

# **An Exegesis of Ephesians 1:15-23**

**The Second Lesson Appointed for the  
Festival of the Ascension of Our Lord**



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### Introduction

Of the five major festivals in the Christian Church calendar, Ascension has gotten a bum deal. Let's face it. Christmas and Easter are on most people's radar screens. Attending services on those days is an expectation, even among some of our inactive members whom we tend to see only for special occasions. Easter and Pentecost always occur on a Sunday, and Christmas comes with a day or two off work, so we're virtually guaranteed to have a decent crowd on those days. Epiphany doesn't get quite as much attention in our circles,<sup>1</sup> although it does have an entire season of the church year named after it, and every few years it does occur on a Sunday. Ascension, on the other hand, has none of these liturgical luxuries. The Ascension of our Lord occurs forty days after the Resurrection of our Lord, and as such it is delegated to a Thursday sometime in late spring, the time of year when children are ready to get out of school and families are anticipating their summer vacations. Unfortunately, it's also a time of year when few Christians seem to want to spend an extra hour of their week in the Lord's house commemorating a significant event in the life of Christ through Word and Sacrament.<sup>2</sup>

The final result of these circumstances is that Ascension has become less familiar to people than secular occasions like Columbus Day or Groundhog's Day!<sup>3</sup> If your congregation does have a Thursday evening service on Ascension Day, chances are that you won't even draw twenty percent of your membership. Some of us may celebrate the Ascension on the Seventh Sunday of Easter so that more of our members are aware of its importance. Maybe we've even considered dropping it altogether from our congregational calendars. Certainly there are a number of factors that seem to discourage Ascension's observance.

Given these circumstances, should we relegate the Ascension to the status of a forgotten festival? You might suspect that the essayist disagrees with that conclusion, and if you do, you're correct. Since our agenda committee chose one of the Lessons appointed for the Ascension as the exegetical paper for this conference, it seems that they also believe Jesus' Ascension deserves more prominence and ought not be forgotten. Indeed, we have much to learn from and about the Ascension. Saint Luke records Jesus' triumphal return to heaven twice for us – once in his Gospel, and again in the opening chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. Saint Mark briefly but clearly refers to the Ascension at the end of his Gospel.<sup>4</sup> Psalm 47 gives us a clear, prophetic

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<sup>1</sup> In the churches of the Eastern tradition, January 6 (Epiphany Day) is their Christmas celebration and therefore tends to receive more attention than in the churches of the West (e.g. Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican).

<sup>2</sup> An aside regarding the Sacrament and Ascension: If it is not your congregation's current practice, consider adding the Lord's Supper to your Ascension service. Surely this is one of the unique ways in which our Lord fulfills his Ascension promise to his church: "I will be with you always to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

<sup>3</sup> At least my 2004 Pastor's Desk Diary, kindly provided by Thrivent Financial for Lutherans™, still lists the minor festival of "The Presentation of our Lord," appointed for February 2, alongside "Groundhog Day."

<sup>4</sup> The external, manuscript evidence casts doubt on the often-held assumption that Mark's Gospel ends at 16:8.

view of Christ's return to his heavenly throne. In the opening chapter of his letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul not only explains the significance of the Ascension, but he also compares the power displayed in Christ's Ascension to the power that our Lord used to bring us from spiritual death to life. The apostle's words regarding the Ascension, as well some of the preceding thoughts, will be the basis for the exegetical study.

As we work through these nine verses from Ephesians chapter one, I will include my own original and literal translation. I will also include occasional comments about the New International Version, noting any translated words or phrases that deserve special attention or clarification. My purpose for including an analysis of the NIV, the translation that most of us use in our congregations, is so that we take special note of areas that we should explain further or clarify to our people in our sermons or Bible studies, with the goal that our laity may be led to understand these verses as fully as possible. May God bless our study of Paul's words that our intellectual understanding of this section may increase, and especially that our faith may be strengthened through the divinely inspired text and the gospel message it contains.

### **Ephesians 1:15-16**

**Greek Text:** Διὰ τοῦτο καγὼ ἀκούσας τὴν καθ' ὑμᾶς πίστιν ἐν τῷ κυρίῳ Ἰησοῦ καὶ τὴν ἀγάπην τὴν εἰς πάντας τοὺς ἁγίους οὐ παύομαι εὐχαριστῶν ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν μείλιαν ποιούμενος ἐπὶ τῶν προσευχῶν μου,

**Literal Translation:** *Because of this (= therefore), I, having also heard (about) your faith in the Lord Jesus in line with you (= in every one of you), and (having heard about) the love that is for all the saints, I am not stopping giving thanks on behalf of you, making mention (of you) upon my prayers...*

**NIV:** *For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.*

The preceding verses (vv. 3-14) contain Paul's beautiful and profound explanation of the doctrine of election. The fact that God the Father had predestined the Ephesians was cause for Paul's praise (v. 3). It was also cause for the apostle's prayers of thanksgiving on behalf of the Ephesians in these two opening verses of our pericope. Διὰ is often translated "because of" when it is followed by an accusative (τοῦτο). The demonstrative forms of οὗτος typically refer to something that has already been mentioned. Paul is referring back to everything he has stated about the doctrine of election in verses three through fourteen.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The writer of the text study for this lesson in *Sermon Studies on the Epistles, Series A* (pp. 204-207) says that Διὰ τοῦτο "refers back to the fact that the Ephesians became Christians through 'the word of truth, the gospel of salvation' (v. 13)". The accusative neuter singular τοῦτο could refer to the accusative neuter singular εὐαγγέλιον, but this seems unlikely because εὐαγγέλιον is really an appositive of λόγον, which is masculine. If Paul were only referring to "the Word of truth, the gospel of your salvation," he probably would have said Διὰ τοῦτον (accusative

The Ephesians' election was cause for Paul's prayers for thanksgiving, as was their faith in Christ and their love for the saints. The *kai* in *καγὼ* connects Paul's first reason for giving thanks with yet another reason that is explained in the phrase beginning with the aorist participle, *ἀκούσας*. The NIV simply translates the participle with a temporal force: "Ever since I heard about your faith...". While that is valid, a stronger case could be made for a causal idea. Paul is linking *ἀκούσας* with *Διὰ τοῦτο* (because of this), so it seems best to understand *ἀκούσας* as a causal participle: "Because of this, and because I heard about your faith...."

Paul's second reason for his prayers of thanksgiving includes two items. He had heard about their faith in Jesus (*τὴν καθ' ὑμᾶς πίστιν ἐν τῷ κυρίῳ Ἰησοῦ*) and their love for the saints (*τὴν ἀγάπην τὴν εἰς πάντας τοὺς ἁγίους*). The prepositional phrase *καθ' ὑμᾶς* included between the article *τὴν* and its noun *πίστιν* indicates that *καθ' ὑμᾶς* modifies *πίστιν*. The preposition *καθ'* (*kata*) is used in a distributive sense: "the faith that is in every one of you."<sup>6</sup> Paul also had heard about their genuine love (*ἀγάπην*) shown toward any and all who were saints, those who were now "holy ones" (*ἁγίους*) in God's sight through faith in Jesus Christ. There is no possessive adjective or genitive modifying *ἀγάπην*, but the context makes it clear that the article *τὴν* should be understood in a possessive sense: "your love for all the saints." Their faith was not dormant, but it genuinely showed itself by their love for all Christians.

