



Ephesians 1:16-23 - <sup>16</sup> I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> 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, <sup>19</sup> and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, <sup>20</sup> which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, <sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, <sup>23</sup> which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

## *The Ascended Christ Preserves His People*

- With glorious status*
- With sure inheritance*
- With incomparable power*



*God has ascended amid shouts of joy, the LORD amid the sounding of trumpets.* Now what? Do you think that question kicked around the minds of the disciples as they watched Jesus ascend into heaven? The thrill, confusion, and excitement of Easter Sunday were over a month old. They had seen the risen Lord a number of times but now as Jesus was bodily taken up into heaven, at least a part of their minds had to be thinking, now what? Jesus had promised them gifts from heaven, but they hadn't noticed any difference yet. Jesus had promised to be with them always, but Pontius Pilate was still governor and those people who hated Jesus and sent him to death were still alive and well in Jerusalem. Who knew if those same people would come after the disciples? Jesus removed his visible presence from among them. How could they carry on the work that he began? What now?

Have you ever puzzled with those first disciples, wondering what the future holds for the little flock of God's church? What now? We hear it over and over again on the Festival of Ascension: the risen and ascended Christ rules all things for the good of his church, but why didn't he just stay? Like the disciples, how can we know that he'll keep his promises? Take a look at the world around you, and it won't take long to realize that things seem backwards. The people of God are marginalized and the secular agendas rule the day. The downfall of the family unit doesn't seem to bother anyone but the Christians. God's definition of marriage is twisted and turned on its head to satisfy the whim of sinful man and all of this is done in the name of equality and tolerance. What now? Take a look at the church at large and sometimes we see it following in the footsteps of the sinful world. Churches are rocked by scandals and clergy turn away from the inspired truth of God's word. What now? Look a little closer to home and see that our own congregation and dear synod are not immune from trouble, either. Budgets are deflated. Missionaries are called back home. Schools close. Church attendance plummets. What now?

If you've ever entertained questions like these, and if we're honest with ourselves we all have, take to heart the words of the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 1. In these verses, Paul assures us that the ascended Christ preserves his people. He doesn't do it with a flimsy word of hope. Christ preserves his people – with glorious status, with sure inheritance, and with incomparable power. Paul writes, **I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.** When Paul wrote this letter, he was in prison. If anyone had reason to wonder how the work of the church would continue, it might have been the missionary sitting incarcerated. But Paul didn't worry, he didn't question. Instead, he gave thanks. What a powerful lesson – even when things seem to be turned upside down or going off the rails – give thanks for the gospel and its power! Paul gave thanks for his two year ministry in Ephesus which God had blessed. He gave thanks for the people there whose hearts had been awakened by the Spirit to trust in Jesus. Paul's sincere desire was that those Christians in Ephesus would know their Savior better. And not only that, but that they would know better what their Savior has made them to be – to see the glorious status they had as children of God.

When Paul was working in Ephesus, things were going well. The church was growing and its leaders were faithful to God's word. But in his farewell to the Ephesian elders, Paul knew that things wouldn't always be so good. He said that **after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.** Paul knew that the preaching of God's word brought with it hostility from the world and false teachers from within and the church at Ephesus wouldn't be immune to that. Paul wanted to assure these Christians and us that no matter what happens in life or how the world views us, we have a glorious status in Christ. He said, **God placed everything under [Christ's] 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.**

Christ is the head and we, his people, are the body. The church's status as the body of Christ is not something that expired when Jesus ascended into heaven. It is a present reality for us here on earth. It changes the way we view our Savior's ascension – Jesus is not a distant or far removed monarch who cares nothing for his people, but a supreme ruler who identifies his very self with those whom he came to redeem. This truth changes the way we look at ourselves. No more



am I identified by my past failures, never again will my character be linked with my sinful nature. Because of Jesus, who he is and what he did, I have a completely new identity – not as a slave, but an heir; not as a stranger, but as a child; not as a rejected piece floating aimlessly in a world gone wrong, but a very part of the body of the One who redeemed me from sin. That is our glorious status as members of Christ's body, the church. The ascended Christ preserves us, his people, with the glorious status he's given us even as we live in a world that wants nothing to do with him.

