

In the name of our Ascended Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. ¹⁷ I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. ¹⁸ I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, ²⁰ which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, ²¹ far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. ²² And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way. **This is God's Word.**

Dear Friends,

Have you ever watched a good movie and as it was ending you noticed that they left an opening for a sequel. Maybe some unanswered question or some missing detail; some indication that the story continues – there is more to see. This morning as we celebrate the Ascension of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, we might think that his work ended when he ascended to heaven. His earthly work was over but there still is plenty that our Savior continues to do for us and that is, **“The Rest of the Ascension Story.”** The Apostle Paul tells us how, **“Our Ascended Lord helps his believers grow in faith,”** and how **“Our Ascended Lord uses his power on behalf of the Church.”**

I. I don't know if you noticed, but the first half of our text is Paul's prayer for the Christians in Ephesus. His prayer starts a little different than a lot of my prayers. A lot of my prayers start with a request. I ask the Lord for something either for myself or someone else, but Paul starts his prayer with thanksgiving. He thanks God for the faith of the Ephesians. Paul had worked with the congregation at Ephesus, but had been gone for a few years however he would occasionally hear reports of their activities. They were letting their faith shine in what they did. Paul is not only thankful that God has called them to faith but that they are continuing in their faith. And Paul doesn't thank God once for their faithfulness but he makes this a regular part of his prayers. Something he does on an ongoing basis.

As you consider Paul's prayer, when is the last time you thanked God for someone else's faith? Maybe the faith of a family member or a friend or someone you know here at church. When is the last time you thanked God for your own faith? Faith is a great blessing God has given us.

We were lost in our sins and God rescued us from certain spiritual death by creating faith in our hearts. It's something so easy to take for granted and yet faith is such a precious gift. It brings God's blessings to us. Right about now you're probably thinking, “Yeh, yeh, I know. Faith brings me the forgiveness of sins. I've heard it hundreds of times.” I hope you never tire of hearing it. Without the forgiveness of sins, the load of guilt would be a heavy burden to bear. Maybe not at first but over time it would weigh you down, until it would crush you. Until it would lead you to despair and spiritual death. It is the forgiveness of sins that lifts that load of

guilt off your shoulders and brings you relief. Faith brings you that relief from guilt. Faith also brings us a lot more than the forgiveness of sins.

It connects us with our fellow believers. Someone to encourage us. Someone to pray for us and with us. Someone to worship with. Someone to study God's Word with. There are many blessings that come through faith. As Paul continues his prayer, he asks God to bring some specific blessings to the Ephesians. He asks God to give them, **“the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.”** (Ephesians 1:17). This is general spiritual wisdom. Things about God that we can't learn from nature or from our conscience. Things that God reveals to us in his Word. Things like the patience he had with the Children of Israel who constantly sinned against God or the faithfulness of God who keeps all his promises or the grace and mercy of God who saves us.

Paul also asks that the Ephesians receive the **“wisdom of hope.”** A hope that that is sure of the outcome. That is the sure hope of salvation that comes to us through the **“eyes of our heart.”** Paul uses that expression because we think of our heart as the seat of our faith.

Paul also asks that the Ephesians might come to know the riches of their inheritance. Let us never forget that God has made us his child through faith in Jesus as our Savior. As a child of God we have the rich inheritance of eternal life in heaven with all our brothers and sisters in faith. An inheritance isn't earned. It is a gift from parent to child. Therefore our heavenly riches are not earned. They are a gift from our God and Paul prays that we realize the depth of those riches – the wealth of this gift that is ours through faith. For Jesus not only paid a tremendous price for our sins, but brings that forgiveness to us along with the sure hope of everlasting righteousness in heaven. The riches of our salvation unfold before us as the Holy Spirit works through the Word to increase our knowledge of our Savior and our salvation.

This prayer that Paul prayed for the Ephesians is also my prayer for you. I thank God for your faith. I pray that God give you spiritual wisdom and open the eyes of your hearts so that you might grow in your wisdom of salvation – that you might grow in your wisdom of the rich inheritance that awaits you in heaven. Our ascended Savior has brought us to faith and helps us to grow in that faith and wisdom through His Word, but there is more. He not only looks after us, his children individually, but he also looks after the Church, the invisible church, the communion of saints, as a whole. Our Ascended Lord uses his power on behalf of the Church.

II. It began when God raised Jesus from the dead. His mission on this earth was complete. Jesus then spent 40 days appearing to many people. He wanted to leave no doubt that his resurrection is fact. Today we celebrate Ascension Day – the day Jesus ascended into heaven and God seated him at his right hand. Paul tells us that Jesus is, **“Far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.”** (Ephesians 1:21). Jesus has unlimited power and he has that unlimited power not only now, but forever. Even better than that, he is using that unlimited power to rule for the benefit of the church; for our benefit.

How does it make you feel to know that our God of perfect love, who has absolute power, has control of your life? That's pretty re-assuring. We don't always make the best decisions for

ourselves, but Jesus always gives us what he knows is best for us and he leads us along the path to eternal life through his Word. Nothing can overcome us because Jesus is above everything. He has conquered our enemies for us and helps us overcome them every day.

God has appointed him to be head over everything for the church. The key words of that sentence are, **“for the church.”** The church is the body of all believers and Christ is the head of the body of believers. The church is the fullness of him who fills everything in every way. The head is not complete without the body. The body – the church – is how Christ goes out into the world. This is what makes him complete. Not because he needs the church but because this is how his love and mercy are extended to his people. Through his Word as proclaimed by the body of believers.

You can be sure that every decision Jesus makes from God’s right hand – whether it’s a decision like opening the doors of communist Russia to missionaries, or the decision to let a cancer cell invade your body, that decision was made to protect and further the health of God’s church, of which you are a member.

We don’t always see the benefits of those decisions made by our Savior, but through faith we trust that God is in control and we wouldn’t want it any other way.

That is the rest of the story. Our ascended Savior not only brought us to faith, keeps us in that faith, but also rules for the benefit of his church – rules for our benefit.

That is what Ascension Day is all about – the love of our Savior as seen in the rest of the story. Continue to look to God’s Word to bring you the spiritual wisdom that God wants you to have – the wisdom that Paul is talking about. Continue to look to God’s work to sustain you in your faith. Continue to look to God’s Word for the sure hope of salvation and trust that your Savior will continue to care for you as part of his church. Amen.