

Ephesians 1:20-23

Introduction

This morning, we come to the end of Paul's second very long sentence, and also to the end of the first chapter in Ephesians. In the first two verses, Paul identified himself as an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God. Then he identified the recipients of his letter as the holy ones who were in Ephesus – those in Christ Jesus who were filled with faith. And finally he sent his greetings – his wishes of *true well-being*: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

After the opening greeting, Paul immediately launches into a 202 word sentence where he blesses the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ – He has chosen us, predestined us for adoption, redeemed us, made known to us the mystery of His will, taken us as an inheritance, and sealed us with the Spirit of promise.

When this sentence is finally finished, Paul begins another long sentence (this one 169 words) where he first *gives thanks* to God for the Ephesians – for the evidence of God's saving blessings in their lives. Then he *prays* for the Ephesians that they might grow in their knowledge of God as the Holy Spirit enables them to comprehend more fully the blessings they've received. And then he moves into something that feels a whole lot like “praise and worship,” and yet at the same time he's teaching, and instructing, and encouraging the Ephesians. (See sentence diagram on last page)

Paul prayed that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, would give us the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the *knowledge* of Him, that we may *know* three things: what is the hope of His calling, what is the wealth of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the powerful working of the strength of His might.” Notice how Paul gets more and more “wordy” with each item. By the time he gets to number three (“the exceeding greatness of [God's] power toward us who believe, according to the powerful working of the strength of His might”), we have the feeling that Paul could end up going anywhere and saying anything – and that would be a very accurate feeling. Once again, the truth that's been revealed to Paul seems to be carrying him away. But even as Paul is “carried away,” he still makes sense, and he's still remembering the needs of the Christians in Ephesus. It's amazing, really, and I can only explain this in light of the fact that these words are ultimately breathed out by God Himself.

So the last thing Paul prays is that we might know “what is the exceeding greatness of [God's] power toward us who believe, according to the powerful working of the strength of His might,” and then he continues:

I. “that He powerfully worked in Christ”

Last week we asked, “How strong is God?” Paul wants us to know the “*exceeding greatness*” of God's power according to the *power* of the *power* of His *power* – according to the powerful

working of the strength of His might. God is powerful way beyond our ability to comprehend. And yet all of the infinite resources of this infinite power are all “*toward us who believe.*” God is always exercising all of His infinite power on our behalf and for our benefit.

But what does that *mean*? **How** is God’s power put into effect for us – **how** is it always being applied to us who believe? (cf. Thielman) So often we think of power and strength in primarily a physical and material way. God is so strong He could pick up that mountain. God is so mighty, He could defeat all the combined armies on the earth. God is so powerful, He could heal the most incurable and untreatable disease. And all of these things are true. But then God doesn’t always do all of these things. So *how* is God’s infinite power always at work in us and for us who believe? That’s the question that Paul answers in these verses.

The exceeding greatness of God’s power toward us who believe, according to the powerful working of the strength of His might **is, specifically, that which He powerfully worked in Christ...**

II. “When He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places”

So often when we read this verse, what we see is more description of just how great God’s power is. So – “The power that was able to raise Jesus from the dead is the same power that is able to do all things for us.” And that’s true. But then why doesn’t God **do** all things for us? Or **is** He doing *all things* for us and we just don’t see it?

We *could* say that “the power that was able to raise Jesus from the dead is the same power that is able to do all things for us.” But it would be better to say that God *has already worked* His power for us **by** raising Jesus from the dead. And God *is continuously working* His power for us **in that** He has seated Jesus at His own right hand in the heavenly places. This is **how** all of the vast resources of the power of God are constantly and always at work *for us* who believe. Paul has actually just quoted from the first verse of Psalm 110 where David writes:

- ✓ **Psalm 110:1-7** — The LORD [Yahweh] says to my Lord [David’s greater Son]: “**Sit at my right hand**, until I make your enemies your footstool.” The LORD sends forth from Zion your mighty scepter. **Rule in the midst of your enemies!** ... 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.

So in this chapter, God (Yahweh) invites David’s “Lord” to sit at His own right hand – to **rule** in the midst of His *enemies* until they become His *footstool*. The enemies are described as human kings and earthly nations who stand opposed to Israel as the people of God. But these human kings and earthly nations were never the real enemies. Behind these earthly powers were spiritual powers whose goals and agendas were far more evil and far more sinister than most people ever knew – whether the people of God or the people of the surrounding hostile nations (cf. Dan. 10:13, 20). So when Paul quotes this verse as being fulfilled in Jesus, He sees *behind*

the earthly powers and enemies of King David and the people of Israel (Psalm 110), the spiritual powers and enemies of David's greater Son (Jesus) and of His new Covenant people (the Church).

