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, ¹⁶I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, ¹⁷that 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, ¹⁸having 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, ¹⁹and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might ²⁰that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹far 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. ²²And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, ²³which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

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 Jesus Christ,
After forty days you ascended to the right hand of God our Father,
and from your throne in heaven you 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.

Introduction

Our text this morning is one that's often read on Ascension Sunday ... 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 may face today as the Church in our time and place.

The church in Ephesus faced an array of political, spiritual, and moral forces that all seemed to be set against them. And these forces often seemed to have all the power in the culture, while they, the Church, did not.

Power was a common cultural theme for the people of Ephesus, and many powerful forces were at work there. The city and the region around it was seen as a place of power: of civil power, and social power, of imperial power under Rome, and also of religious power – from religion groups often set against the early Church. [Wright, 15]

The world around the Ephesian Church was all about power ... and the Ephesian church could often feel weak and powerless in their midst – especially as those powers took aim against them.

And we can often feel that way too. Our culture, increasingly, is focused on power. In some ways that's always been true, but in others our culture has also become even more open and overt about this than it has been in the past: we are a culture that is more and more focused on the naked use of power in the world.

At the same time, as the Church, we can feel like the powers at work in the religious landscape, the political landscape, even the social or economic landscape are often set against the Church. We can feel like there are many forces out there that have power ... but we do not.

And it's interesting to note that when the Apostle Paul writes to Christians – writes to a church – that is facing a similar situation, his answer is to point them to the ascension of Jesus. That's basically what he does in verse 20 through 23.

The Bible tells us that 40 days after Jesus’s resurrection, before the eyes of his disciples, the risen Jesus ascended bodily to heaven. And he didn’t just ascend up to heaven to sit around and wait for his final return to earth. The Bible tells us that Jesus ascended to heaven, where he sat down on a throne – a throne over the universe – at the right hand of God the Father, to reign over all things. That’s what Paul’s referring to here.

And Paul tells us that when we struggle with worldly powers and worldly oppositions, one of the things we need to do is to look to the reality of Christ’s ascension to the throne room of God.

What Paul reminds us of here is that: When the Church faces powerful worldly opposition, we are often tempted towards worldly responses ... but the ascension of Jesus changes everything ... and since the ascended Jesus is working for the Church’s good, we can have hope and motivation as we serve Jesus in this world.

Let me say that again: When the Church faces powerful worldly opposition, we are often tempted towards worldly responses ... but the ascension of Jesus changes everything ... and since the ascended Jesus is working for the Church’s good, we can have hope and motivation as we serve Jesus in this world.

Let’s consider that now one piece at a time.

When the Church Faces Powerful Worldly Opposition, We Are Often Tempted Towards Worldly Responses

First, when the church faces powerful worldly opposition, we are often tempted towards worldly responses.

And those worldly responses can vary.

Some of us are tempted more towards despair. When it comes to the future of the Church as a faithful community and institution, we give up on hope ... we kill hope ... and instead we embrace sadness, despair, or cynicism. We embrace a worldly loss of hope – and we assume that the church will falter and fail ... and slide away from whatever period of time we consider the “good old days.” That’s one worldly response.

Another worldly response is accommodation. This is when we take our loss of hope in the Church as it’s been established by Jesus, and we combine that with a pragmatic determination to preserve the Church anyway. With the response of pragmatic accommodation, we still lose hope in the Church persevering in its current form, and so we make some compromises to preserve it in a modified form. Maybe we decide we need to adjust the Bible’s sexual ethics, or maybe we need to mute Jesus’s warnings about greed, or maybe we need to downplay the Bible’s commitment to absolute truth, or maybe we need to soften the prophet’s concern for justice and the weak, but whatever the details, we try to accommodate the Bible’s teaching to make it more palatable to some cultural subgroup, in the hopes that that will preserve the Church, either by increasing its numbers, or by gaining the favor of worldly powers.

This pragmatic accommodation may look more hopeful than despair ... but it's hope is rooted in worldly powers and authorities – not in Jesus's ability to preserve his Church.

Still other times, we are tempted instead just to retreat. To block out the world. To set aside the Great Commission. Build higher walls and deeper moats around the Church. Give up hope for the Church to grow or impact the world. Lock it up for safety instead ... and hope that God changes the culture sometime down the road, without the Church's involvement. But this too is a worldly response – because it does not trust Jesus to work through his Church, and because it's focus is ultimately self-serving and selfish.

When the church faces powerful worldly opposition, we are often tempted towards a worldly response, whether it's despair, cynicism, accommodation, withdrawal, or something else.

What worldly response are you tempted towards?

Whatever it may be for you, the Ephesians faced the same challenge of powerful worldly opposition, and the same temptation towards worldly responses.

So what was Paul's solution for them?

But the Ascension of Jesus Changes Everything

Well, the heart of Paul's solution is to remind the Ephesians that the ascension of Jesus changes everything.

Because, as Paul emphasizes here, the ascension means that Jesus has been given supreme authority over all of creation. And that should transform how we think of all power dynamics in this world.