The world in which the Apostle Paul lived and worked was not all that different from our world today. It was a world from which Jesus had removed his visible, physical presence. It was a world of people who were sinful by nature and hostile to God's Word and work. It was a world that caused believers to raise some serious questions about what the future would hold for the little flock of God's church. In a world that abounds with uncertainty, Paul points our attention to the sure and certain hope of our glorious inheritance because of Jesus.

He wrote, **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.** God has called us to hope and we have hope because of his call. For the believer, hope is not the world's wishful thinking, but the absolute certainty that God will make good on everything he's promised. And what has God promised you? He's promised that he's chosen you from before the creation of the world. He's connected his promise to the waters of baptism when he brought you into his family. He's promised that the seal of his Spirit on your heart is a deposit guaranteeing your inheritance in his kingdom. He's promised to forgive your sins, to love you with an everlasting love, and to be with you always even after Jesus' ascension. That's how precious you are in God's sight – a chosen heir who stands to receive the entirety of his glorious inheritance. That is your sure and certain hope.

But sometimes, living in the world we do, we don't feel all that hopeful about the future. It's easier to be pessimistic and doubt God's power, especially when it comes to the church. The ascended Christ preserves his people, but sometimes we wished he'd show us some more outward success. Lord, you know that our church proclaims your word in truth and purity, so why in the world doesn't anybody seem to appreciate it? Lord, in our churches, the only increase in number we're seeing is the steady climb of age. Lord, our budget is tight, our attendance is down, our schools aren't producing enough workers. What now? We wonder whether the ascended Christ really can do what he promised. God forgive us for doubting our Savior! He can do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine. We can be sure that he will keep his word to preserve his people and prosper his church!

And to prove it, Paul uses one of the most beautiful pictures in all of Scripture. He calls us the body of Christ, **the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.** Think about that. At his ascension, God placed Christ over all things. He is all-powerful, all-knowing, and completely self sufficient. He doesn't need anyone or anything, but Paul calls us, you and me, **the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.** By his saving work, Jesus has forged an unbreakable bond with his church. So much so, that he does not want to be seen as complete apart from those he redeemed. The sheep give the Shepherd identity. The Head finds its full expression in the body. Christ lacks nothing, but he chooses to be seen as empty and unfulfilled without you, the one he came to save. The ascended Christ preserves his people with a sure and certain inheritance. And he can do all of these things because of his incomparable power.

We read, **I pray also that...you may know...his incomparably great power for us who believe. 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.**



Christ's ascension means that he preserves his people with incomparable power. God placed absolutely everything under his feet and now the risen and ascended Lord Jesus rules over all things. When Paul states that *all things* are subjected to Christ, he means it. Everything is subject to Christ's control – forces of nature, humankind, the spread of the church, everything is under Christ's control – even disease and death. He rules absolutely everything just for you. His power is at work in the world, guiding the events of history and charting the course of time – just for you. Your Savior's goal is to bring you home to heaven. Through faith in him, you can be certain that no earthly ruler, no terminal illness, no shrinking numbers, increasing age, or deflated budget are going to stop Jesus from accomplishing his purpose of spreading his kingdom and bringing you to be with him in heaven.

So...what now? That's the question that was on the disciples' minds and it rattles around in our head, too. What about the future of the church in the world? What about the spread of the gospel? What about the number of future church workers? What about budgets and buildings, futures and finances? With his ascension, Jesus answers all of those questions. But probably not in the way we'd expect. He departs to his Father's side so that he can be with us always. He sits in power so he can rule absolutely everything for our good. He lives to guide and direct the events of all human history with the sole intention of making good on his promises and bringing you to be with him forever in heaven. The ascended Christ preserves his people and will continue to do so until he returns in glory on the Last Day. *God has ascended amid shouts of joy, the LORD amid the sounding of trumpets! Alleluia!*

Amen