Verse fifteen raises a question about Paul's response to the report from Ephesus. He had spent three years of his ministry there. Why, then, would he say that he gave thanks for them because he had heard about their faith? Why didn't he make the point in a first-person way, for example: "I give thanks to God because I know you believe and I saw your faith grow and mature while I was with you." The historical situation clarifies the question. Paul had been under house arrest for nearly three years at this point. He had not personally been among them for quite some time. "Hence, it is entirely likely that Paul's best and most recent source of information about the readers was what he had *heard* via the reports that had come to him."<sup>7</sup>

Verse fifteen gives us the two reasons for what Paul now says in verse sixteen. Because of their election and because of the report of their faith and love, Paul states that he continually gives thanks to God for them in his prayers. The negative *οὐ* combined with the present middle indicative *παύομαι* indicates that Paul regularly and frequently gave thanks (*εὐχαριστῶν*) to God for them. This brings to mind the pastor who begins his day studying the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions, and then closes his morning devotion with prayers for the people whom Christ has called him to serve. We see Paul's pastoral heart vividly in these words.

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masculine singular) instead. I am inclined to believe that Paul used the neuter singular form to treat everything in verses 3-14 as a single unit, since those verses are grammatically one (very long!) sentence.

<sup>6</sup> See Acts 2:46 for another example of *καθ'* (*kata*) used in a distributive sense: *καθ' ἡμέραν* = "every day."

<sup>7</sup> Panning, Armin. *The People's Bible: Galatians, Ephesians*, p. 139, emphasis in the original.

The supplementary participle, εὐχαριστῶν, tells us what it is that Paul does not cease to do (οὐ παύομαι<sup>8</sup>). The present tense of the participle once again underscores the frequent nature of Paul's thanksgiving prayers.

Another participle appears at the end of the verse, ποιούμενος. Because there is no conjunction to connect these two participles (and their accompanying phrases), the second phrase, μνεΐαν ποιούμενος ἐπὶ τῶν προσευχῶν μου ("making mention of you upon my prayers"), serves as an appositive of the first phrase, εὐχαριστῶν ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν ("giving thanks on behalf of you"). Both participles share the same form – present tense, nominative masculine singular – which also supports the idea that the second is in apposition to the first and thus explains it further. The preposition ἐπὶ with the genitive is used in a temporal sense<sup>9</sup> here: "making mention of you in the time of my prayers" or "making mention of you during my prayers."

### Ephesians 1:17

**Greek Text:** ἵνα ὁ θεὸς τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, ὁ πατὴρ τῆς δόξης, δώῃ ὑμῖν πνεῦμα σοφίας καὶ ἀποκαλύψεως ἐν ἐπιγνώσει αὐτοῦ,

**Literal Translation:** ...that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in (the sphere of) thorough knowledge of (= about) him...

**NIV:** I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit (footnote: or a spirit) of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.

Paul has stated that he continually prays to God with thanks for the Ephesians. The main verb in the ἵνα clause that begins the verse is δώῃ, which could be either aorist subjunctive or optative. The subjunctive with ἵνα would express the purpose for Paul's prayers and/or the content of his prayers; the optative would express that this was Paul's wish for them. Stoeckhardt rightly notes, "It is entirely irrelevant whether we take the verb form to be subjunctive or optative."<sup>10</sup> I am inclined to take δώῃ as a subjunctive that expresses both the purpose of Paul's prayer and the content of his prayer, which obviously go hand in hand: "I do not stop praying that God may give you the spirit of wisdom and revelation." Paul states both what he is praying for (content) and his reason for praying (purpose – in order that they might receive these things from God). But someone who takes δώῃ as a volitive optative will still come to a similar conclusion, so Stoeckhardt's observation still stands.

The one whom Paul wishes will give them what he is praying for is, "The God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory" (ὁ θεὸς τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, ὁ πατὴρ τῆς δόξης).

<sup>8</sup> παύω will often take a supplementary, or complementary, participle: see Wallace, Daniel B., *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, p. 646.

<sup>9</sup> Wallace, p. 376

<sup>10</sup> Stoeckhardt, George. *Concordia Classic Commentary Series: Ephesians*, p. 102

The genitive, τοῦ κυρίου...Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ is a genitive of relationship,<sup>11</sup> a sub-category of the possessive genitive. The close relationship of the persons of the Trinity is expressed. The second phrase, ὁ πατήρ τῆς δόξης, appears without a conjunction and so it is an appositive of the previous phrase. The God of our Lord Jesus Christ is the “Father of glory.” The genitive δόξης is a descriptive genitive. Our God and Father is one who has a unique glory and splendor, far beyond the ordinary. The article τῆς makes δόξης specific and speaks of the glory that is specifically unique to our heavenly Father. The NIV’s translation, “the glorious Father,” is a good way to capture this descriptive genitive.

Now we come to the specific thing that Paul prays the Ephesians might receive from God. The accusative πνεῦμα is the direct object here. It is modified by the two genitives, σοφίας (wisdom) and ἀποκαλύψεως (revelation). We first need to determine what is meant by πνεῦμα. Is Paul referring to the Holy Spirit, the new man, or simply an attitude? The two genitives serve like adjectives modifying πνεῦμα, and so they can help us in this discussion. Since “wisdom” and “revelation” are not attitudes, we can eliminate that as the understanding of πνεῦμα. “Wisdom” and “revelation” could be gifts received from the Holy Spirit, making them genitives of product<sup>12</sup> if πνεῦμα is to be understood as the Holy Spirit. That understanding is valid, and it is what the NIV text suggests. However, there seems to be more support that πνεῦμα refers to the new man. In the next verse, the phrase translated, “the eyes of your heart,” refers back to πνεῦμα. In that case, it seems best to understand πνεῦμα as the new man. σοφίας and ἀποκαλύψεως would then serve as descriptive genitives, telling us more about the new man.

Both σοφίας and ἀποκαλύψεως appear without an article, here stressing the qualities of wisdom (something useful to know) and revelation (something that is not obvious by itself). The καὶ after σοφίας is exegetical – the “revelation” phrase explains more about the “wisdom” that Paul is talking about. The spiritual wisdom of the new man takes place ἐν ἐπιγνώσει αὐτοῦ, “in (the sphere of) thorough knowledge of him.” Through his Word, God would nurture the Ephesians so that his grace would be revealed to them in their complete knowledge (ἐπιγνώσει) about him (αὐτοῦ is an objective genitive here).

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<sup>11</sup> Wallace, p. 83

<sup>12</sup> Wallace, p. 106

## Ephesians 1:18-19a

**Greek Text:** πεφωτισμένους τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς τῆς καρδίας [ὑμῶν] εἰς τὸ εἶδέναι ὑμᾶς τίς ἐστὶν ἡ ἐλπίς τῆς κλήσεως αὐτοῦ, τίς ὁ πλοῦτος τῆς δόξης τῆς κληρονομίας αὐτοῦ ἐν τοῖς ἁγίοις καὶ τί τὸ ὑπερβάλλον μέγεθος τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ εἰς ἡμᾶς τοὺς πιστεύοντας

**Literal Translation:** ...the eyes of your heart having been enlightened in order that you know what is the hope of his calling you (= the hope to which he has called you), what (is) the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints, and what (is) the continually surpassing greatness of his power for us, the ones who are believing...

