

“Above Every Name.”

The Third in a Series of Sermons on Ephesians

Texts: Ephesians 1:15-23; Psalm 110:1-7

Paul has a well-defined concept of history. While God ordains all things and reveals his will through the unfolding events of human history, Paul is especially concerned with the redemption of God's people. Redemptive history refers to God's plan of salvation as it unfolds in those historical events recorded in Genesis through Revelation. In verses 3-14 of Ephesians 1, Paul's redemptive-historical panorama takes us from eternity past (when the Father chooses to save a multitude of sinners so vast they cannot be counted), to the historical work of Christ (who redeems those chosen by the Father through his shed blood), to that moment in time when we were called to faith by the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the gospel. Paul states that we were sealed by the Holy Spirit until the end of the age when our bodies will be raised in the resurrection. In our passage this morning (verses 15-23 of Ephesians 1), Paul focuses upon the center-point in redemptive history, the resurrection of Jesus Christ. For Paul, Jesus' resurrection marks the dawn of the new creation and is that critical turning-point when God begins to undo the effects of human sin. Occurring at the mid-point of Paul's redemptive-historical panorama, the resurrection of Jesus defines how we as Christians are to view the balance of human history from the moment Jesus was raised until our own resurrection at the end of the age. It is in our Lord's triumph over death and the grave that we find our hope as we await that day when the story of redemption is finally complete and we receive that glorious inheritance promised to us "in Christ."

We are continuing our series on Ephesians and now make our way to the concluding verses of Ephesians chapter 1. Building upon the sweeping Trinitarian panorama of redemption he has set forth in verses 3-14, Paul now prays for those who will read this letter, and in doing so, points us to the importance of Jesus Christ's resurrection as the foundation for the Christian life. Jesus not only shed his blood to redeem us from our sins, but his resurrection and ascension are a defining moment of the redemptive drama. All those who read Paul's letter to the Ephesians presently live in that period in redemptive history *after* Jesus has actually accomplished redemption for all those whom the Father had chosen from eternity past. This is why we speak of particular redemption (or definite atonement). Jesus does not merely make salvation possible for whomever wishes to be saved. Who among Adam's fallen children actually wishes to be saved? Rather, Jesus actually redeems all those given to him by the Father. Jesus' resurrection is the proof that Jesus definitely accomplished our redemption, and as surely as Christ "died for us," it is certain that Jesus was "raised for us," ensuring our own resurrection at the time of the end.

When Paul wrote this letter in the early 60's of the first century, Christianity was spreading rapidly throughout the Roman world. As we read this letter today, people are still coming to faith in Christ. It has been argued by some that the course of history will reach its end when the last elect sinner comes to faith in Jesus and the full number of those chosen by the Father, redeemed by the Son, and called by the Holy Spirit is realized. Now, since we don't know when that will be, we must prepare as though human history will continue to roll along just as it has been doing, long after we are dead and gone.

But since human history will come to an end when Jesus returns to raise the dead, judge the world, and make all things new, there is always the glorious possibility that we may be that generation living when the Lord returns, and that we may be among those who never taste the sting of death. As Paul puts it in Titus 2:13, we are "*waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.*" While we don't know when Jesus will return, we can say for sure that we are two-

thousand years closer to Christ's return than was the Apostle Paul.

In light of his discussion of the Trinitarian pattern of redemption in verses 3-14 (the Father choosing whom he will save, the son accomplishing redemption for those chosen by the Father, and the Spirit calling all those whom the Father has chosen and for whom the Son has died) and in light of the panoramic swath of redemptive history (from eternity past, to Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection, to that moment we come to faith, to the resurrection at the end of the age), Paul now gives us a basic overview of how we are to understand the times in which we live.

For Paul, our hope is to be found in the certainty of that glorious inheritance which God has for all of those who are "in Christ." This is a hope grounded in the fact that God has ordained all things and is directing all of human history toward its final goal—the uniting of all things in Christ, and the resurrection of our bodies. This is not "pie in the sky" and "angels with wings floating on clouds" kind of hope. This is a hope grounded in very real shed blood and an empty tomb. This hope is grounded in the fact of our Lord's resurrection, which is the proof that God's plan and purpose for history will reach the goal for which God has intended. If God can raise Jesus from the dead, then is anything else impossible for him? This is our hope—eternal life in redeemed bodies in the presence of God and his Beloved, Jesus, and in the perfect fellowship of the Holy Spirit. It is in this sense, then, that Jesus' resurrection changes everything. It is the proof that God can and will fulfill his purposes for each one of us.

