

Ps 99:1,2
 Ps 68:1
 Ps 110:1,2,3
 Ps 118:3,4
 Hy 41:1,2,3
 Ephesians 1:15-23
 Acts 19:11-20
 Psalm 110
 Ephesians 1:19a

Yarrow, June 5, 2011

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Is it appropriate that we, children of the 21st century, still celebrate Ascension Day? I ask the question because the society in which we live distinctly refuses to acknowledge the Saviour in public life; in fact, that Jesus received the throne of the universe is –as far as public life is concerned– universally denied. That reality in the public life of today’s world has made countless Christians very pessimistic on the matter of where this world is headed. Throughout our western culture, Christians have come to feel insignificant, our ability to contribute to the life of the nation restricted. We feel unwelcome and unwanted, and as a result so many Christians everywhere have withdrawn within themselves, withdrawn from the public arena....

That sense of malaise, beloved, which has beset so many children of God is not fitting, not in agreement with the gospel of Christ’s ascension into heaven. I want this morning, then, to open with you the Word of the Lord God concerning the ascension of Jesus Christ. This ascension of the Saviour is stimulant for God’s people to shed their discouragement, and stand up tall and straight in the main-stream of public life – precisely where the devil does not want us.¹

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

CHRIST’S INCOMPARABLY GREAT POWER IS FOR THE SAINTS TO USE.

1. The extent of Christ’s power
2. The glory of Christ’s power
3. The use of Christ’s power

1. The Extent of Christ’s power

The passage from Ephesians 1 we read together displays for us an enthusiastic and excited Paul. In the original Greek of this chapter, these nine verses make up one long sentence, but Paul doesn’t just ramble on without saying a great deal; rather, the apostle has packed this one long sentence with a lot of detail. In fact, in this one long sentence it’s as if one thought produces another, and that thought in turn produces another Paul wants to express. Paul is excited, so ecstatic that word tumbles out after word, thought after thought as he seeks to get on paper the material he finds so inspiring.

At the same time, these nine verses very much revolve around one central thought, and that’s the notion of the immense power of God, a power that God was pleased in Christ to lay at the disposal of the saints. It’s this thought that comes out specifically in the words of vs 19.

In this one verse the apostle has packed four different words that each captures the concept of power. The first word Paul uses is the Greek form of our English word “dynamic”. This is the common word for power, both in the Bible and outside, and it’s translated as such in our translations. Just as in English, the term refers to the “ability” or the “capacity” to do something.

¹cf Clinton E Arnold, *Ephesians: Power and Magic* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), pg 52:

“In the prayer in Eph 1:15-23, the writer wants to impress indelibly upon his readers that no conceivable being can even come close to matching Christ in power or authority. Upon raising Christ from the dead, almighty God exalted him to a position of unrivalled authority from where he exercises his lordship. The significant Christological statements in the prayer are made by the author for their direct ecclesiological relevance -- the church now shares in this resurrection power. The goal of the prayer is that the readers will be made aware of and appropriate this unsurpassed power which is available to them.”

Power: the point of the word is not that you do something; the point of the word is that you are *able* to do something.² This first word for power is embellished by the descriptive words “exceeding greatness” (NKJV). The point is that God’s ability to do something surpasses by far the ability of any other being in the world. God’s power is “incomparably great” (NIV), His capacity to act immeasurable.

This first superlative word is followed by two other terms that appear in our translation at the end of the verse as “mighty strength”. These two terms might better be translated as “might” and “strength”, and then placed beside each other as “the might of His strength”. In any case, the two words “might” and “strength” mean basically the same as the first word Paul uses, the word for “power”, and so they too point up God’s ability to act. By piling these different words for “power” on top of each other, Paul achieves an accumulative effect: God’s ability to act is overwhelming. Here’s the notion that nothing is beyond God; what He determines to do He’s in turn able to do.

The fourth word Paul uses in this verse for the concept of power is translated for us with the word “working”; the text says that God’s “incomparably great power” is “like the *working* of His mighty strength.” The word translated as “working” captures the concept of the *effect* of power. That is: it’s not just that God is *able* to do what He wishes; He also *does* what He wishes. Because of God’s great power, things get done, God is *effective*.³ Overwhelming ability becomes *action*.

We say: that God’s so mighty as to get things done is all good and well, but just what has God accomplished?? We look at our society, and see a weakened church and a strong force of unbelief..., and yes, it gets us discouraged.

Notice, then, congregation, what the apostle says in vs 20: God used His incomparably great power to raise Jesus Christ from the dead. And truly: that is a display of incredible power! To blow new life into that which was dead, in the tomb for three days, in the process of decaying into dust: yes, that’s far beyond what any creature can do; it’s fully a display of incomparably great power. What a God this is; see what He does!