**NIV:** I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.

These verses continue Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians’ spiritual wisdom. The accusative ὀφθαλμοὺς is really an appositive of πνεῦμα in the preceding verse because there is no conjunction to connect these two direct objects of δώη. Paul prays for the new man inside each of the Ephesian Christians with an interesting picture – that “the eyes of your heart” are enlightened. ὀφθαλμοὺς is used as a metaphor for spiritual understanding. It is interesting that ὀφθαλμοὺς is modified by the singular genitive καρδίας. The use of the singular implies that Paul pictured them as having one heart, one common faith, mind, and will. The possessive genitive ὑμῶν is included in brackets because it was only given a “C” rating by the editors of the UBS Greek text. The evidence supports the presence of ὑμῶν more than the editors give credit for it, but in the end it will not change anything because the article τῆς with καρδίας would naturally be understood in a possessive sense even without ὑμῶν in the text.

Now we can look at the attributive participle that begins the sentence, πεφωτισμένους. It is a perfect passive participle from φωτίζω, which means to shine light upon something; modifying ὀφθαλμοὺς, it gives the picture of a profound growth in spiritual wisdom as the light of the gospel is seen by “the eyes of (their) heart.” πεφωτισμένους is passive; the implied agent is God, who uses the means of grace to enlighten our new man. πεφωτισμένους is also perfect, emphasizing a past action with ongoing results. Paul prays that the spiritual knowledge that they had already received would bring the ongoing result of greater spiritual insight.

This phrase is followed by the preposition εἰς with the articularized infinitive, τὸ εἶδέναι. This construction is used to indicate purpose. As Paul prays for the Ephesians’ spiritual enlightenment, he does so with three purposes in mind. These three items that he wants them to know are indicated by the three indefinite pronouns, τίς, τίς again, and τί.

The first purpose of Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians’ enlightenment is that they would better understand the specific hope they had received from God’s calling them to faith (τίς ἐστὶν ἡ

ἐλπίς τῆς κλήσεως αὐτοῦ). Paul is not referring to some sort of generic hopeful feeling; he is not using the term as we do when we say, “I hope the weather is nice tomorrow.” The article ἡ with ἐλπίς indicates that Paul has a specific type of hope in mind. There is something to look forward to. One of the reasons for our Christian hope is expressed by the genitive τῆς κλήσεως (αὐτοῦ), which modifies ἐλπίς: the hope of his calling. κλήσεως is a genitive of production.<sup>13</sup> Returning to the phrase we are looking at in verse 18, God’s calling (τῆς κλήσεως αὐτοῦ) is what produces our hope, and so the genitive of production seems to be the best understanding for κλήσεως. The demonstrative genitive αὐτοῦ is a subjective genitive: God is the one who calls us. This is a reference to our conversion to faith, which God alone can accomplish. The first purpose of Paul’s prayer, then, was that the Ephesians might understand the specific hope that God had given them by calling them to faith.

The second purpose of Paul’s prayer comes in the next phrase of verse 18, τίς ὁ πλοῦτος τῆς δόξης τῆς κληρονομίας αὐτοῦ ἐν τοῖς ἁγίοις. Here is the next item that Paul wants the Ephesians to understand more fully: “the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints.” The word for riches, πλοῦτος, is a term that describes tremendous value and great wealth. Sometimes it carries a negative connotation (e.g. “filthy rich”), but in this context the use of the word is obviously quite positive. Modifying πλοῦτος is the genitive, τῆς δόξης. δόξης is a descriptive genitive, serving like an adjective modifying πλοῦτος. The article τῆς indicates that Paul has a specific kind of glory in mind; God’s glory, which is far above any human splendor, is a key component of the great spiritual riches that Paul wants the Ephesians to know about. Another genitive, κληρονομίας, follows. The glory that is characteristic of our spiritual riches belongs to the inheritance that comes from God (αὐτοῦ). κληρονομίας, then, can be understood as a possessive genitive, and αὐτοῦ as a genitive of source. The word “inheritance” helps to underscore the gracious, undeserved, unmerited nature of these blessings. Finally, these spiritual riches belonged to the Ephesians because they were saints. The final phrase of the verse, ἐν τοῖς ἁγίοις, shows us that the only sphere in which this inheritance is received is “in the holy ones,” those who have been called to faith and sanctified by the work of the Holy Spirit. Apart from faith, these glorious blessings cannot be received.

We now have two of the three purposes for Paul’s prayer: he wanted the Ephesians to know the hope that they now had because God had called them to faith, and he also wanted them to understand the glorious spiritual riches that they would inherit because they had been brought to faith and made holy in God’s sight through Jesus Christ. The beginning of verse 19 lists the third and final purpose of Paul’s prayer, revealed in the phrase καὶ τί τὸ ὑπερβάλλον μέγεθος

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<sup>13</sup> Wallace, p. 104. This useful category for understanding the genitive is apparently a fairly new development in biblical Greek scholarship (refer to the comments made in footnotes 88 and 89 in Wallace’s text). This category is essentially half way between a genitive of source and a subjective genitive. A subjective genitive actually carries out the action in the head noun; our calling from God is responsible for our hope, but that calling does not actually do the hoping, which a subjective genitive would imply. On the other hand, a genitive of source isn’t as specific as what Paul likely has in mind here. Wallace writes in his grammar, “[The genitive of production] is also similar to a genitive of source, but tends to involve a more active role on the part of the genitive. Thus, ‘an angel from heaven’ (source) simply indicates the source or origin from which the angel came. But ‘peace of God’ suggests both source and involvement on the part of God” (p. 105).

τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ εἰς ἡμᾶς τοὺς πιστεύοντας. The main noun in this phrase, μέγεθος, is modified by the present participle, ὑπερβάλλον. The participle serves as an adjective here, indicating that God's greatness is constantly (present tense) overflowing; his greatness (μέγεθος) surpasses anyone and anything else. μέγεθος is further modified by the genitives τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ. The first genitive, δυνάμεως, is a term that expresses great strength and raw power. We see the origin of the English word "dynamite" from this Greek word. God's power possesses the greatness already mentioned, and so μέγεθος can be understood as possessive, as well as the genitive pronoun, αὐτοῦ`.

The prepositional phrase beginning with εἰς shows us who receives the benefit of God's unsurpassed power. This phrase expresses the same idea as a dative of advantage.<sup>14</sup> God's great power is used εἰς ἡμᾶς, for us, i.e. for our benefit. Paul includes himself together with the Ephesians as those who have been on the receiving end of God's gifts. Paul further describes himself and the Ephesians with the substantival present participle, τοὺς πιστεύοντας. Those who believe in our Savior Jesus Christ have the unique blessing to know God's great power which he uses to bless us, his children by faith.