Paul's discussion of the Christian's hope unfolds against the backdrop of verses 3-14.

Like verses 3-14, verses 15-23 is one long sentence of thanksgiving in the original Greek text. Having set forth the glories of what God has done for us in Christ, Paul's heart is moved to pour out a lengthy prayer of thanksgiving not only because of what God has done in providing for our salvation, but also because Paul has heard wonderful things about the faithfulness of the recipients of this letter. This news means that God's eternal purposes (as Paul has just set forth) are indeed being realized in the lives of his people. In verses 15-16 Paul writes, "*For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.*" Once Paul has considered the way in which God saves sinners, and then is reminded that God's redemptive purposes are being worked out in the midst of Gentiles (the predominant make-up of those in the churches to which Paul is writing) he is immediately moved to give thanks and to pray for all those hearing/reading his words. For Paul, good theology leads to doxology. The heart follows the mind.

In verse 17, Paul gets very specific about what he desires for his audience, "*that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him.*" In light of all the glorious things mentioned in the previous verses (God's loving purpose in election, our predestination unto holiness, our being chosen "in Christ," our being redeemed and forgiven, our being included in Christ, and so on), Paul's prayer must be seen in light of the fact that it is his desire that the knowledge and power of these glorious theological truths be realized in the present lives of all this reading/hearing his words. For Paul, doctrine matters. What we believe and understand about how God saves us, provides us with the categories to live the Christian life. Since the knowledge of these things will not be fully and perfectly realized until the end of age when Christ comes back, until then believers must struggle to live in light of these things, hence Paul's prayer for us following on the heels of the theologically rich passage in the previous verses.¹

¹ Bruce, Ephesians, 269.

At this point, I need to offer a few words of qualification. When Paul speaks of the “spirit of wisdom and revelation” he’s not describing what Pat Robertson does on the set of the *700 Club* when the “Spirit” supposedly reveals to him the identity of someone watching his program who has just been healed of a particular disease. Pentecostals and others engage in these rather bizarre practices which have more in common with fortune-telling than with Christianity—like getting “words of wisdom” and “words of knowledge.” They appeal to a verse like this one to justify their practices. If Paul was getting words of wisdom and revelation from the Spirit, Pentecostals argue, so should we.

According to Paul, the spirit of wisdom and of revelation is that which is imparted through the indwelling Holy Spirit. The Spirit does this so that we can understand how it is that God saves us, and so that we will then live in light of all of the blessings that God has so wonderfully provided for us. This is not the imparting of secrets to someone, who in turn, thinks they are some sort of spokesperson for God, and who sees their role as revealing these secrets to others. Rather, this is the work of the Spirit enabling all of God’s people to understand what had previously been hidden (God’s eternal decree to save his elect “in Christ”). This enables us to bask in the blessings of what God has done, as well as live in light of the fact that even as Jesus has been raised from the dead, so too, will all those whom the Father has chosen, for whom the son has died, and who have “heard the word of truth,” and who have been included in Christ and then sealed unto the day of redemption. Paul greatly desires that we understand these doctrines since they are the basis for how we are to live our lives. This means that if someone claims to have “a word from the Lord,” and doesn’t have an open Bible from which they are reading, they are deceived, or else deceiving. Do not listen to such people.