In fact, so great is the immeasurable power of God that God’s raising Jesus from the dead produced in Jesus more than the resurrection itself. Rather, such was the strength of the work God performed on Jesus that Easter morning that Jesus Christ sat down at the right hand of God in heaven.⁴ Though as dead on earth as dead can be, God raised this Jesus from the dead and so exalted Him to new heights of life; to the resurrected Christ was entrusted dominion over all creatures, all things subjected to Him. What God had intended for man in Paradise –have dominion over all creatures– was granted to the Christ God raised from the dead; God “put all things under His feet” (vs 22).⁵ See there, beloved, the immense power of God: such is “the exceeding greatness of His power” that He raised up Jesus from the dead and gave to Him such incomparable majesty; the ascended Christ is now Ruler over the entire world, with every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth under His authority!

That in turn means, beloved, that the great power belonging to God has also *been given to the Christ*. For *all* things have been placed under Jesus’ feet; in fact, the Saviour has received a place at God’s right hand – that place symbolizing honour, power, authority. The incomparable might with which God effectively raised Jesus from the dead so that He might receive a place in heaven has now become Jesus’ might; to Him is given the exceeding greatness of God’s power.⁶ Small wonder that in these nine verses Paul is so excited, so enthralled: the Saviour is *Lord*, incomparable *Master* of God’s manifold creation. The Roman Empire of Paul’s day, the United States of America, the slumbering Chinese giant: all are *under His feet!*

But before we can elaborate on the consequences of the power God has given to Christ, we need first to penetrate somewhat deeper into this great power of the exalted Saviour. It’s one thing to say that our ascended Lord has received such incomparable might, but the statement needs some colour in order to bring out its glory. That’s our second point:

² cf Arnold, 73.

³cf TDNT, II, 652. Also Arnold, 74.

⁴according to the Greek, the subject implied in the participle *εγεγερσθαι* is God and the object Jesus. The subject implied in the participle *καθισθαι* is not God; the subject is Christ, and there is no object. Christ, then, is not pictured as having *been seated*; after His resurrection He rather *sat*.

⁵See further Ps 8, quoted in part in vs 22.

⁶See Brian Donne, *Christ Ascended* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1983), pg 32.

2. *The Glory of Christ's Power.*

To draw out the glory of the Saviour's power, the apostle Paul colours this great power in two ways. The first aspect we need to draw out involves the background of the Ephesians Paul addressed. The second concerns what the Old Testament had prophesied about the ascended Christ.

a. **Background in Ephesus.**

Concerning the background of the Ephesians, we are to know that these saints of Ephesus had not so long ago come to faith in Jesus Christ; they had recently given up their heathen faith in order to serve the one true God. As heathens, though, they had served any number of gods; the Greeks had many deities. Of the many gods of Greek religion, some were considered good, others were patently evil and did you harm. Again, some of the gods were strong, others were weaker. These various levels and temperaments of the deities went by different names; the Greeks (and the Jews who lived in Greece did it too) spoke of "rulers", of "principalities", of "powers" and so much more.⁷ These gods, spirits of the air, affected what one did; they did good to you or did evil to you. One could call on certain gods by calling their name, or could use a magical incantation in order to drive an evil spirit out – exorcism.⁸ The passage we read from Acts 19 provides us with an example. All in all, these false gods didn't make the lives of their worshippers easy.

The saints of Ephesus had broken with the heathen beliefs of their youth. Still, what one has been taught as a child stays with you; the fear of the gods, the notion that your conduct offends some evil gods and brings you into trouble, is not easily overcome. And besides: now that you believe in the only true God, what do you make of these heathen gods? Ought the new saints of Ephesus to deny their existence?

It's in that sort of a setting, beloved, that the words of Ephesians 1 are written. Then notice: Paul does not deny the existence of the gods the Ephesian saints used to serve, does not say they are simply the product of one's imagination and that's it and so just ignore them. The apostle rather realizes that behind the false gods the Greeks served (and it's true of all idolatry) stand Satan and his demons, and no amount of talking will talk these demons out of existence. So it is that when the apostle describes for his Ephesian readers the exalted place given to the ascended Christ, he does so with direct reference to the gods they used to serve. Vs 21: Jesus has a place "far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come." For the locals who read Paul's words about the "incomparably great power" given to Christ, it was specifically this reference to the principalities and powers and might and dominions that gave colour to Christ's exalted position. For: those principalities and powers and might and dominions: these were precisely the forces, the deities, they had been so enslaved to, the ones they had feared. These principalities and powers and might and dominions had power, great power – power to make you sick and power to make you better, power to make you poor and power to make you rich. Through magic or some other means you might be able to convince them to help, but meanwhile these gods controlled you. That the people of Ephesus in Acts 19 burned books on magic worth "50,000 pieces of silver" goes to show just how much the deities – those principalities and powers and dominions and might – controlled the people; on an average wage of one denarius (that's a piece of silver) per day, "50,000 pieces of silver" was wages for 50,000 man-days!⁹ One certainly needs to fear the spirits immensely before a town spends that kind of money on books dealing with magic! And recall: it surely wasn't the zealous heathens who burned their books; that will have been only the converts.