### **Ephesians 1:19b-20**

**Greek:** κατὰ τὴν ἐνέργειαν τοῦ κράτους τῆς ἰσχύος αὐτοῦ. Ἦν ἐνήργησεν ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ ἐγείρας αὐτὸν ἐκ νεκρῶν καὶ καθίσας ἐν δεξιᾷ αὐτοῦ ἐν τοῖς ἔπουρανίοις

**Literal Translation:** ...*(which is) in line with the working of the power of his strength, which he worked in Christ by having raised him from the dead and having seated (him) in (= at) his right in the heavens...*

**NIV:** *That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms...*

The second half of verse 19 begins the transition from the content and purpose of Paul's prayer to the apostle's thoughts related to our Lord's ascension. We first need to determine what the prepositional phrase beginning with κατὰ refers to. Something Paul has mentioned previously is "in line with" (κατὰ) "the working of the power of his strength." In theory, the phrase could refer back to the three purposes of Paul's prayer mentioned in verse 18 and the first half of verse 19. The language of the phrase κατὰ τὴν ἐνέργειαν ... αὐτοῦ` fits with the last of the three purposes naturally, namely, that the Ephesians would recognize God's surpassing power for them. For this reason, it seems best to say that the κατὰ phrase in the last half of verse 19 modifies the third purpose of Paul's prayer mentioned in the first half of the same verse. The NIV comes to the same conclusion when it makes the second half of verse 19 the start of a new

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<sup>14</sup> Wallace, p. 369

sentence in English and begins it with a reference to the last purpose of Paul's prayer: "That power is like the working of his mighty strength...."

There are three different "power words" in the closing phrase of verse 19. The first is τὴν ἐνέργειαν, the accusative object of the preposition κατὰ. Our English word, "energy," comes from this vocable. This term implies active work in order to accomplish something. It is followed by two more descriptive genitives. τοῦ κράτους modifies ἐνέργειαν. Except for a few rare instances, κράτους almost always refers to God.<sup>15</sup> The word refers to evident power and often includes the idea of someone ruling over something. The working of God (to be later defined in verse 20 as occurring in Jesus' resurrection and ascension) is evident by his power, which defeated the grave. This evident power (κράτους) of God is further modified by τῆς ἰσχύος. The TDNT says, "The group ἰJscu- has the sense of 'ability,' 'capacity,' 'power,' or 'strength.' It overlaps with the duna- group, but with greater stress on the power implied."<sup>16</sup> In this phrase, ἰσχύος further strengthens the "power" idea in the rest of the phrase. We might be able to capture that concept if we translated it this way: "That power is in line with the working of his mighty might," or "That power is in line with the working of his powerful power." The disadvantage of that kind of translation is that it would imply that the same word is used twice, which is not the case. The NIV's translation, "mighty strength," works well here.

Paul defines this mighty strength of God as we move into verse 20. Even though the editors of the Greek text place a period at the end of verse 19, the relative pronoun indicates that verse 20 is actually a continuation of the previous verse.<sup>17</sup> The pronoun ἣν is accusative feminine singular and refers back to τὴν ἐνέργειαν in verse 19. ἣν is the direct object of the main verb of the clause, ἐνήργησεν. Paul's choice of the verb is rather obvious: the verb comes from the same root as the noun that this relative clause modifies, and the clause further describes this working (τὴν ἐνέργειαν) of God's strength. This is the active work of God intended to accomplish his greatest purpose, the salvation of sinners! The aorist tense indicates that this work is an accomplished fact. Furthermore, this work was accomplished only ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ, in (the sphere of) Christ. God's effective work in people's lives can take place in no other way than in Jesus Christ, his Son and our Savior.

Two aorist participles follow, ἐγείρας and καθίσας, showing us the means by which God accomplished his work for us in Christ. The first way God carried out this work was by raising Christ from the dead. Notice that there is no article with νεκρῶν. Paul is emphasizing the fact that Jesus was truly dead by stressing the quality of the noun νεκρῶν; he lacked any sort of physical life from the moment he gave up his life on the cross until the early hours of Easter morning.

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<sup>15</sup> κράτους is used to speak of God in verses such as Luke 1:51, Ephesians 6:10, Colossians 1:11, 1 Timothy 6:16, and 1 Peter 5:11.

<sup>16</sup> Kittel, Gerhard, Gerhard Friedrich, and Geoffrey W. Bromiley. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, electronic edition. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1985. Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996.

<sup>17</sup> In fact, this entire selection (vv. 15-23) is one sentence in Greek.

The resurrection was a key component of early apostolic preaching; just glance at the sermons in the book of Acts and read how this was so. The resurrection should be a key component in our preaching as well. It was the loudest and most powerful proclamation of our divine acquittal that heaven could have sounded. But just as significant and powerful is the next item, καὶ καθίσας ἐν δεξιᾷ αὐτοῦ ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις. God also demonstrated his effectual working for us by seating his Son at his right hand in heaven. This idiomatic expression (a form of καθίζω with either ἐκ δεξιῶν or ἐν δεξιᾷ) is used to describe someone who has been granted a position of high status and honor.<sup>18</sup> This was the request that James and John had in mind when they came to Jesus and asked to sit at his right and his left in heaven. In the New Testament, this expression is primarily used to describe Jesus' reigning power and honor after his ascension into heaven.<sup>19</sup> The ascension is not merely a reference to the day that our Lord exited the world's stage. At his ascension he took his place of honor and prestige in heaven after he had accomplished everything necessary to secure our salvation from sin.

### Ephesians 1:21

**Greek:** ὑπεράνω πάσης ἀρχῆς καὶ ἐξουσίας καὶ δυνάμεως καὶ κυριότητος καὶ παντὸς ὀνόματος ὀνομαζομένου, οὐ μόνον ἐν τῷ αἰῶνι τούτῳ ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐν τῷ μέλλοντι.

**Literal Translation:** ...far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and every name which is being named, not only in this age, but also in the coming (age)...

**NIV:** ... far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.

This verse explains more about God the Father seating Jesus at his right hand in heaven. The first word of the verse, the adverb ὑπεράνω, refers back to the last verbal form of verse 20, the participle καθίσας. ἐράνω itself means “above,” and with the prefix ὑπ- the thought is intensified.<sup>20</sup>

The rest of the verse explains what the Father has placed his Son above. The adverb ὑπεράνω is an “improper preposition” that takes the genitive, and so the words that follow are in that case. The adjective πάσης takes the same form (genitive feminine singular) as the four nouns that follow it. Even though πάσης is not repeated before each noun, it is clear that it modifies each of the nouns that follow. The list includes ἀρχῆς, translated “rule(r)” and emphasizing someone

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<sup>18</sup> See definition 87.34 in *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* by Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida.

<sup>19</sup> New Testament passages using this expression include Romans 8:34, Colossians 3:1, Hebrews 1:3,13, 8:1, 10:12, 12:2, and 1 Peter 3:22. The Messianic Psalm, Psalm 110:1 also uses this expression, and is quoted by Peter on Pentecost Day in Acts 2:34.

<sup>20</sup> This specific form, ὑπεράνω, is found in only two other places in the New Testament: Ephesians 4:10 and Hebrews 9:5.

who is “at the top.”<sup>21</sup> Next is ἐξουσίας, meaning authority by virtue of one’s position. The third noun is δυνάμεως, which means authority from one’s power and strength. The last term is κυριότητος, meaning “dominion” and emphasizing authority by dominating (e.g. lord vs. servant).