Take a look again at the text.

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

In verse 17 he prays that they would know what is true, and in verse 18 he says that truth they need to see involves hope, and in verse 19 he says that that hope is rooted in God's power, and in verse 20 he says that that power is seen not only in Jesus's resurrection, but also, crucially, in Jesus's ascension – when God the Father seated Jesus at his right hand in the heavenly places, which Paul says in verses 21 and 22 is “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.” So that God the Father has put “all things” under Christ's feet.

The Ephesian church was surrounded by worldly powers that opposed them. But Paul here is reminding them that Jesus has more power over this world than any of their enemies could ever

hope to have. Because Jesus has not only invaded this hostile world in his incarnation, he has also taken the seat of ultimate authority over this world, in his ascension.

And that reality should change everything for us, as the Church. Because however powerful the opponents of the Church may be, Jesus' power over this world is stronger. And so we shouldn't turn to the worldly responses of despair, or cynicism, or accommodation, or retreat. Because such responses assume that Jesus hasn't really been elevated to a place of authority "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion."

When we respond to opposition in worldly ways, we act like the old order of things is still in place. But it's not. Because Jesus has ascended to the throne of heaven. And that changes everything.

It makes me think of a novel I read recently. The main characters are all scientists, working in a setting of academic research.

And it's intensely competitive. Researchers are vying for different positions for themselves, and there are power moves everywhere. If you want the right placement, if you want the best projects, if you want good funding, if you want to succeed then it's not just about how smart you are or what kind of results you can produce. It's also all about how you navigate the worldly powers. Do you know the right people in the right places, do you have the right prestige, can you maneuver through the right systems, and have the right effect on the right room of people to get what you want. That's what power is all about in this setting: it's the worldly power dynamics of social status, and social influence, and leverage over others, and money.

And that's what the first portion of the book focuses on.

And then the planet is invaded and taken over by the Carryx ... a race of powerful, intelligent, and elephant-sized aliens that look kind of like giant insects.

And the Carryx are now in charge. And that changes everything. Because now, each person's future and each person's hope is all about where they stand with the Carryx. If you have their favor, then you're probably going to be okay. If they don't like you ... then they're probably going to send one of their alien henchmen to come and stomp you to death ... which is a thing that happens to a surprising number of people in this book.

In other words, now that the Carryx reign over the planet, everything has changed – the old power dynamics of social status and social leverage and money no longer matter, because the Carryx run things now, and their power matters far more than any other power at work in the world.

But here's the thing. In the novel, there are still humans, living in this new order of things, under the rule of the Carryx, who try to keep living as if the old order was still in place. They try to keep operating as if human social status and human influence and past wealth or prestige is still what matters most.

But it's not. The old power dynamics may still show up in the new world under the reign of the Carryx. But despite how instinctual they may be for most humans ... such human powers are

pathetic now when compared to the power of the Carryx. And so while those old power dynamics may not go away ... they're no longer what matters most. What matters most is reorienting their lives to the new power over them – the greater power that reigns over all human powers. [Corey]

And as odd as the comparison may feel, the same is true in some ways for us. Jesus Christ has ascended to the throne of heaven. He now reigns over the universe. He is sovereign over all. And that changes everything. The old ways – the worldly ways – of navigating power have not disappeared from the earth. But the truth is that their power is pathetic compared to the power of Jesus, who reigns in heaven. And so, for us, the only sane thing to do, to actually live in the world we find ourselves in, is to reorient our view of power – to remember that whatever human power plays may occur ... there is a greater power who reigns over them all ... and our relationship to that greater power is what matters most – just like the people living under the alien Carryx rulers.

But with one big difference. The new power that reigns over us – the new power that trumps every human power in our world, is not a race of hostile aliens that look like humongous lobsters. In our case, the new power that reigns over all thing is Jesus Christ.

And that brings us to our next point.

The ascension of Jesus changes everything. But it changes everything in a very specific way.

The Ascended Jesus Is Working for the Good of the Church

Because the ascended Jesus is working in all things for the good of the Church.

And Paul makes this point in verses 22 and 23. There we read: “And he [that is, God] 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.”

Paul is saying here that God the Father put all things under Jesus's feet, and then, he took Jesus, the One who is now head over all, who occupies the role of supreme authority in the universe, and he gave Jesus to the Church.

It's not just that Jesus has been given to the Church in his atoning death. But Jesus has also been given to the Church in his powerful reign in heaven right now.

Jesus Christ, 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, to work in all things for the Church's good.

Now, that might sound like a thing Christians already know and say a lot. But I'm not sure we often say it in that specific way.

Let me explain what I mean: When we or another Christian faces 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. We remind ourselves of that truth – we preach it to ourselves and to others. And we often proclaim that truth even if we cannot see how whatever happened could work for good. Even so, we recognize it as something that's true, that we hold to by faith because we trust that Jesus reigns, and that he is working for the good of each individual Christian, who follows him.