But see, says Paul to these readers: you may have feared these principalities and powers, the gods of your past, but so exceedingly great is the power of the ascended Christ that He has a place "far above" these principalities and powers and dominions and might. "Far above", writes Paul, and the word he uses is rare in the New Testament¹⁰ but quite common in other writings of

⁷See Clinton E Arnold, *Powers of Darkness: Principalities and Powers in Paul's Letters* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1992), 91.

⁸cf Arnold, *Ephesians*, 54f.

⁹cf Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), pg 567.

¹⁰It occurs but three times, twice to indicate height of place (Heb 9:5; Eph 4:10), once height of rank (Eph 1:21). See Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, pg 646f.

Paul's time to describe the place where the "powers" dwelt.¹¹ Says Paul here to these Ephesians steeped in their heathen religions of many gods, of principalities and powers and dominions and might: these principalities and powers exist alright, but the ascended Christ has received from God a place "far above" the spirits you used to worship and contend with. You were brought up to think that the spirits and the gods you served had a place high above the earth and so you had to tremble for these gods, do the right things to impress them, utter various incantations and practice other kinds of magic to persuade them. But the ascended Christ has received a place far, far above them; these principalities and powers and dominions and might you feared are all subject to this Christ!

We understand: a statement like that gives colour to Paul's contention that Jesus Christ has been raised to a place of incomparable power. If His might is "far above" that of the spirits and the powers that be, truly, Christ's power is "exceedingly great".

b. Background in the Old Testament

The colour Paul gives to His statements about the exalted position of the Saviour, about the exceeding greatness of His power, receives more sharpness still when we consider what the apostle quotes from the Old Testament. The phrase in vs 20 that the ascended Christ was seated "at His right hand" is lifted from Ps 110. That's the Psalm which David sang when he captured Jerusalem from the Jebusites and sat on the throne of Melchizedek, that ancient "king of Salem" (cf Genesis 14).¹² David realized that he could never be a king as great as Melchizedek had ever been, for the Old Testament law made it very clear that the king of Israel could never at the same time be the high priest of Israel (for the priest had to be a Levite, while the king had to come from the tribe of Judah). Then David could sit on Melchizedek's throne, but Melchizedek was very much his superior; he'd been both priest and king. That's why in vs 1 David can speak of another king who will be David's "lord"; he's to be both priest and king. And moved by the Spirit, David understands God to instruct this person-greater-than-David to "sit at My right hand". That right hand is in the Bible the position of honour, of power. Yes, so much power would God give to this person-greater-than-David that God would make his enemies his footstool. Now, if anything is a graphic picture of you being master over another, it's surely this that you can place your feet on his neck!

That's now the text Paul quotes to show the exceeding greatness of the power God has given to the ascended Christ. In fulfillment of Ps 110, Christ sits at God's right hand. And –vs 22– in that position all things are put under His feet; this person-greater-than-David has total, complete, absolute mastery over His enemies. Talk about an incomparably great power given to the Christ!

See, beloved, then one can say much about Christ's great power, but it is His absolute mastery over other gods, it's the fact that the devil behind these other gods has been made a stool for Christ's feet, that gives colour, depth, focus to "the exceeding greatness of His power." Given that kind of colour, small wonder that Paul in these verses was so excited, enthusiastic, enthralled! See who's Master of the Universe! The Old Testament had spoken of God as "LORD of hosts", but see: that's literally Christ the Saviour! Exciting indeed!

Now the big question: of what relevance is all this information about the gloriously great power God has given to Christ in His ascension? Of what benefit was this information to the Ephesians Paul addressed, and of what benefit is it to us today? That brings us to our last point:

3. The Use of this Power

Back to the text: Paul speaks there of "His incomparably great power *for us who believe.*" The point of that expression is this: this incomparably great power is *directed to* the believers, it is laid *at the disposal* of the believers, is *for their use.*¹³ What a thought: Christ's power is laid at the believers' disposal! Why might Paul want to say that??