After these four nouns, Paul closes out the verse with a sort of “catch-all” statement. In addition to the different kinds of power that he has already listed, Jesus has also been placed above “every name” (παντὸς ὀνόματος). It is as if Paul were saying, “Name anything else you could possibly think of, anything of significance or important to you or anyone else, and you will have named something over which Jesus has power and dominion.” Just in case someone thinks to himself that someone or something could come along in the future that would threaten Jesus’ reign over all things, Paul adds οὐ μόνον ἐν τῷ αἰῶνι τούτῳ ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐν τῷ μέλλοντι. Not only does our ascended Lord have complete power over anything you could name that exists right now, but (ἀλλὰ καὶ) he will also have complete power over anything that may come in the future. The ending of the little doxology that concludes our liturgical psalms comes to mind: “As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever.” Nothing can or ever will usurp the power of the risen and ascended Christ!

### **Ephesians 1:22-23**

**Greek Text:** καὶ πάντα ὑπέταξεν ὑπὸ τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ καὶ αὐτὸν ἔδωκεν κεφαλὴν ὑπὲρ πάντα τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ, ἣτις ἐστὶν τὸ σῶμα αὐτοῦ, τὸ πλήρωμα τοῦ τὰ πάντα ἐν πάσιν πληρουμένου.

**Literal Translation:** ...and he (= God) placed all things under his feet and gave (= appointed) him head over all for the church, which is his body, the fullness of the one filling all things in all (= in every way).

**NIV:** And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

The two καὶ’s in verse 22 highlight two equally important points about the significance of Christ being seated at his Father’s right hand in heaven. They point back to verse 21 and further clarify what it means that Jesus has been placed above all rule, authority, power, dominion, and all other things. The subject of these two clauses is the same as the subject of the last indicative verb (ἐνήργησεν) found in verse 20 – God the Father. The Father has placed or ordered all things under Christ. There is a strong emphasis on the fact that all things are under Jesus’ control by the placement of the direct object, πάντα, at the beginning of its clause. The aorist indicative,

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<sup>21</sup> A visual way to picture the word is to imagine the top point of a triangle. The top point is the ἀρχή. In this way, the word can mean “beginning” (the top point is the “beginning” of the triangle) or “ruler” (e.g., the owner or president of a company is in the top position of authority with everyone else underneath him).

ὑπέταξεν, comes from ὑποτάσσω, which literally means to place (someone/thing) under (someone/thing). The word is often translated, “to subject” or “to submit.” In fact, it is the same word used four chapters later in Ephesians, where Paul encourages Christian wives to be submissive to their husbands. While the term carries negative baggage for some, there is nothing negative about what God is saying, both in respect to husbands and wives in chapter five, and in respect to our relationship to Christ here in chapter one. God has made all things subordinate to Christ, that is, he has placed everything under him in an orderly fashion. That fact that all things, ourselves included, are subordinate to Christ is a blessing for us; we will discuss this more as we reach the end of this verse.

This concept that everything is placed under Christ is further carried by the phrase ὑπὸ τοῦς πόδας αὐτοῦ. Those words are likely a reference to Psalm 8:6, a Messianic Psalm quoted by Paul here as well as in 1 Corinthians 15:27, and also quoted by the writer to the Hebrews in chapter two, verses 6-8. Habecck explains the phrase in its context this way: “Putting the foot on the neck of a defeated enemy kneeling before his conqueror was a symbol of subjugation. In the present context where no conflict is referred to it becomes a symbol of subjection. All things were made subject to the exalted Christ.”<sup>22</sup>

Paul adds a second statement in verse 22 that also speaks to the significance of Jesus’ place at the Father’s right hand in heaven. Not only has the Father placed all things under Christ’s authority, but the Father has also appointed Jesus head over all things for the church. The aorist indicative ἔδωκεν normally is translated “to give,” but the second direct object, κεφαλὴν, is understood as a position being given to Christ; in that case, it may be best to translate this section as the NIV did, “[God] appointed [Christ] head over all.” ἔδωκεν takes two direct objects in this clause. The first, αὐτόν, referring to Christ, is placed in a position of emphasis. It really serves more like an indirect object here, even though it appears in the accusative case. The other direct object is κεφαλὴν. Just like ὑπέταξεν above, κεφαλὴν appears here and again in chapter five, where Paul discusses the roles of husband and wife in the home. To the skeptic who claims that the principle of headship means that husbands are allowed to be unloving and domineering, we respond with Paul’s words in Ephesians 5:25-29, words that clarify the husband’s position of headship as one of loving and caring leadership that does everything with the best interest of his wife in mind. So it is with Christ as the head of the church. We are happy to be subordinate to him; we are blessed to have him as our head, for he rules over all things for our benefit.

Verse 22 closes with τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ, a dative of advantage. Jesus rules over all things to bless and benefit those whom he has called out of darkness and into the light of faith. The article makes it clear that Jesus has in mind a specific group of those who have been “called out.” ἐκκλησία is usually translated as “church,” which Luther appropriately defines this way in the Smalcald Articles: “God be praised, a seven-year-old child knows what the church is: holy believers and

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<sup>22</sup> Habecck, Irwin, J. *Ephesians: Amazing Grace*, p. 34

‘the little sheep who hear the voice of their shepherd.’”<sup>23</sup> Everything our ascended Lord does is ultimately intended to bless and benefit those whom he has called to faith, who hear his voice in the Word of God, and who may count themselves among the members of the invisible church through the Spirit’s work in their hearts.

The last verse of the chapter begins with the indefinite relative pronoun, ἥτις. It is feminine singular and so points back to the last word of verse 22, ἐκκλησία, which is also feminine singular. This final verse provides further commentary on the word “church.” The previous verse used the word κεφαλὴν, head, to describe Christ. Paul continues that imagery here by calling the church τὸ σῶμα αὐτοῦ, his (Christ’s) body. As the head of the church, Christ will only do that which benefits us, his body.

This concept that the church is the body of Christ is developed further in the final clause, τὸ πλήρωμα τοῦ τὰ πάντα ἐν πάσιν πληρουμένου. This phrase is an appositive of τὸ σῶμα because there is no conjunction between τὸ σῶμα αὐτοῦ and τὸ πλήρωμα. πλήρωμα means “fullness” or “completeness.” Christ, the head of the church, has in grace chosen to be incomplete without us, his body.

The remainder of the sentence further clarifies the “fullness” (τὸ πλήρωμα) that Paul is speaking about: τοῦ...πληρουμένου is a genitive modifying πλήρωμα, and τὰ πάντα ἐν πάσιν is placed between the article τοῦ and the genitive πληρουμένου, indicating that this phrase modifies πληρουμένου. πληρουμένου is a present middle participle used substantively as a noun. Although the form could also be passive, the middle voice is most logical in this context. A passive idea comes through because it modifies πλήρωμα: the church is the “fullness of Christ.” He chooses to be made complete by the church, which makes πληρουμένου an objective genitive. At the same time there is an active idea in πληρουμένου, because it takes an accusative direct object, τὰ πάντα. This is what Christ fills – everything! The article τὰ indicates the previous reference of πάντα at the end of verse 22. The phrase ἐν πάσιν, seems to indicate the manner<sup>24</sup> in which Christ fills all things. The BAGD lexicon notes that forms of πᾶς may be used without the article to express “everything” in an absolute sense.<sup>25</sup> Putting all of this information together, we could paraphrase the final verse in this way: “The church is Christ’s body, and that body is the completeness/fullness of the One who completes/fills everything for himself<sup>26</sup> in every way. Paul concludes the chapter with a paradoxical mystery. Christ, who fills everything that exists, has designed his relationship to the church in such a way that he is incomplete without his body, the church.

