

Power To The People

Ephesians 1:20-23 May 10, 2023

Ephesians 1:20-23 - ²⁰He exercised this power in Christ by raising him from the dead and seating him at his right hand in the heavens—²¹far above every ruler and authority, power and dominion, and every title given, not only in this age but also in the one to come. ²²And he subjected everything under his feet and appointed him as head over everything for the church, ²³which is his body, the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way.

The city of Ephesus was a seaside port on the west coast of modern Türkiye. A little more than 300 miles to the east was Ankara, today the nation's capital city. In Ankara stood the most famous augusteum - a temple of worship for Rome's first emperor. Built around 25 AD,¹ on both walls of this temple, in Latin and Greek, was inscribed a copy of *The Deeds Of The Divine Augustus* - a 35 paragraph testimony that Caesar wrote about himself before his death. It begins with this line: "A copy below of the deeds of the divine Augustus, by which he subjected the whole wide earth."² He goes on to list the money he spent, the wars he won, the gifts he gave, the temples he built, and the titles he enjoyed.

The emperor cult was one of *many* religions in first century Asia Minor, but it was an important one to Rome. It was part of the government's unification of the vast empire.³

Now, here you are, a Gentile Ephesian. For years the emperor cult was part of your life. Maybe you also joined a mystery religion, or even dabbled in sorcery which was so prevalent in your city.

At some point, someone shared the Good News of Jesus Christ with you. You believed and were born again. Suddenly, you were a monotheist - unlike most everyone else in your city and neighborhood. At church one Sunday night, you hear a letter from the Jewish Christian who founded your local fellowship - an apostle who speaks with authority and finality. In this letter, Paul tells you about just how great the One true God is and how great the salvation which flows from God's love and grace is. But, as Paul explains these things, the fundamental truths of life are being rewritten in your mind. Things like there is One God, not many gods. There is a coming Kingdom that Christians have a place in. There is an order when it comes to family, employment, citizenship, that is quite different than what the world around you practices.

While Paul's letter is *incredibly* good news, it was also incredibly countercultural. Eventually, the truths of Christianity would be considered *criminal* by the unbelieving world. Listening to Paul explain that Caesar is *not* God, Rome is *not* the ultimate Kingdom, you might realize just how radical Christianity was. In fact, you'd probably start piecing together *why* Paul was in jail - why Christians were sometimes seen as seditious traitors.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Temple_of_Augustus_and_Rome

² <https://pages.ucsd.edu/~dkjordan/arch/romans/DivineAugustus.html>

³ <https://rpl.hds.harvard.edu/faq/cult-emperor>

These were incredibly encouraging words, but these were ideas that shook your old Gentile understanding to its core. But Christians didn't have to be afraid because God has limitless power - power that is presented to God's people so that they can grow and strengthen as they walk with Him. Paul's great desire was that these believers would become more and more spiritually enlightened to understand this hope, this power, the wealth of our salvation.

We pick back up in verse 20. If you're using the New King James Version, you'll see it's mid-sentence. That's because, in the Greek, verses 15 through 23 are all one long sentence,⁴ so translators have to make choices about punctuation to assist the ease of reading in English.

Paul is in a section where he's talking about the exceeding greatness of God's power toward those who believe.

Ephesians 1:20 - ²⁰He exercised this power in Christ by raising him from the dead and seating him at his right hand in the heavens

The resurrection is the most important event in human history. Paul told the Corinthians, if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless.⁵

R. Kent Hughes writes, "*The cross is the highest display of God's love...the resurrection is the ultimate display of His power.*"⁶

The best news is that it wasn't a one-time display. Jesus was the *first fruits* of the resurrection power of God. Paul said it plainly: "Just as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive...Christ the first fruits, afterward, at His coming, those who belong to Christ."⁷

The resurrection of Jesus was God exercising His immeasurably great power. That power is also exercised for *us*, not only when we come out of the grave one day, but in the present. Ephesians 3:20 speaks of God's power "that works in us." Same word for works as is seen here for exercised. God's power is meant to energize our lives - to bring spiritual life where there was deadness. Today we think of power and how it brings energy and heat and electromagnetism. God's power brings life and grace and love and endurance and glory and honor and strength as we are energized by it.

Paul also explains that Christ was seated at God's right hand in the heavens. When Jesus came out of the grave, He didn't come out in weakness, but in power.

Sometimes in popular culture we see a character that comes back from the dead. Most often, they come back in *weakness* - they come back incomplete. In *The Revenant*, Leonardo DiCaprio did not come out of his scrape with death in great strength. The word revenant means "a person who has returned, especially from the dead." Or think of Wesley in *The Princess Bride*. He comes back from

⁴ Thomas Neufeld *Ephesians*

⁵ 1 Corinthians 15:17

⁶ R. Kent Hughes *Ephesians: The Mystery Of The Body Of Christ*

⁷ 1 Corinthians 15:22-23

being *mostly* dead, but he can't move. He has to be carried into the third act. Emperor Palpatine is back from the dead in *The Rise Of Skywalker*, but there's not much of him left.

