

May 25, 2017 – Ascension

Ephesians 1:16-23 (Evangelical Heritage Version)

Theme: Pray to the Father of our Ascended Lord for the Benefit of his Church, that he...

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

¹⁶I never stop giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. ¹⁷I 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. ¹⁸I 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, ¹⁹and just how surpassingly great his power is for us who believe. ²⁰It 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, ²¹far 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. ²²God also placed all things under his feet and made him head over everything for the church. ²³The church is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

There is a temptation to think that, since Jesus ascended into heaven, he is too far above to know or care about what's going on in our lives. Nothing can be further from the truth. Jesus' ascension did not mark his retirement from being our Savior, but started a new phase of his work. Even though we don't see him, he still sees us and cares. He ascended into heaven to rule over all things for the benefit of His Church – promising to hear all our prayers and answer them according to his good and gracious will.

Our Ascended Savior truly cares for his church. He wants us to care for it as well. How can we do that? With St. Paul as our guide let us learn to **pray to the Father of our Ascended Lord for the Benefit of his Church, that he** *1) Give us the Holy Spirit. 2) Fill us with hope. 3) Rule for our good.*

Part One: That he give us the Holy Spirit

Our text begins with the apostle Paul telling the Ephesian Christians: *¹⁶I never stop giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.*

I want to pause here and let you know that I thank God for all of you as well: 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.

Sure, there are times we might 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, I thank God that we all are different. Each one of you brings a special perspective to this congregation - having ideas that others might not have thought about. When differences in opinion arise, don't pray, "Lord, let them see it my way." but rather, "Lord, there are differences between my opinion and someone else's. Even though I might not agree with their opinion, I thank you for blessing our congregation with them, and their insights. Help me see things from their point of view and value their ideas. Keep me from being overly proud of my opinions. This is your Church, and not mine. 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: *¹⁷I 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.*

Now understand Paul's words correctly. From the context of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, we can tell that these Christians already knew a great deal about Christ and the Gospel. But Paul prays that they continue growing in their faith – never becoming complacent in their knowledge. This is also my prayer 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 and faith in him, the better prepared we will be to live wisely upon this earth – recognizing and avoiding all the deadly, spiritual pitfalls that the devil, world and our sinful nature put in our way. As we grow in our faith and knowledge of Christ, we will also be better witnesses of him – sharing his love in words and action to a world that so desperately needs him.

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 would never be able to understand or believe God's Word on our own. We need God himself to interpret his word for us. We need the Holy Spirit. This is why Jesus encourages us to pray for the Spirit - promising that His *Father in heaven will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!*"ⁱ

So we pray on this Ascension day: "Ascended LORD, send us your Spirit to increase our faith by means of your Word. Without his aid and counsel, we would be lost. Let him plant in our hearts a desire to ever learn more about you, grow in knowledge of your wonderful Gospel, and wisely apply your Word to our lives. Then we will be able to discern good from evil, right from wrong, and (keeping our hearts from willful sin) glorify you with our lives. Then we will be emboldened to witness your name in the world and encourage each other with the hope your promises give us."

Part Two: That he fill us with hope.

Our sermon text continues with St. Paul telling the Ephesians: *¹⁸I 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, ¹⁹and just how surpassingly great his power is for us who believe.*

Probably the greatest gift the Holy Spirit offers us through his guidance of Scripture is hope. Now understand that our Christian hope is not a mere wish; it is an unseen reality that gives us power and confidence to face every aspect of life.

Hope is a powerful force – allowing people to endure incredible things. For example, when WWII concentration camp survivors were asked what kept them alive during all their sufferings and hardship, many responded that it was the hope of rescue. Now, if a mere uncertain earthly hope can accomplish something like this, imagine what our Christian hope can do.

Mocking, slander, temptation, persecution, pain, suffering . . . Christians often face a lot of hardships for their faith. But the LORD offers us a hope that sustains us through it all. What is this hope? It's the certainty of our salvation. Jesus died on the cross for all our sins. We are reconciled to God. We have become his dearly loved children through faith – the apple of his eye, whom he promises to love, guard and keep throughout our life on this evil earth, and finally to take us home to himself in heaven.

As word of the allied advance on Germany spread in the WWII German concentration camps, the hope of those prisoners increased. They knew that it was no longer a matter of if 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:

“Gracious Lord, enlighten our hearts to the wonderful hope you won for us through your life, death and resurrection. You ascended into heaven to prepare a place for us and promised to come back soon to take us to be with you. Fill our hearts with hope as we look forward to your return. Help us to endure all the hardships we face in life - knowing that our salvation is certain. Your work has sealed it for us. Help us also encourage one another in this hope, as we remember your gracious rule for our behalf.”

Part Three: That he rule for our good

Concerning our the power at work in us by bringing and keeping us in the faith, Paul says: ²⁰*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,* ²¹*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.* ²²*God also placed all things under his feet and made him head over everything for the church.* ²³*The church is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.*

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 Savior was dead. Could humanity's situation get any worse?

But then God showed his real power. Jesus' death was not defeat, but victory – a fact he proved by raising Jesus from the dead. God the Father exalted Jesus to the highest place imaginable – giving him all authority over everything. God the Father brought Jesus back to heaven so that he could direct all history for the benefit of his Church. Everything Jesus does, he does out of love for us.

But someone might ask, “If Jesus is in control over everything, why does he allow major suffering and hardship in our lives?” The LORD doesn't tell us why he allows the specific hardships and troubles we face. What he does, rather, is ask us to trust him by remembering Jesus' cross.

“But,” someone might ask, “how does remembering Jesus' cross give us hope in our hardships?” Think about it: to human eyes Jesus looked all but defeated as he hung on the cross, but it was on that cross that Jesus' true strength was revealed!

The same is true for us. Consider what Jesus told St. Paul when he was undergoing some sort of painful trial: *“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”* Paul took those words of Christ to heart and exclaimed: *Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.*¹⁰ *That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*ⁱⁱ

Whenever the LORD allows tough times in our lives, understand that he is not doing it because he doesn't care or have power to help. No, Jesus does care and shows his power by helping you bear up under the burden he allows in your life. He uses tough times to strengthen our faith – moving us to let go of our grip on this world and press on towards heaven in faith

And as we press on in faith, our ascended Savior promises to work in all things for our eternal good. He will provide everything we need exactly when we need it – just like he did for the Israelites during the Exodus from Egypt. He will never leave or forsake us. Let us, therefore, pray to him in faith:

“Ascended Lord, I thank you for every member of this congregation. You have brought us together as a family to proclaim your praises in our community. Send us your Spirit that 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 own sinful flesh are trying to separate us from your love through temptations and hardships. Give us hope, dear LORD, as we trust your promises which state that you are in control and are working in all things for our eternal good. Keep our eyes fixed on that fast approaching day when you will return to this earth in the same fashion you went up into heaven – fulfilling your promise to come back to take us to our eternal home with you. In your name we pray. Amen.”

ⁱ Luke 11:13 NIV84

ⁱⁱ 2 Corinthians 12:9-10 NIV84