But I don't think we apply that same truth in the same way when it comes to the life of the Church as a community, or as an institution.

When the Christian Church, as a community, as an institution, faces challenges, or trials, or opposition in our society, I don't notice the same tendency for Christians to point out that in all these things too, Christ is at work for the good of the Church, as an institution. But Paul here is saying that he is.

And yet, 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 these things for the good of his 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 often respond to a threat towards the Church with the kind of despair, cynicism, accommodation, or retreat that we discussed earlier.

But Paul here reminds us that that is a mistake, because Christ is the supreme authority over all of creation, and God the Father has given Christ to the Church to use that authority for the Church's good.

And when we look back over Church history, we can often catch glimpses of this.

In the first century the small and powerless Church could often find itself the target of those who had far more earthly power than they did. And yet ... rather than collapse, the Church grew. Rather than bringing an end to evangelism, the public martyrdom of Christians often drew new people to the faith – people wanting to know what these Christians were willing to die for. Even in the midst of such opposition – even through such opposition – Jesus was working all things 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. But it also became 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 – an understanding we still benefit from today. Even in the midst of such fundamental battles against heresy, Jesus was at work for the long-term good of his Church.

In the second and third centuries the Church was attacked by pagan philosophers, who challenged a number of key Christian beliefs and caused many to question their faith ... and again, the Lord used that challenge to raise up defenders of the faith, and to help the young Church grow in its understanding and articulation of its faith in Christ. Even in such challenges, Jesus was at work 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. But through that difficult trial the Church articulated a deeper understanding of what the Bible teaches not only about Jesus, but about the nature of God himself. Even in the midst of heretical opposition, Jesus was at work for the long-term good of his Church.

And we could go on.

But let's note two things. First, we can catch a glimpse of what Jesus was doing in these challenges, with centuries of hindsight. But ordinarily, those experiencing it could not see what the outcome would be.

And second, for every example where we can now discern what Jesus's purpose may have been in the struggles his Church faced, there are many more where even now we can't see exactly what Jesus was doing at the time.

Sure, persecution led to further Church growth in second century Rome. But persecution effectively stamped Christianity out of the land in seventeenth century Japan. So how was Jesus working there for the good of his Church? I don't know. He hasn't shown us. But that doesn't make it less true.

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

But even so, our calling as Paul reminds us, is to trust that Christ has authority over all of creation and that in all things, he is working for the good of his Church. That is Christian faith. That is biblical wisdom.

Because while we he may sometimes give us glimpses into what he's doing, even so, as J.I. Packer puts it: "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's still true that he is working for good.

When the Church faces powerful worldly opposition, we are often tempted towards worldly responses ... but the ascension of Jesus changes everything ... because the ascended Jesus is working in all things for the Church's good.

We Should Have Hope and Motivation as We Serve Jesus in This World

And knowing this is true – believing that this is true – should give us hope, and motivation to serve Jesus in this world.

First, these truths should give us hope – not a hope that’s just wishful thinking, not a hope that denies or sugar-coats the painful trials this life may bring for God’s people, not a hope that is arrogant about ourselves, but rather a hope that enables us walk towards the challenges ahead with both realism and with confidence that Christ will work all things for the good of his Church.

And armed with that hope, we should be motivated to get to work for Christ’s Kingdom. We won’t give in to despair or cynicism, because we know that by Christ’s power, the Church will be victorious, and the gates of hell will not prevail against her. We won’t accommodate to worldly powers, because why would we forsake our most powerful ally, Jesus, in order to gain a lesser ally among the powers of this world? And we won’t retreat, because Jesus has assured us of ultimate success.

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

But the soldier who knows that victory is coming is more often spurred on to fight with endurance.

That’s the picture we sing of in the fifth verse of the hymn “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 un-winnable ... 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, should come to our ears like a victory song in the distance.

The picture in that hymn is of soldiers fighting, and they’re tired, and the warfare has been long ... but then they hear in the distance the song that tells them that the battle is already won. Their side is already assured the victory. And as they hear that song, and receive that truth, they don’t 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.

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, the Church can face powerful opposition from the forces of this world. But even so, we can have hope. Because as we remember today, Jesus has ascended to the heavenly places. He has ascended “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 the Lord has 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, to work all things for our good, as the church.

Therefore, let us have confidence. Let us have hope.

The King of the Universe is with us. And so the gates of hell will never prevail against his Church.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

- Bruce, F. F. *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*. NICNT. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984.
- Corey, James S. A. *The Mercy of Gods*. New York, NY: Orbit, 2024.
- Leithart, Peter. *The Kingdom and the Power: Rediscovering the Centrality of the Church*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1993. (60-63)
- Lincoln, Andrew T. *Ephesians*. Word Biblical Commentary, Vol 42. Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1990
- O’Brien, Peter T. *The Letter to the Ephesians*. PNTC. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999.
- Packer, J. I. *Knowing God*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973.
- Wright, N. T. *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.

This sermon draws significantly from a sermon I preached here on June 2, 2019.

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.