

May 12, 2024 – Ascension

Ephesians 1:16-23 (EHV)

Theme: **To our Ascended Lord, we pray:**

- 1) Give us the Holy Spirit
- 2) Fill us with hope
- 3) Rule for our good

*<sup>16</sup>I never stop giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. <sup>17</sup>I keep praying that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, will give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation in knowing Christ fully. <sup>18</sup>I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know the hope to which he has called you, just how rich his glorious inheritance among the saints is, <sup>19</sup>and just how surpassingly great his power is for us who believe. <sup>20</sup>It is as great as the working of his mighty strength, which God worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, <sup>21</sup>far above all rule, authority, power, and dominion, and above every name that is given, not only in this age but also in the one to come. <sup>22</sup>God also placed all things under his feet and made him head over everything for the church. <sup>23</sup>The church is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.*

We are tempted to think that, since Jesus ascended into heaven, he may be too far removed from our lives to either know or care about us in our need. Nothing can be further from the truth. Jesus' ascension did not mark his retirement from being our Saviour. No, it ushered in a new phase of his work. He still sees and cares for us, even if we can't physically see him. He ascended into heaven to rule over all things for the benefit of His Church – promising to hear and answer all our prayers according to his good and gracious will. In a way, Jesus is closer to us now than he was when he walked this earth in humility; He is always present to use his full, divine power for our everlasting good.

Our Ascended Saviour truly cares for us, His church. He wants us to care for His church as well. How can we do that? **By praying to our Ascended LORD that He** 1) Give us the Holy Spirit, 2) Fills us with hope, 3) and Rules for our good.

Part One: To our Ascended Lord, we pray: Give us the Holy Spirit

Our sermon text begins with the apostle Paul telling the Christians in Ephesus: *<sup>16</sup>I never stop giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.*

Brothers and sisters in Christ: I also thank God for your faith, love, and all you do for Christ's kingdom. I probably have not said it as often as I should, but you are in my prayers. You are a blessing to me. I hope you realize the blessing you are to each other as well.

Yes, there may be times when we get on each other's nerves; for example, when one person wants something done a certain way, and another person wants it done another way. Such differences

can lead to conflict. At the same time, we ought to thank God for our differences. Each of you brings a particular perspective to this congregation – having ideas and experiences others might not have considered. When conflicts of opinion arise on issues where God’s Word gives us freedom, don’t pray, “Lord, let them see it my way.” Instead, pray, “Ascended Lord, I am of a different opinion than my fellow Christian. Even though I might disagree with them, I thank you for blessing our congregation with their thoughts and insights. Help me see things from their point of view and value their ideas. Keep me from being overly proud of my opinions. The Church belongs to you, not me. Guide us in the direction you want us to go as we submit all our ideas, opinions and very selves to your holy Word.”

Paul continues: *<sup>17</sup>I keep praying that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, will give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation in knowing Christ fully.*

Understand Paul’s words correctly: he is not implying that the Ephesian Christians were infants in their faith. Paul’s entire letter reveals they knew much about Christ and the Gospel. The apostle prayerfully desires that they continue growing in their faith – never thinking that they know enough about the Gospel to stop learning and reviewing. That is also my prayerful desire for you – as I hope it is your prayer for me. Why do I say this? Because the LORD knows that the more we grow in our knowledge of him, the better prepared we will be for life on this earth: recognizing and avoiding all the seemingly harmless temptations that the devil, world and our sinful nature put in our way that are, in fact serious, spiritual traps meant to separate us from Christ. Not only that, but as we grow in our knowledge of Christ, we will also be better witnesses of him – calling those God puts in our lives to repent and receive from Jesus the forgiveness and salvation he freely offers all.

And how do we grow in our wisdom and knowledge of Christ? By prayerfully studying His Word. I say “prayerfully” because, without God’s aid, we could never understand or believe the Bible on our own. We need the Spirit of God to guide us and reveal Christ to us on every page of Scripture as we let the Bible itself, and not our faulty feelings or reasoning, interpret His Word for us.

Therefore, we pray, “Ascended Lord, send your Spirit to increase our faith through your Word. Without His aid and counsel, we would be lost. Let Him plant in our hearts a desire to learn more about you, to grow in knowledge of your wonderful Gospel, and wisely to apply your Word to our lives. Then, we will be able to discern good from evil and avoid all the dangerous, camouflaged spiritual mines the devil and his allies have set to destroy us. Then we will be emboldened to encourage one another better and share the soul-saving message of your forgiving love to those you put in our lives.”

Part Two: To our Ascended Lord, we pray: fill us with hope.

St. Paul continues: *<sup>18</sup>I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know the hope to which he has called you, just how rich his glorious inheritance among the saints is, <sup>19</sup>and just how surpassingly great his power is for us who believe.*

One of the greatest gifts the Holy Spirit offers us through the Gospel is hope. Understand that our Christian hope is not a mere wish; it is an unseen reality that gives us the confidence to face all of life's difficulties.