Just take a moment to think about it. To say that a man has been seated at the right hand of God is to say that He occupies the supreme, highest, and most powerful position in all the universe. He sits with God on His throne and shares with God in His rule. But then Paul goes on to say explicitly that Christ has been seated at the right hand of God *in the heavenly places*. The point is that Christ's power and authority extends not *only* to earthly, visible realities, but *first of all* and *most importantly* to realities that are spiritual and invisible. Remember all the "*spiritual*" blessings that God has blessed us with "*in the heavenly places*"! So if Christ has been seated with God in the heavenly places, then this means that He has power and authority not just over earthly kings and nations, but *first of all* over all of the spiritual powers and authorities that exist in the heavenly places. And these spiritual powers and authorities are what stand behind every earthly and temporal assault on the people of God – of whatever kind it may be. But in case we should somehow miss these things, Paul makes it explicit. Christ has been seated at the right hand of God in the heavenly places...

III. "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come"

At the end of the letter, Paul reminds the Ephesians:

- ✓ Ephesians 6:12 — We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the *rulers*, against the *authorities*, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the *spiritual* forces of evil *in the heavenly places*.

Our enemies are not ultimately physical and earthly. Our enemies are not powers that we can see, and touch, and feel. They are the spiritual forces of evil—the rulers and authorities—in the heavenly places. In Ephesians six, Paul goes on to describe the spiritual weapons of our warfare (Eph. 6:14-17). Peter says that it's our adversary *the devil* who prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour (1 Peter 5:8). Jesus said that Satan had demanded to sift Peter like wheat, but Jesus had prayed for Peter that his faith would not fail (Luke 22:31-32). Paul speaks of the various schemes of Satan by which he would seek to weaken and compromise our faith (2 Cor. 2:10-11). John vividly describes the true nature of our enemy and what's really at stake in the battle:

- ✓ Revelation 12:17 — Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.

If we take any of this seriously, it should easily be enough to fill us with terror. Our real enemies are the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places, and what's at stake in the battle is not ultimately our bodies or any temporal reality, but our souls and our eternal well-being. And so now is when we need to know exactly *where Christ is*. God has raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power

and dominion and every name that is named (or maybe we could say, “every spiritual power that could ever possibly be invoked”) – not only in this age but also in the one to come.

It’s the powerful working of Christ’s rule and authority ***right now in the present*** that guarantees the powerful working of this rule and authority in the age to come and therefore for all eternity. So often, we think of Christ as exercising a much greater power and authority in the age to come. But for Paul there is *no such difference*. Then, the exercise of Christ’s power and authority will have already accomplished the intended result, but that will be the only difference. And so we desperately need to know that as Christ will exercise His power and authority *then*, so He *is* exercising His power and authority *today*. And it’s this powerful working of Christ’s rule and authority right now in the present that Paul really wants us to see. To paraphrase one commentator, “So concerned is Paul to emphasize the powerful working of Christ’s present rule and authority that he continues to heap up further clauses underlining it” (cf. Lincoln).

IV. **“and He put all things under His feet”**

This is in the *past* tense! As the Apostle Peter says:

- ✓ 1 Peter 3:22 — [Jesus Christ] has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

God has *already* put all things under Christ’s feet. And yet as the writer of Hebrews says:

- ✓ Hebrews 2:8 — *At present*, we do not yet *see* everything in subjection to him.

So we could picture it like this: God lined up all of the spiritual powers and authorities under Christ’s feet when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places. And then God said to His anointed one, “Now rule in the midst of Your enemies until all of these powers and authorities have been utterly destroyed.” And that’s what Christ is doing even now as we sit here today.

- ✓ 1 Corinthians 15:20–27 — Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep... For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive... Christ the firstfruits, then ***at his coming*** those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father ***after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign [in this age] until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed [at the moment of Christ’s coming; 1 Cor. 15:23, 50-56] is death. For “God has put all things in subjection under his feet.”***

This is why I’m not premillennial. I don’t believe the Bible teaches that after Christ’s coming, He will reign for a thousand years in a world where there is still sin and death. Paul says that Christ will *destroy at His coming the last enemy*, which is death. The reason I talk about my understanding of the Bible’s teaching on the millennium is not because I like debating subtle and complicated points of irrelevant doctrine – as though there could be any such thing. The reason I emphasize that the Bible is not premillennial is because I believe this idea robs us of the ***full*** understanding of what Christ is ***actually doing right now***. By definition, the thought of a world

after Christ's coming where there is still sin and death – where the spiritual powers and authorities in the heavenly places have not yet been destroyed – by definition, this premillennialism cannot allow us to understand the full extent of the powerful working of Christ's rule and authority right now in the present. But this is exactly what Paul so desperately wants us to see. The God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, has seated Christ at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come; and He put all things under His feet.