Here I need to remind you, brothers and sisters, that the one long sentence of vss 15-23 was actually Paul's report of the prayers he regularly prayed on behalf of the Ephesians. Vs 16: "[I] do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers." The content of Paul's

¹¹ Arnold, *Ephesians*, 78.

¹² Leslie C Allen, *Psalms 101-150* (Waco: Word Books, 1983), pg 86. See also Holwerda, "De Priester-Koning in het Oude Testament", in "...*Begonnen Hebbende van Mozes...*" (Terneuzen: Uitgeverij DH Littooi, 1953), esp pg 60.

¹³ AT Lincoln, *Ephesians* (Waco: Word Book, 1990), pg 61.

prayer is mentioned in the vss 17 & 18; he asks God to give to the believers of Ephesus insight so that they come to know the “hope to which He called you”, that they come to know the “riches” God imparts to the saints. And what is the “hope” which the believer now has? What is the “riches” God now gives? No, Paul does not think of the life to come, with all its splendour; in this passage of Ephesians 1, the “hope” which the believer has, the “riches” God now gives is the fact that *Christ’s incomparably great power is made available to the saints now*.¹⁴ That’s the hope of the Christian, the riches the Christian now has! The ascended and exalted Christ did not keep His capacity to act to Himself; what He had gained at His exaltation *is for the saints to use*, now, in this life. That same thought is expressed again in vs 22 where God is presented as having given Christ the position of “head over everything *for the church*”. That is: the Church benefits, Christ’s headship is for the Church; it is through the church, the believers, that Christ’s fullness fills all the world.¹⁵

Now: let that sink in, beloved. The power of the exalted Christ is beyond our understanding; so great is it that all His enemies—including the principalities and powers, and the devil and his demons behind the heathen religions too— all form a footstool for Jesus’ feet. That immeasurably great power is *made available* to the believers, laid at our *disposal*. Who, then, has the power in this world? No, congregation, it is *not* the media that has the power in this world, and it is *not* the politicians, and it is *not* the United Nations. All such ungodly powers are footstools for the Lord of hosts! Who has power in this world? In this world, beloved, it is *you* who have the power! *You*, for Christ has ascended into heaven, and God has seated Him “at His right hand” so that He’s “far above all principality and power and dominion and might”, and that immeasurable power is “for [you] who believe”, it is available for you to appropriate, to use! *You*, the Church of Jesus Christ in this town, have far more power at your disposal than does anybody else in town!

Then it may well be true that the name of Jesus isn’t mentioned on the streets of our land, and is respected even less in the nation’s chambers of power. But you understand, brothers and sister: that’s no reason for the believers to retreat from the streets of the land, from the hallways of power and the boardrooms of big business. Christ has ascended, His exceedingly great power is at your disposal, and therefore, beloved, fear not the world, fear not the media and the politicians and the principalities and powers, the devil and his demons behind today’s politicians and today’s media. Fear them not, but rather exercise the power that’s at your disposal through the ascension of Jesus Christ. With boldness fight the evils present in our nation, with assurance cause that authority of the King of kings to impact on the decisions of the business world, with confidence cause Christ’s power to influence the nation’s hallways of power, with courage stand up for the unborn, stand up for the oppressed, stand up for the poor of the world. Let the righteousness and the mercy and the justice of the King of kings shine forth in this world – even as the gods of this age go all out to silence such mercy and righteousness and love. Christ has ascended, and therefore it’s *not for the church to retreat from the public square*. Christ has ascended, is exalted in heaven, and therefore it’s not for you believers to *hide themselves in isolation from society*, but it’s for believers to get involved –as Christians armed with the almighty power of Christ– get involved in the thick of the public square! There, as Christians, *as Christians* boldly do your daily task in service to the One and Only King of kings, convinced that you have no enemies too great for you to handle – for they’re all under Christ’s feet.

I know: we battle the prince of darkness, the principalities and powers and dominions, the spirits of the air, the gods of sport and power and money and liberalism and so many more such gods common in today’s society. The battle is real –anybody engaged in that battle on the streets of our heathen nation knows it well– but beloved, there is no reason to fear; Christ’s power is at your disposal, for you to use in the battles of each day.

Go, then, use that power, and believe: Christ, through you, shall overcome.

¹⁴Arnold, *Ephesians*, pg 72: “As his third and consummatory request, the author prays that his readers may be given a special awareness of the incomparably great power of God working in them.”

¹⁵See the commentaries for the exegesis of the notoriously difficult verse 23.