Hope is a powerful force. For example, when WWII concentration camp survivors were asked what kept them alive during all their sufferings, many responded that it was the hope of rescue. Now, if an uncertain earthly hope of rescue from a concentration camp can move people to press on through its horrors, imagine what our guaranteed hope in Christ can do!

From temptation to pain, persecution, and death, Christians face a lot of hardships for their faith, but the Lord offers us a hope that sustains us through it all: the certainty of our salvation. Because Jesus died on the cross for all our sins, we are reconciled to God. He declared us to be His children through faith. We are the apple of his eye, whom he promises to love, guard, and preserve throughout our lives and finally deliver us home to live in the glory and peace of his presence forever.

As word of the Allied advance on Germany spread in WWII German concentration camps, the hope of those imprisoned there increased. They knew it was no longer whether they would be liberated, but when.

We, too, live in such hope of spiritual liberation. As each day passes, we know that it is not a matter of "if" Christ will rescue us from this evil earth, but "when." He promised that he is coming soon, which moves us to pray: "Ascended Lord, enlighten our hearts to see the wonderful hope you won for us through your life, death, and resurrection. You ascended to heaven to prepare a place for us and promised to return soon to take us home to be with you. As we await your return, help us endure every hardship in life - knowing that our salvation is certain. Your resurrection and ascension prove it. Help us encourage each other in this hope as we contemplate your gracious rule on our behalf."

Part Three: To our Ascended Lord, we pray: rule for our good.

Paul says that the power our Ascended Lord promises to use for the church's benefit...<sup>20</sup>*is as great as the working of his mighty strength, which God worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, <sup>21</sup>far above all rule, authority, power, and dominion, and above every name that is given, not only in this age but also in the one to come.*

God certainly has a way of changing a situation, doesn't he? Just think: 43 days ago, we commemorated Jesus' crucifixion. When the disciples looked at the cross, it seemed as if all hope was lost: the world's Saviour was dead. Could humanity's situation get any worse? But then God showed his genuine power by raising Jesus from the grave, proving his victory over sin, death and the devil. At Jesus' ascension, God the Father exalted Jesus to the highest place imaginable, giving him all authority over everything – including every good and evil spiritual force in existence! Why? Paul writes: <sup>22</sup>*God also placed all things under his feet and made him head over everything for the church. <sup>23</sup>The church is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.*

Jesus cares so deeply for his Church that he uses everything in his power to grow, protect, and prosper it. He cares for us as much as he cares for his own body, for that is what he considers us to be: his hands, feet, and mouth on this earth to share his message of salvation.

But someone might ask, “If Jesus controls everything, why does he allow hardship in our lives?” The LORD doesn’t tell us why he allows the specific troubles we face. Instead, he encourages us to trust his promise to work in everything for our good, looking to his cross and empty tomb as proof.

“But,” someone might ask, “how does remembering Jesus’ cross and empty tomb give us hope in our hardships?” Think about it: Jesus looked all but defeated to human eyes as he hung on the cross. But it was on that cross that Jesus’ true strength was revealed in paying for our sins and reconciling us to God! On the third day after his death, he rose from the grave in glory, proving every promise of Scripture true! And if Jesus could do that, we can be sure he will keep his promise to work in all things – even the evil we experience – for our everlasting good.

When the Apostle Paul prayed for relief from an enduring painful trial, Jesus responded: “*My grace is sufficient for you, because my power is made perfect in weakness.*” Taking these words to heart, Paul exclaimed, “*Therefore I will be glad to boast all the more in my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may shelter me. That is why I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties, for the sake of Christ. For whenever I am weak, then am I strong.*”<sup>i</sup>

Whenever the LORD allows tough times in our lives, understand that he is not doing it because he doesn’t care or have the power to help. No, He uses them because he does care. He uses them to strengthen our faith – moving us to let go of our grip on this world and cling even more tightly to his promises in faith. And as we press on in faith, our ascended Saviour will continue to work in all things for our good - providing everything we need precisely when we need it. He will never leave or forsake us. Therefore, let us conclude our sermon by praying:

“Ascended Lord, I thank you for every member of this congregation. You have brought us together as a family to proclaim your salvation in our community. Send us your Spirit so we may grow in knowledge and faith as we study your Word together. Ascended Lord, our world is a scary place: the devil, world, and our sinful flesh constantly try to separate us from your love through temptation or hardship. Give us hope as we cling to your promises that you are in control and will work in all things for our everlasting good. Keep our eyes fixed on your coming return when you will fulfill your promise to take us to our everlasting home with you in glory. In your name, we pray. Amen.”

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<sup>i</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:9-10 EHV