Christ came out of the grave in absolute power and glory and strength and ascended from earth to the right hand of God the Father where He rules and reigns forever.

Now, this verse has revealed some significant truths already, but one of the most important is the fact that there is, *indeed*, a world beyond this one. Heaven is real. Eternity is real. We will occupy them one day. Sometimes you hear notable people debate whether they think we're in "the matrix" - in some computer simulation or not. I saw a video of Neil DeGrasse Tyson telling someone that there's really no difference between our world and the world of *Super Mario Brothers* the game.⁸ And he's supposed to be an expert on what is real and what is true. These are important, fundamental issues from which we build our lives. It matters whether this is true or not.

As a first-century Ephesian, you were told Caesar is God or that Diana is God or that there are these geographical deities or you can control otherworldly powers through magic. And Paul cuts through all of these follies and says, "*There is one God. He has revealed Himself. He is in charge and He has extended an invitation for you to join His family. There is a supernatural realm and this life leads to the next one. And here are the proofs so that you can know all of this is true and here's how you can benefit from these truths today as you live out your days in this temporal world.*"

As Paul lays out these things we learn that we live in a tension between this world and the next. Bible commentators sometimes refer to it as the "now and the not yet." We see it here: Christ *has been seated* in His position of rule and authority, and yet the physical Kingdom is not yet encompassing the earth. So, Christ is King, and we Christians serve in His Kingdom, but there is also a *not yet* aspect to it. There is still more to come in the fulfillment of these truths.

The tension grows even greater when we get to chapter 2 of this letter and read, "He also raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus." Past tense. It's done. Yet, here we are in bodies of flesh in a temporal world with all its difficulties.

The process of God accomplishing His powerful plan isn't over. But the important part is that it cannot be stopped. God *has* done these things and so they will unfold according to His glorious will. And we should remind ourselves that God is so powerful that it isn't *hard* for Him.

In every superhero movie, there comes a moment where the hero can *barely* overcome the problem. He has to use *all* his ability to hold up the bridge or fight back the enemy who is just about as strong as him. But God's power isn't like that. It's *immeasurably* great. There's no contest.

Ephesians 1:21 - ²¹far above every ruler and authority, power and dominion, and every title given, not only in this age but also in the one to come.

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=87nILueuJas>

In every category, in every place, in every time, Christ is above and in charge.⁹ And it's not even close. He is *far above* every ruler, every power, every being in every age.

Now, this was seriously counter-cultural. Archaeologists have discovered a house in Ephesus that had this written on the wall: "*Rome, the ruler of all, your power will never die.*"¹⁰ But here's Paul saying ideas like that simply aren't true. Rome was not the authority, Christ was. Caesar was not ultimately in charge, Christ was. And *is!* Not only does that give us comfort since this ultimate Authority is our Friend and Savior, but it also gives us a mindset. Because, in the end, we answer to this Lord and Savior more than we do to any earthly ruler. God has given government for the good of human society, but human government will often operate in contradiction to God's truth and while we live as good citizens we must remind ourselves that we ultimately answer to Christ Jesus and must honor His commands.

Paul's reference to the age to come reminds us again that we have a place in that age. As Christians, we've been invited to be a part of Christ's Kingdom. And the Bible explains that the life we live now helps prepare us for that coming age. So, we should ask ourselves: Am I dressed for that coming age? Am I saved up for it? We prepare for vacations, right? Even if you don't use a budget normally, most people budget for a vacation. They pack and prepare and plan. Jesus says, "store up treasures in eternity. Adorn the robes of heaven. Prepare and plan for the age to come."

Ephesians 1:22-23a - ²²And he subjected everything under his feet and appointed him as head over everything for the church, which is His body.

This stands in bold, defiance of Caesar's claim, "I (Augustus) subjected the whole wide earth." No, you didn't. Christ did. And this has been the plan all along. Paul is quoting multiple Psalms in these verses, which have revealed God's plan hundreds of years before this letter was written. Caesar was a pretender. Christ is the real deal.

We're told that God did this "for the church which is His body." This continues the incredible message that Paul has been getting at for the whole chapter: *Do you know what God has done for you?* Here, we find that Christ is given as the Head over us as a *gift* to us and that we are set apart to operate as the Body of Christ, He in heaven, we on earth, working together by His power.

We are *terribly* unqualified for the job! But the Lord says, "That's ok. I'll build you up. I'll empower you. I'll lead you. I'll gift you. I'll help you and protect you. But *you* are My Body now."

In Augustus' Divine Deeds scroll he said, "[I] subjected the whole wide earth *to the rule of the Roman people.*" But did he, really? Did he *actually* share his throne? The Lord Jesus *does!*

In the Millennium we will govern with the Lord. He shares His Kingdom with us. We're told we're going to judge angels! And when we see glimpses of the Millennium in the prophetic books of the

⁹ Darrell Bock *Ephesians: An Introduction And Commentary*

¹⁰ Frank Thielman *Ephesians*

Bible, we see that it's a time of great activity. All sorts of things are happening. Paul has us thinking about the age to come and the power of God and how we operate as His Body. It's good to remind ourselves that the coming age is not a time of inactivity. We're going to be very busy as God continues to energize us and as we finally are able to live as sinless, glorified people.