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<sup>23</sup> Kolb, Robert, and Timothy J. Wengert, editors. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, pp. 324-325

<sup>24</sup> Wallace, p. 372

<sup>25</sup> Gingrich, F. Wilbur, and Frederick W. Danker, editors. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Second Edition), p. 632-633. This verse is listed on page 633a under definition 2ad as one that could possibly be understood to mean, “in all respects,” or “in every way.”

<sup>26</sup> “For himself” is included to express the middle voice of πληρουμένου.

## Homiletical Suggestions

In general, I am in favor of preaching on the Gospel selection, rather than the First or Second Lessons, for major festivals.<sup>27</sup> The Gospel most often records the events that are being celebrated when we observe major festivals in the church calendar.<sup>28</sup> However, one should not make a rigid rule about this, either. There is benefit in preaching on the First Lesson, showing how God's promises were fulfilled in Christ, and on the Second Lesson, which often provides ample opportunity to apply the events we are celebrating to the people sitting in the pews.

The other two lessons appointed for Ascension Day<sup>29</sup> tell the story of the Ascension from the perspective of the same man, Luke. The readings on Ascension Day do not change from year to year in our three-year lectionary as they do for other festivals such as Easter and Pentecost, and so the Second Lesson for Ascension is a more likely candidate for festival preaching than on other days, simply because there are not as many pericope selections to work with.<sup>30</sup> Another possible use for this pericope is to preach a sermon based on this text on the Sunday after the Ascension. If your congregation has a sparsely attended service on Ascension Day, you may want to keep Christ's Ascension the central focus in your service on the following Sunday as well. Since there is not a strong "theme" found in the lessons appointed for the Seventh Sunday of Easter,<sup>31</sup> using Ephesians 1:15-23 as a free text on the Sunday after Ascension may be a good way to put our Lord's triumphant return to heaven before the hearts of more of our members.<sup>32</sup>

I would also like to share some thoughts regarding possible sermon applications. This is by no means an exhaustive list of possible applications. You will undoubtedly be able to come up with many more as you think of the people the Lord has called you to serve and their unique circumstances. Allow me to present three thoughts that especially came to mind as I prepared this paper:

- **Prayers with "balance:"** The apostle Paul's regular prayers on behalf of the Ephesians had a distinctively spiritual focus. He gave thanks to God for them because of their sincere faith and love. He prayed that their spiritual knowledge and faith would continue to grow. Just as

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<sup>27</sup> Refer to James Tiefel's article in the January/February 2002 edition of *Preach the Word* for further discussion about preaching on the Gospel for festivals (cf. the heading, "Tell the Story"). Past issues of *Preach the Word* are available online via the WELS Commission on Worship website.

<sup>28</sup> One significant exception is Pentecost Day, when the Second Lesson, Acts 2:1-21, records the events that are being commemorated.

<sup>29</sup> Acts 1:1-11, Luke 24:44-53

<sup>30</sup> Other preaching options for Ascension could include the appointed Psalm of the Day, Psalm 47, and Mark's very simple mention of the Ascension in the final two verses of his Gospel. The Mark account may be especially useful if circumstances call for a shorter sermon than usual.

<sup>31</sup> Both the First and Second Lessons during the Easter season are *lectio continua*, i.e., a series of readings from one book of the Bible. Because of this, the lessons generally do not tend to carry the theme of the Gospel during the Easter season (there are a few exceptions to this, however).

<sup>32</sup> The exception to this idea occurs in Year A of our lectionary, when the First Lesson contains the Acts ascension account along with the three verses that follow.

the prayer our Savior has taught us focuses primarily on spiritual matters, so Paul's pastoral prayer example does the same.

- **God's power in our lives:** Verse nineteen states that God's power at work in the hearts of his people is "in line with" (κατὰ) the power that he demonstrated when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand following the Ascension. From all outward appearances, God's action in our lives seems insignificant, even absent at times. But that is the great miracle of his power – it is at work even when we do not detect it! His power was at work when a small amount of tap water was poured over your head and Christ's words were spoken. His power is at work to make trials and difficulties serve for our good and strengthen our faith. We cannot always see God's power at work in our lives, but it is there, and it is powerful! God's power in our lives is just as mighty as the power demonstrated on Easter Sunday and Ascension Thursday!
- **Christian comfort and confidence:** Our Lord Jesus Christ reigns from heaven, "far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age, but also in the one to come" (verse 21). Nothing can usurp our Lord's authority. Furthermore, he has promised to use his authority "for the church" (verse 22), that is, for our benefit. Whatever we face in our lives, whether it is pleasant or painful, is something that our Lord will use for our benefit. The significance of the Ascension gospel gives every Christian comfort and confidence in any situation.

Finally, there are two appendices attached that provide some additional homiletical helps. The first contains sample themes and parts from the *Sermon Studies on the Epistles* series of books. Since the Ascension lessons remain the same in all three years of our lectionary, each volume has its own text study and outline suggestions. A second appendix contains a sermon that I preached on this text for Ascension Day 2002. The theme and parts for that sermon are different from the other suggestions given.

What a privilege we preachers have been given, to preach the gospel to the people of God regularly, especially on such important commemorations as our Lord's birth, resurrection, and ascension. Though Christ's ascension does not receive nearly the same degree of attention as Christmas or Easter, may we give this glorious event in the life of our Savior our full attention each spring, that God's people may be strengthened by the gospel proclaimed in the Ascension and that we further marvel at the power of God who has gone to such great lengths to redeem us and secure a future home for us in heaven.

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*Soli Deo Gloria*

**APPENDIX 1**  
**Sermon Outline Suggestions from *Sermon Series on the Epistles***

**Series A (pp. 204-207)**

**Christ Is our Chief Executive Officer -or- Jesus Christ, C.E.O.**

1. By God's power (19-20)
2. Above all authorities (21-22b)
3. For his church (22c-23, 15-18)

**Your Pastor's Prayer for the Church**

1. His thanks for service (15-16)
2. His petitions that we:
  - (a) Grow in understanding (17-18)
  - (b) Trust in God's power (19-23)

*There is a slight disadvantage with these two suggestions in that they do not specifically refer to the Ascension. The second sample in particular focuses the sermon more on the pastor's prayer than on Christ's ascension. Since this text is appointed for Ascension Day, it seems best to keep the significance of the day's celebration in the foreground rather than the background. These outlines might work better if one was preaching a sermon series on the book of Ephesians.*

**Series B (pp. 164-169)**

**Our Ascended Lord Blesses Us**

1. He helps us grow in faith (16-19)
2. He shepherds his church (20-23)

**The Rest of the Ascension Story**

1. Our ascended Lord helps his believers grow in faith (16-19)
2. Our ascended Lord uses his power on behalf of his church (20-23)

**May Our Ascended Lord Bless Us**

1. As individual believers (16-19)
2. As his body, the church (20-23)

**Jesus Reigns to Eternity (using only vv. 20-23)**

1. Trust him wholeheartedly (20-22a)
2. Serve him humbly (22a,23)
3. Proclaim him confidently (22)

Series C (pp. 184-188)

**What Is Our Ascended Lord Doing Now?**

1. He is giving the Holy Spirit (16-17)
2. He is preparing our glorious inheritance (18)
3. He is ruling this world for our good (19-23)

**We Pray on This Ascension Day**

1. Lord, give us the Holy Spirit (16,17)
2. Lord, fill us with hope (18)
3. Lord, let us see you ruling for our good (19-23)

**On Christ's Ascension I Now Build** (*Christian Worship #173*)

1. The hope of my ascension (16-18)
2. My comfort in this life (19-23)

*Note that if you use either of the first two suggestions above, it will involve a different interpretation of πνεῦμα in verse 17. The exegesis suggests that πνεῦμα refers to the new man, but the first two outlines here interpret πνεῦμα as the Holy Spirit. Refer to page five of the essay for a discussion of that matter.*

## **APPENDIX 2**

### **A Sample Sermon based on Ephesians 1:15-23**

#### *Theme & Parts:*

#### **How Should We Celebrate the Ascension?**

1. Pray to the ascended Lord for wisdom
2. Marvel at the ascended Lord's power

#### **Introduction**

How did you celebrate Memorial Day? Did you take part in a civic ceremony remembering the servicemen who gave their lives in battle? Did you enjoy an outdoor picnic or barbecue with friends and family? Did you watch a television documentary about one of the wars in which our military fought?