Paul goes on in this passage to point us to that which gives us hope in the midst of all of the trials of life. In effect, Paul is asking us to look at the big picture. In light of the grand Trinitarian panorama of redemption (the Father choosing, the son redeeming, the Spirit calling and sealing), and in light of what happens at the mid-point of redemptive history (Jesus being raised from the dead), we will better understand the glorious inheritance which awaits us. And so in verse 18, Paul can pray for us that *“having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints.”*

When Paul speaks of the “eyes of our heart,” he’s speaking of the work of the Holy Spirit in illuminating the glory of God (just as someone puts a floodlight on a building at night) as the one who redeems sinners in and through the work of his son Jesus. Paul is simply praying that we may understand the ways and purposes of God, so that we see the big picture and not bog down in the trials and tribulations of this life.² If we have some understanding of the fact that the same loving Father who chose us in eternity past, who sent his son to die for our sins, and who sent his Spirit to call us to faith and seal us until the day of judgment, then we will be able to have some understanding of the “big picture” of God’s redemptive purposes. This gives us hope—we know that whatever happens to us is part of God’s eternal decree being worked out in history (in general) and our lives in particular.

If you were to go strictly by your present circumstances, you cannot possibly live in the hope which Paul is praying that we will enjoy. Imagine how the disciples felt during the evening of Good Friday. Without knowledge of the resurrection, everything they thought they knew about Jesus suddenly appeared to be illusory. But after Easter Sunday, when Jesus did indeed conquer death and the grave, they could now understand God’s purposes in a way they could not have before. How much more should

² Bruce, *Ephesians*, 270.

we, Paul prays, live in the knowledge that God has not only promised to work everything together for good—even if we can't see the good and even if our present circumstances are pretty miserable—and that in Christ's resurrection we see that God has the power to make good on his promises. If we grasp the big picture of God's redemptive purposes, we will still have hope whenever things go to vinegar.

Paul wants all of those whom the Father has chosen, for whom the son has died, and who the Spirit has (or will) call to faith, to live their lives in the kind of hope which anticipates the joys of a glorious inheritance which is ours at the end of the age. Paul says we have been chosen, redeemed, called and sealed, we will be raised from the dead, the knowledge of which, Paul says gives us hope (a confidence in the purposes of God). It is this hope which enables us to endure persecution from unbelievers, sickness and calamity, as well as the ups and downs associated with our sanctification. It is this hope which enables those whom God has given riches, good health, and a life of relative comfort, to see that this life is not all that there is. Our promised inheritance in Christ completely transcends all earthly prosperity.

The kind of inheritance Paul is talking about is knowing that we will live forever in a new heaven and earth, where there are no more tears, no pain, no suffering and we will dwell in the presence of the Lord himself. Since this inheritance has been won for us by the doing and dying of Jesus, it cannot be taken from us, no matter what may happen to us in this life. No wonder that at the time of the Spanish invasion in the 1560s of what is now the Netherlands, one Spanish general lamented that one Calvinist soldier who thought he was doing the will of God was worth infinitely more than a well-trained regiment of mercenaries who fought solely for money. Paul wants us to know and understand the kind of theology that can withstand the ups and downs of life. If the tomb was empty Easter Sunday, then we can be certain that everything will turn out well in the end. This is hope in the biblical sense.

In continuing his point, Paul writes in verses 19-20, "*and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places.*" Paul prays that we come to know (in an experiential way) the "immeasurable greatness of God's power." If the cross is the display of God's love and justice (as set out in the previous verses), then the resurrection is the display of God's power. He alone is omnipotent (all powerful). His power knows no creaturely bounds or limitations. But his power was not manifest in such a way as to make us "ooh and awe" like people do during a firework display, or after a magician's amazing act of illusion. This display of God's power has a very specific purpose. Believers see God's power manifest through the way in which he saves sinners. Paul want us to know and understand how this is—redemption decreed, accomplished, and applied.

Paul also prays that we would come to understand "*the working of his great might which he worked in Christ.*" This is a reference to Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection. In the person of Jesus of Nazareth, God veiled his glory (and his power) and came to earth to save us from our sins. In his death, Jesus redeemed us from our sins, and it is only through his shed blood that our sins are forgiven. But a dead redeemer is no redeemer. And so Paul adds that we see the working of God's great might *when [God] raised [Jesus] from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places.* Jesus died for our sins, he was raised for our justification, and then he ascended into heaven, where at this very moment he is seated at God's right hand. This fact colors Paul's entire concept of human history.