So, if this is already done, as Paul says, and if everything that is subjected under Christ is also subjected under His Church, since we are His Body, why do we experience so much difficulty and frustration and feel powerless in this life?

Thomas Neufeld writes, *"God's order of creation and salvation is still in the process of being realized in Christ. Such transformation is neither momentary nor without conflict and struggle."*¹¹

It's not that it might not happen, but that it is still happening. And so Paul wrote, hoping the Ephesians would understand more of what *is* true, what *is* given to us, what *is* possible as we walk in the power of God so that we could grow in strength and hope and effectiveness.

The whole point is that Paul wants us to know the incredible potential and privilege we have as saved people in the church, but also that this great privilege comes with important, counter-cultural, right-now responsibilities. And so, in this salvation, full of blessings and benefits and power, we are called to complete participation with what God is doing, allowing Christ to be our head in every way, operating as His Body, filled with His power but subordinate to His leading.

Verse 23 continues:

Ephesians 1:23b - the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way.

Scholars call this the hardest phrase in the book, maybe in all the New Testament.¹² The Greek grammar is vague and Paul even rhymed many of these words.¹³ Who is filling and who is being filled? There's debate, but the overall message is this: The Church is the special beneficiary of God's powerful filling,¹⁴ and the Church is implicated in the filling work of God.

Paul will go on to show us how we live in this cooperative relationship with Christ. He fills us and we fill up with Him. God is filling us full, He is accomplishing His glorious, sanctifying work by His power, but at the same time, we cooperate by using that energy to *"build up the body of Christ... growing into maturity with a stature measured by Christ's fullness."*¹⁵

The picture he uses is a head and a body. The head with the central nervous system, with the directing power, the place of thought and understanding and and personality and decision, but then those directives being carried out by the body, which has life and strength and mobility.

¹¹ Thomas Neufeld *Ephesians*

¹² Stephen Fowl *Ephesians: A Commentary*

¹³ Ben Witherington *The Letters To Philemon, The Colossians, And The Ephesians*

¹⁴ Bock

¹⁵ Ephesians 4:12-13

In this analogy, it's the head that matters, right? I read an article titled, *"How Many Organs In The Body Could You Live Without?"*¹⁶ It said this, *"You can still have a fairly normal life without one of your lungs, a kidney, your spleen, appendix, gall bladder, adenoids, tonsils, plus some of your lymph nodes, the fibula bones from each leg and six of your ribs...If you allow yourself artificial replacements and medication, we can go further and remove your stomach, colon, pancreas, salivary glands, thyroid, bladder and your other kidney. Still not enough for you? Theoretically, surgeons could amputate all of your limbs, and remove your eyes, nose, ears, larynx, tongue, lower spine and rectum."* But there's no living without the head. The head is all-important. But the head *wants* eyes and kidneys and salivary glands and lungs.

This is an amazing revelation: God *wants* to act, He wants to express His powerful work on the earth. And to accomplish that, He's decided He wants *you* as part of His body - a representative group of people that act in His place on the earth, with His power and authority. It's amazing that He is willing to limit Himself in this way. God the Son took on a body *forever* because of His great love for us. And now, He goes further and says, "I'm not going to stay on the earth and walk around as the Risen GodMan. No, I'm going to ascend to heaven and now *YOU* are My Body on the earth. I will act through *you*. And so that you can be My body I will give you power and filling and gifting and all the directives you need." We, the assembly, the ekklesia, are called out to live as the Body, energized by the mighty power of God, filled with His fullness and filling with Him according to His purposes. Filling the earth with His grace. Filling up in our flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ. Filling our little spheres of influence with ministry and generosity and endurance in suffering and with Gospel truth. Filled full with this power that has been given to us, not by a dead Caesar, but by the Living Lord.

Our hostile world refuses to believe in this Savior, despite proofs like the resurrection. The world settles for building empty memorials for dead men who claim to be great. Augustus was decaying in the dirt while they carved on wall of an empty temple how powerful he was and how grateful the Roman people should be for all he did for himself.

Meanwhile, Christ Jesus lives in heaven and says, "I am building *you* as My Temple. And My Temple isn't full of dead men's bones, it's full of life and power." What a complete re-understanding of reality for the Ephesians. This was a radical change in their understanding of reality. That's what the opening of this letter is all about. You Christians, do you realize what God has done? Do you realize what that means? Do you realize what is possible because of God's power given to you? It's Paul's hope that they would understand and that *we* would understand so that God's truth and power and goodness could be made known through us, the church, as the Lord energizes us and builds us up.

¹⁶ <https://www.sciencefocus.com/the-human-body/how-many-organs-in-the-body-could-you-live-without/>