And now we come full circle. What's the point of all this power and authority? What does it mean for us? Well that's *the whole point!* Paul prayed that we might know what is the exceeding greatness of God's power *toward us who believe*, according to the powerful working of the strength of His might – *that He powerfully worked in Christ* when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come; and He put all things under his feet...

V. **“and gave Him as head over all things to the church”**

The other way to say that “*all things*” are “under” Christ's “**feet**” is to say that Christ is “**head over all things**.” (cf. O'Brien) But here's what Paul wants us to see: God “*gave [Christ] – as head over all things – to the church*.” Christ is exercising all of His powerful rule and authority over the spiritual powers and authorities in the heavenly places all for *us*, and all for *our sake*. God “*gave Him as head over all things to the church*” – to *this*...

VI. **“which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.”**

To say that the church is the “fullness” of Christ is to say that the church is “filled up” with the fullness of Christ. Later in Ephesians Paul prays that his readers might be “filled with all the fullness of God” (3:19; cf. 4:13). The Apostle John writes:

- ✓ John 1:16 (cf. Col. 1:19; 2:9) — For from [Christ's] fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

“All the Divine graces which reside in [Christ] are imparted to [us] (the church); His ‘fullness’ is communicated to [us] and thus [we] may be said to be His [fullness].” (Lightfoot; quoted in O'Brien and Hoehner)

And, of course, if we are the fullness of *Christ*, then this means that He is the one who fills. The church is “the fullness,” Paul says, “of Him who fills all in all.” As the one in whom God has worked—and is still working—the exceeding greatness of His power, Christ comes to us and He fills us perfectly, and totally, and completely with Himself. Paul says in Colossians:

- ✓ Colossians 3:11 — Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

And so the exceeding greatness of God's power that He worked, and is working, in Christ is not just external to us, or outside of us – it's *in us*, and *through us*, and therefore it's truly *for us* at *all times* and in *every way*. As Paul says: God gave Christ *as head over all things* to us – to *this*, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

Conclusion

Last week we asked, “How strong is God?” Paul wants us to know the “*exceeding greatness*” of God's power according to the *power* of the *power* of His *power* – according to the powerful working of the strength of His might. God is powerful way beyond our ability to comprehend. And yet all of the infinite resources of this infinite power are all “*toward us who believe.*”

God is always exercising all of His infinite power on our behalf and for our benefit. But what does that *mean*? *How* is God's power put into effect for us – *how* is it always being applied to us who believe? So often we think of power and strength in primarily a physical and material way. God is so strong He could pick up that mountain. God is so mighty, He could defeat all the combined armies on the earth. God is so powerful, He could heal the most incurable and untreatable disease. And all of these things are true. But then God doesn't always do all of these things. So *how* are all of the vast resources of the power of God constantly and always at work *for us* and *in us* who believe?

“We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the *spiritual* forces of evil *in the heavenly places.*” Our enemies are not ultimately physical and earthly. Our enemies are not powers that we can see, and touch, and feel. Behind every *earthly* power are *spiritual* powers whose goals and agendas are far more evil and far more sinister than most of us have ever truly comprehended. Our real enemies are the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places, and what's at stake in the battle is not ultimately our bodies or anything temporal, but our souls and our eternal well-being. If we take any of this seriously, and if we have any understanding of our own sinful weakness and frailty, this should easily be enough to fill us with terror.

This is *why* Paul prays that we might know what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the powerful working of the strength of His might, that He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead, and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule, and authority, and power, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come; 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. And so now we can truly say with Martin Luther:

“And tho' this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us, we will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph thro' us... Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing, were not the right man on our side, the man of God's own choosing. Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He—Lord Sabaoth His name, from age to age the same, and He must win the battle.”

Ephesians 1:15-23

For this reason I for my part,
—*having* heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus
and your love toward all the saints—
I never cease giving **THANKS** for you,

Verses 15-16a

remembering you in my **PRAYERS**,
that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory,
may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation
in the **knowledge** of Him
(the eyes of your hearts being [already] enlightened),
that you may **know**
what is the hope of His calling,
what is the wealth *of the glory of His inheritance* in the saints,
and *what is* the exceeding greatness of His power
toward us who believe,
according to the **powerful working of the strength of His might**,

Verses 16b-19

that He **powerfully worked** in Christ
when He raised Him from the dead
and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places,
far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named,
not only in this age but also in the one to come;
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.

Verses 20-23