Sitting at God's right hand is not only symbolic of our Lord's rule over all things (from human history, to his rule over our lives in our sanctification, even to death and the grave), but it means that Jesus took our flesh into heaven. As our catechism puts it in Q & A 49:

49. What benefit do we receive from Christ's ascension into heaven?

First, that He is our Advocate in the presence of His Father in heaven. Second, that we have our flesh in heaven as a sure pledge, that He as the Head, will also take us, His members, up to Himself. Third, that He sends us His Spirit as an earnest, by whose power we seek those things which are above, where Christ sits at the right hand of God, and not things on the earth.

The catechism very effectively captures the point that Paul is making here. Not only does Christ's resurrection and ascension demonstrate God's absolute power over death and the curse of human sin, but serves as the basis for our hope as Christians. Jesus' resurrection and ascension means that the one who redeemed us, and who has all power, is presently in heaven, where he is directing all things according to the will and purposes of the Father. It also means that Jesus is present with us through his word and sacraments through the power of the Holy Spirit. This is what Paul is praying that we will understand, so that we actually live (and enjoy) the hope which Jesus secured for us. This is the content of the word of truth which has been preached to us and which we have believed, and in which we have placed our hope.

This brings us to the specifics of Paul's view of history. This is significant enough to Paul's overall theology, as well as how we are to understand God's redemptive purposes in our own lives, that we should take time to spell this out in some detail. As Paul informs us in verse 21, having risen from the dead and ascended to the right hand of his Father, Jesus is "*far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.*" This verse is densely-packed and we need to carefully reflect upon Paul's key points.

First, Jesus is clearly the one spoken of in Psalm 110. "*The Lord says to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.'*" As Paul has stated, this is what Jesus is presently doing. Note how what follows in Psalm 110 is also related to Paul's prayer, as Paul's words echo this Psalm. "*The Lord sends forth from Zion your mighty scepter. Rule in the midst of your enemies! Your people will offer themselves freely on the day of your power, in holy garments; from the womb of the morning, the dew of your youth will be yours. The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, 'You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.' The Lord is at your right hand; he will shatter kings on the day of his wrath. He will execute judgment among the nations, filling them with corpses; he will shatter chiefs over the wide earth. He will drink from the brook by the way; therefore he will lift up his head.*" The Psalmist could not have known what Paul knows. In the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, God rules over his enemies and his people now justified, and clothed in the perfect righteousness of Christ (holy garments) freely offer themselves to their heavenly high priest in response to what God has done for them "in Christ." Our Lord's resurrection and ascension fulfills this Psalm, the most widely quoted Old Testament text in the New Testament. Jesus presently exercises his rule, authority, power and dominion both now and forever. Jesus rules over all things, although in different ways appropriate to each. This is the basis for all forms of "two-kingdoms" approaches to Christian ethics and history.

Second, this text also makes plain that Paul (following Jesus' own words throughout the gospels) does not believe that there will be a millennial kingdom of Christ on earth, either before or after Christ comes back. Paul is non-millennarian in his eschatology. He is neither "pre" nor "post" millennial. Paul believes that when Jesus returns, our Lord will judge the world, raise the dead, and bring about a new heaven and earth. As does Jesus, Paul affirms that there are two eschatological ages, "this age" and the "age to come." Throughout the Bible, "this age" always refers to things temporal, things which are destined to perish. "The age to come" always refers to things eternal, things without end. Notice that Paul indicates that Jesus rules over both ages in all his priestly, kingly, and prophetic authority.

By setting forth these two ages (“this age” and “the age to come”), Paul indicates that we must understand all of human history in terms of these two eschatological ages. We live in “this age”—which elsewhere Paul calls the present “evil” age (Galatians 1:4). “This age” is an age in which all things temporal are destined to perish at Christ’s second advent. Time will give way to eternity. “The already” gives way to the “not yet.” When Jesus rose again from the dead, he ushered in the “age to come,” the age of things eternal. Although not present in its fulness, by virtue of our “union with Christ” we are simultaneously citizens of this age, and citizens of the age to come. Paul will point out in the next chapter that even though we live on earth, God already sees us “in Christ” as seated and raised with him in the heavenlies. This means that our eternal destinies are already secure, even though our lives still must be played out “in this present age” in history. This simply means that we live our lives in the here and now in light of eternity. The big picture enables us to overcome the nagging doubts, sinful foibles, and trials and difficulties of human life and existence. This sad life is not all there is.