How will we celebrate our church's 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary? Should we conduct a special service marking the event? (We will in a week and a half). Should we invite past members to join us for the occasion? (We did). Should we have a special meal after the service at which everyone can mix and mingle and share memories? (We will).

How should we celebrate Ascension Day? Memorial Day is worth a day off work, and a church anniversary is worth a special service and dinner, but what is Ascension worth to people? Not much, it seems. I didn't check this with the various other churches in our area, but my guess is that there aren't too many churches with an Ascension service tonight. Many Christians would probably say that we should just celebrate it the Sunday before or after the actual day, so that more people will be here. Some might even suggest that we should drop it altogether, since it doesn't seem like a big deal to most people.

If you guessed that your pastor disagrees with those sentiments, you're right! We may not have the same crowd tonight that we did on Easter Sunday, but Jesus' Ascension is obviously important enough that we have scheduled a special service, and you have taken the time out of your busy schedules to be here. So, since we're here, what should we do? How should we celebrate the Ascension? To be sure, there is more than one approach we could take tonight as we remember our Lord's return to heaven, but it seems appropriate that we celebrate this event with a special service, just as we do for any major Christian holiday. And it seems appropriate that we take our cue for this celebration from the Word of God. That's what we want to do in this sermon tonight. Tonight we will spend some time looking at the words of the Second Lesson, which the apostle Paul wrote to Christians living in the ancient city of Ephesus. Paul gave those ancient believers some words of spiritual insight about Jesus and his ascension that will also guide our celebration. How should we celebrate the Ascension? Here is St. Paul's advice: First, pray to the Ascended Lord for insight, and second, marvel at the Ascended Lord's power.

#### **I.**

The Second Lesson tonight covers more thoughts that just our Lord's Ascension. Actually, Paul is writing a series of interconnected phrases that lead up to the major thought of Jesus' ascension; then he follows the mention of the ascension with more interconnected thoughts about the ascension. In the first half of this sermon we want to work up through the first few opening verses which lead us to Paul's Ascension thoughts. These are the verses that encourage us to pray to our ascended Lord for insight.

Paul's opening thought is about the prayers of thanksgiving that he constantly offered to God for the Ephesians. The church in ancient Ephesus was near and dear to Paul's heart. He had spent quite a bit of time in Ephesus helping to establish this congregation. Hearing about their faith in Christ and love for fellow Christians brought a genuine sense of gratitude to Paul. But he wasn't grateful to them for being so nice; he was grateful to God for sustaining them in their faith and love.

When Paul prayed to God and thanked him for keeping the Ephesians in the one true faith, at the very same time he continued to ask God to deepen their spiritual understanding. Paul writes, **"I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better."** If you have your Bibles open, you'll notice that our translation uses an upper case "S" for the word "Spirit." The translators are suggesting that Paul has the Holy Spirit in mind. But a better case could probably be made for a lower case "s." It seems that Paul has their new Christian nature in mind, the "new man" given to them in Baptism, the "new man" who wants to follow God and his will. The "new man" inside every Christian is the part that wants to gain more knowledge and greater understanding of the Lord's Word.

Paul prays that the "new man" inside them would gain spiritual insight into three specific items. Paul said, **"I pray...that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe."** Paul used an interesting phrase to introduce this list of three items. He asked God to **"[enlighten] the eyes of your heart."** We usually don't think of our hearts as the place where our intellect is located; but to the ancient mind, the heart was not only the location for emotions but also intellect. So Paul's prayer for his people is that God give them a special knowledge that would affect their entire being, both mental and emotional.

Now Paul lists three specific things that he wants them to understand. The first is, **"The hope to which [God] has called you."** If you have a special outdoor event planned, you might say, "I hope the weather will be nice." That's not the way the Bible uses the term "hope." The Christian's hope is not a nice wish that we make with our fingers crossed. It's a certainty we look forward to. Our future is not insecure. Our future comes with a rock-solid guarantee. Paul's second point expands that idea. The second item Paul wants his readers to understand is, **"The riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints."** Every believer is going to receive an inheritance from God. But God's inheritance is not some old, worn out family heirloom that only has sentimental value. Paul equates this inheritance to "riches." That term implies much more than a nice Christmas bonus at the end of the year. No, Paul means to say that the inheritance of heaven that believers will receive is like a Swiss bank account filled with millions and millions of dollars – so much that eternity would not be enough time to spend it all! That's how richly God has blessed us. On top of that, Paul adds one more item to his prayer for spiritual insight: **"[The Lord's] incomparably great power for us who believe."** No human being can take a corpse and successfully breathe a real, viable, active life into it. But that is what God did with us in a spiritual sense. He took spiritually dead corpses – people like the Ephesians Christians, people like you and me – and by his incomparably great power brought us from the dead of unbelief and make us alive by faith in his Son.

Paul really had a "pastor's heart." Every time he spoke to the Lord in prayer, he included a prayer of thanksgiving for these Christians in Ephesus. Did you notice the overall theme or content in his prayer? I'm sure the Ephesian Christians had day-to-day problems that were not much different than the ones we face, and yet Paul doesn't ask that God give them a worry-free, problem-free, carefree life. The theme of Paul's prayer is a simple request for spiritual understanding. But why? What about their problems, their heartaches, their obstacles? There's nothing that says Paul didn't pray about those things, but why does his prayer for spiritual understanding top the list, instead of a more "practical" prayer?

Let's bring this point home. What is it that we need to prayer for in our day of trouble? What is it that will get us through the rough and tough times in our lives? How do we keep our chin up when we've lost a loved one? How do we move into the future with confidence when the family finances aren't so hot? How can we maintain a positive outlook when we're haunted by loneliness or an uncertain future? How can we survive those tough teen years when our life seems to be going up and down all at once?

Isn't the answer found in the gospel? Sure, a friend's advice may be cherished, and sound psychology may offer some help, but when it comes to our spiritual outlook, is there anything else that can put things back into perspective as the gospel does? Though your heart may be heavy, your head can still be lifted high with confidence when you say good-bye to a loved one, because the Easter gospel assures us that Christ has defeated death. Though you don't know where the next check is coming from, Jesus' victory over sin at the cross shows you that our earthly problems pale in comparison to the heavenly solution Jesus provides for our biggest spiritual problem. Though you don't know what the Lord has in store for you tomorrow, you know what the Lord has in store for you in eternity, where all loneliness and uncertainty will never be able to haunt you again. Though teenage years are filled with constant flux, God's grace and love to you through his Son is constant. The gospel is the answer, so let us pray to our God this Ascension Day that he gives us greater insight into the gospel, which trumps all our troubles and stills every last soul.