Third, this means that our hope is not that Jesus will establish his kingdom on the earth, either before or after he returns. There will be no earthly utopias. There will be no earthly millennial kingdom. As we read in Revelation 11:15, it is when the final trumpet sounds (and not until then) that “*the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.*” This tells us that our ultimate hope is that when Jesus returns, our sinful, temporal existence, will give way to eternity, and then we dwell with Christ forever in a new heaven and earth, which Scripture calls the home of righteousness (2 Peter 3:13). Our hope in this life is grounded in the fact that God has permitted us to read the final chapters of the story. We know who wins in the end. Despite the trials and tribulations of this life, Christ has already secured our inheritance for us. God raised has raised Jesus from the dead.

Finally, Paul concludes his prayer of thanksgiving in verses 22-23 by reminding us again of Jesus’ authority over all things. “*And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.*” This verse has very important ramifications for us as we consider these two eschatological ages. Paul’s words forces us to wrestle with the question, “just how is it, that if Jesus has all authority now, why is there still so much evil and suffering in the world?” The reason is that the presence of evil and suffering is somehow part of God’s purpose. He has permitted these horrible things to happen and somehow and in some way they serve his predetermined purpose. This is not to say in any sense that God is the author of evil—he is not and Scripture is crystal clear about that. But it is to say that since Jesus is in heaven, with all authority and dominion, head over all things, whatever happens, good or evil, is part of God’s purpose and does not occur outside of Christ’s control nor God’s plan.

To put it another way, “in Christ” God is directing all things—the sinful wrath of men included—to their divinely appointed end. Christ’s resurrection and ascension demonstrates that he has power to do so, the revelation of God’s loving purpose for his people (the panoramic picture of redemption) tells us that God’s purpose is to unite all things “in Christ.” Jesus Christ is the head of his church, therefore he is its Savior and protector. While sin and evil fit within his purpose, it was Jesus himself who told us “*the gates of hell shall not prevail against [my church]*” (Matthew 16:18), and that he is with us until the end of the age (Matthew 28:20). Thus Paul directs us to the present rule of the risen and ascended Christ who directs all things according to his will. This means that all of human history serves God’s eternal purposes. And that since Jesus is head of his church, whatsoever comes to pass (good or evil) will only hasten that day when this age passes away into the glories of the age to come and when we receive the promised inheritance. This is what it means for a Christian to have hope.

As we wrap up, Paul has made a number of important points, which we can now summarize.

While many critics of Reformed theology charge that stress upon God's sovereignty removes the incentive for prayer, let us follow Paul's example and see any consideration of God's grace in Christ as the supreme motive to pray. When we stop and think of all that God has done for us in Christ, how can we not offer prayers of praise and thanksgiving to our heavenly Father in the name of his son?

Since Christ is in heaven at the right hand of the Father, this means that his presence with us is realized through the work of the Holy Spirit in revealing to us the riches of our inheritance "in Christ" through word and sacrament. The blessed Spirit does this by giving us a spirit of wisdom and revelation enabling us to understand God's purpose in which the Father chooses to save his elect, sends the son comes to redeem them, and the Holy Spirit to apply redemption to all those chosen by the Father and for whom the Son has died. We must always keep this redemptive historical panorama (the big picture) before our eyes. This helps us make sense of our lives.

Paul is very clear that Jesus Christ is Lord of all history. His resurrection marks the dawn of the age to come. Therefore, even though we live in this present age, one day this present age will give way to eternity. As Christians, we live between these two ages. We have the blessings of the "already" but must await the glories of the "not yet." While our inheritance will come at the end of the age, we live our lives in hope, knowing that God has decreed that all that everything we do in this life has meaning and purpose. We know this because we see that God is love "in Christ". We also know this because we've seen God's power when he raised Jesus from the dead. And since Jesus has been given that name which is above every name, and who alone who sits at the Father's right hand directing all things unto their appointed end, we know that no matter what may come our way in this life, God can and will turn it to all good in the age to come. And this is why the big picture matters so much.