## II.

In verses 19 and 20, Paul connects all his preceding thoughts with the Ascension of our Lord. The last item in his list of three spiritual insights was the Lord's **"incomparably great power for us who believe."** Now Paul picks up that thought again and compares that demonstration of God's power to another demonstration of God's power – the divine power that was on display at Jesus' ascension. **"That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way."** It's almost as if Paul puts an equal sign between God's power shown in our conversion and the power of God shown in Jesus' resurrection and ascension. And why shouldn't he say that? At our conversion, God made the spiritually dead become spiritually alive. At Jesus' resurrection, God made his physically dead Son physically alive again.

Now Jesus' Ascension is sort of like the icing on the cake. In the final three verses of the Second Lesson Paul marvels at the awesome power that God displayed in Jesus' ascension and that God turned over to Jesus at his ascension. The expression that Jesus is **"seated at [God's] right hand"** is a biblical way of showing the complete power and authority that Jesus has. Paul used a number of different phrases to really drive that point home – the ascended Jesus is Lord over all. First, Paul said it this way: **"[God] seated [Christ] at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come."** Not only is the ascended Jesus ruling over all things, but God the Father has made him ruler over all for time and eternity! And, just in case you didn't get it the first time, Paul says it a second time: **"God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church."** Notice the thought that is added here – Jesus rules over all, but not as a nasty dictator. He rules over all to benefit the church. That's us! Every Christian has a direct connection to the C.E.O. of the universe! Every Christian has an ally in the permanent ruler of heaven and earth!

Our Ascension celebration is so much more than a nostalgic look back at the life and ministry of Jesus. We want to do more than remember; we want to marvel! After all, one look at Jesus' marvelous ministry

and we'll quickly realize he was no ordinary man. No ordinary man could heal the sick with a word, not to mention raising the dead. No ordinary man could bring himself back from death to life and ascend into the heavens. But Jesus is no ordinary man. He's the God-man, the Incarnate One who now rules in heaven as the Eternal God.

Maybe the thought of Jesus' total power is a little scary. It's scary because if Jesus has total power, that means he is omniscient: he knows everything. And that means he knows everything about you and me! As he rules from heaven above, he sees everything, including our sin. And he sees every sin. He sees our poor attempt to cover up our guilt. He sees the shameful and hateful thoughts that crossed through our minds. He sees a world full of people who deserve to find out how powerful is wrath really is.

But that is precisely the reason we need to take a moment to look back on the life of our Savior and marvel at his life, because it is his very life that undoes the sin and guilt we have done. On this Ascension Day, you and I can marvel at the power our Lord had over sin, for despite sin's best attempts and Satan's best temptations, our Lord did not break his heavenly Father's will. You and I can marvel at the spotless life that Christ lived for us and how that very same life was offered for us into death. You and I can marvel that our Lord would pour out his blood and die in our stead, only to defeat death in a once-and-for-all victory like none other.

You see, our Lord Jesus' power is nothing to fear. He doesn't display his power to scare us, but to save us. Don't be fearful of his power; rather, marvel at his power. May Paul's prayer be your prayer this Ascension Day, that you may be filled with greater insight of Christ's love, and that you may marvel at the magnitude of his mercy. There can be no greater way to celebrate Ascension! Amen.

Pastor Johnold J. Strey  
Gloria Dei Evangelical Lutheran Church  
Belmont, California  
The Festival of the Ascension of our Lord  
Thursday, May 29, 2003

**APPENDIX 3**  
**Reference Copy of Text and Literal Translation**  
**Ephesians 1:15-23**

**Ephesians 1:15-16**

**Greek Text:** Διὰ τοῦτο καγὼ ἀκούσας τὴν καθ' ὑμᾶς πίστιν ἐν τῷ κυρίῳ Ἰησοῦ καὶ τὴν ἀγάπην τὴν εἰς πάντας τοὺς ἁγίους οὐ παύομαι εὐχαριστῶν ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν μνείαν ποιούμενος ἐπὶ τῶν προσευχῶν μου,

**Literal Translation:** Because of this (= therefore), I, having also heard (about) your faith in the Lord Jesus in line with you (= in every one of you), and (having heard about) the love that is for all the saints, I am not stopping giving thanks on behalf of you, making mention (of you) upon my prayers...

**Ephesians 1:17**

**Greek Text:** ἵνα ὁ θεὸς τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, ὁ πατὴρ τῆς δόξης, δώῃ ὑμῖν πνεῦμα σοφίας καὶ ἀποκαλύψεως ἐν ἐπιγνώσει αὐτοῦ,

**Literal Translation:** ...that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in (the sphere of) thorough knowledge of (= about) him...

**Ephesians 1:18-19a**

**Greek Text:** πεφωτισμένους τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς τῆς καρδίας [ὑμῶν] εἰς τὸ εἰδέναι ὑμᾶς τίς ἐστὶν ἡ ἐλπίς τῆς κλήσεως αὐτοῦ, τίς ὁ πλοῦτος τῆς δόξης τῆς κληρονομίας αὐτοῦ ἐν τοῖς ἁγίοις καὶ τί τὸ ὑπερβάλλον μέγεθος τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ εἰς ἡμᾶς τοὺς πιστεύοντας

**Literal Translation:** ...the eyes of your heart having been enlightened in order that you know what is the hope of his calling you (= the hope to which he has called you), what (is) the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints, and what (is) the continually surpassing greatness of his power for us, the ones who are believing...

### **Ephesians 1:19b-20**

**Greek:** κατὰ τὴν ἐνέργειαν τοῦ κράτους τῆς ἰσχύος αὐτοῦ. Ἦν ἐνήργησεν ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ ἐγείρας αὐτὸν ἐκ νεκρῶν καὶ καθίσας ἐν δεξιᾷ αὐτοῦ ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις

**Literal Translation:** ... (which is) in line with the working of the power of his strength, which he worked in Christ by having raised him from the dead and having seated (him) in (= at) his right in the heavens...

### **Ephesians 1:21**

**Greek:** ὑπεράνω πάσης ἀρχῆς καὶ ἐξουσίας καὶ δυνάμεως καὶ κυριότητος καὶ παντὸς ὀνόματος ὀνομαζομένου, οὐ μόνον ἐν τῷ αἰῶνι τούτῳ ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐν τῷ μέλλοντι.

**Literal Translation:** ...far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and every name which is being named, not only in this age, but also in the coming (age)...

### **Ephesians 1:22-23**

**Greek Text:** καὶ πάντα ὑπέταξεν ὑπὸ τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ καὶ αὐτὸν ἔδωκεν κεφαλὴν ὑπὲρ πάντα τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ, ἣτις ἐστὶν τὸ σῶμα αὐτοῦ, τὸ πλήρωμα τοῦ τὰ πάντα ἐν πάσιν πληρουμένου.

**Literal Translation:** ...and he (= God) placed all things under his feet and gave (= appointed) him head over all for the church, which is the his body, the fullness of the one filling all things in all (= in every way).