

“Hope, Riches, Power”  
Ephesians 1:15-23

May 13, 2018

The Ascension of Our Lord – Observed

It's no secret that worship services celebrating the Ascension of our Lord are not usually well attended. The only reason attendance is up this year is because we are observing Ascension Day on the Sunday after the actual Thursday of Ascension Day due to a conflict in scheduling. The fact that midweek services are generally not popular in this day and age; the onset of warm spring weather; the desire to be outdoors when it stays light longer; and the idea that Ascension Day is not that big of a deal all may be contributing factors to this lack of attendance for such a service.

However, suppose I said that Ascension Day is a time to develop confidence, obtain wealth, and pursue power? Would that cause more people to flock to Ascension Day services? I doubt it. I don't think anybody would believe such a statement. Confidence, wealth, and power are not often considered to be Christian virtues in describing the Christian life. One doesn't expect to hear a sermon that focuses on these three things – confidence, wealth, power – unless it is a sermon which criticizes the world's emphasis on these things and criticizes our desire to obtain such things.

However, what would you say if I told you that these three things – confidence, wealth, and power – are at the center of our Ascension Day celebration? In fact, Paul proclaims these concepts with slightly different words – hope, riches, and power – in our epistle reading for this morning and his desire that we all may know these three things.

It should be noted that none of these three things – confidence, wealth, or power – are inherently good or bad, right or wrong, or righteous or sinful in and of themselves. Where we find these things and what our attitude toward these things are crucial. What is the place of these things in our lives? In other words, what is the source of our confidence? What constitutes wealth and our lives? Where is the location of the power in our lives?

The first one is translated as “hope”, but I have been using another word for that. The reason for this is that, in the English language, the word hope has a very weak connotation for most people. Many people see hope is nothing more than a wishful optimism that things might go well. However, that is not the correct understanding for the biblical word for hope. “Hope” is a more certain concept in the Bible. “Confidence” is a more accurate way of expressing the meaning here.

There seems to be no shortage of confidence in our world today, but what is the source of our confidence? Usually, today, people have great confidence in themselves and their intelligence or knowledge. From a very early age, children are encouraged to “believe in yourself”. We are told that you can accomplish anything you set your mind to and should feel confident of it. That all sounds very well and good.

However, there are two problems with having complete confidence in ourselves and our ability. First of all, such a confidence often draws us away from God as the first sin of Adam and Eve shows. They had such confidence in their own ability to determine right and wrong that the promise in the temptation “you will be like God” led them away from God and into sin. We do the same today. We have great confidence in ourselves. Like Adam and Eve, we wish to be the God of our lives because we know what is best and what is right, even if our actions contradict God's commands.

Secondly, on a more practical basis, the problem with being so self-confident is that such confidence often fails us. We make choices, take courses of action, do things or fail to do things based on our confidence, which then turns out to be harmful or even sinful for us. The Lord tries to warn us, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:8-9) but our confidence in ourselves and our choices cause us not to listen to God and to choose our own way which we are supremely confident is the best, even when it conflicts with the Word of God.

Secondly, there is wealth or, as the text puts it, “riches.” We seek and pursue the wealth of this world as measured by money, cash, property, precious metals, jewels and so on. Again, there's

nothing intrinsically wrong with the wealth of this world. The most misquoted verse in all the Bible says, "Money is the root of all evil," when it clearly is not. Money is neither good nor evil. Wealth is neither righteous or sinful. We do need the resources of this world to provide for the legitimate needs for ourselves, our families, our church, our community, and so on.

However, like confidence, our attitude toward wealth can actually lead us away from God and put our confidence in another "god". When that famous Bible verses rightly quoted, it says, "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs." (1 Timothy 6:10) Earthly wealth and our love of it, our pursuit of it and our worship of it can make it a "god" in our lives. Martin Luther referred to money as the most common idol on earth. Many Christians believe they can balance out their desire for material wealth with their worship of God. However, Jesus warns us, "No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money." (Luke 16:13)

On the practical side of it, our pursuit, desire, and confidence in earthly wealth will ultimately disappoint us. It will be unable to satisfy us completely and it will ultimately be gone. One of the vanities or foolish thing in life which the Preacher points out in the book of Ecclesiastes is this, "He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income;" (Ecclesiastes 5:10). The Word of God time and time again warns us about the fleeting nature of earthly wealth. St. Peter, in his second letter, writes "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be burned up." (2 Peter 3:10)

Then, there is power. Our world survives and thrives on the basis of power, strength, and might. Sometimes we think those are dirty words. Like confidence and wealth, power is neither right nor wrong. However, our attitude toward power and our use of power can be right or wrong. The government's use of military power, the government's use of political power, an individual's use of a powerful weapon, and so on can be good or bad.

However, like confidence and wealth, it is our attitude toward power which is crucial. We often end up depending upon our own power – our military, our guns, our elections, and so on – rather than in God's power. This, too, is another form of idolatry. God is not impressed. As the psalmist writes, "His delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the legs of a man," (Psalm 147:16)

And, like confidence and wealth, our own power will ultimately fail to keep us safe. With all of our nuclear weaponry do we really feel safe? Terrorists abound in their killing and destruction. We passed more and more laws in favor of gun control, yet there seems to be a new shooting or mass murder almost every day on the news.

As I said before, the problem is not with confidence, wealth, or power. Those concepts are neutral. Nor is the difficulty merely our attitude toward these things. While our attitudes can be adjusted, they cannot become fully reformed. What is needed is an entirely new source of confidence, wealth, and power. That is what Paul yearns for his readers (and us) to have. He desires, "that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe." And it is Ascension Day which helps deliver this to us.

God gives us true hope, not wishful optimism. It is, indeed, confidence tied in with faith. It is confidence based, not on ourselves, but is rooted in the utterly reliable promise of God. Faith sees history is progressing toward a goal of salvation. Hope has confidence in the future because of God's work of salvation. This work had been prophesied by the prophets for centuries. It came to pass at the birth of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. It continued through His life of perfect obedience in our place and culminated in that week which we call holy when Jesus offered up Himself on the cross as the sacrifice to gain forgiveness for all sin and, three days later, rose from death to life as the guarantee of life after death for all people. The day of our Lord's ascension into heaven, 40 days later, signaled the completion of that work. Jesus returned to His Father's heavenly throne from which he had come in the first place. Redemption was complete. Forgiveness was obtained. Life forever

was guaranteed. That is what God has called us to. That is what we have full confidence in and not just wishful thinking about.

God gives us true wealth, not merely the earthly possessions which we think are wealth. Paul labels this “the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints.” All of God’s saints are included in this great inheritance which was gained by Jesus’ death on the cross and guaranteed to us by Jesus’ resurrection from the tomb. It is an inheritance more valuable than all the wealth of this world. It is a wealth which meets all of our needs forever, not just some of our needs occasionally. It is an inheritance which, like other inheritances, is not in our possession now, but will be later. Until that time and for all eternity, it can never run out, be destroyed, or stolen. As Jesus puts it, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.” (Matthew 6:19-23)

God has the power to accomplish this salvation, instill in us this confidence, and gain this inheritance for us. It is a power, Paul said, “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 proper and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.” The festivals of the Resurrection of our Lord and the Ascension of our Lord demonstrates that God’s power, in contrast to what we think of as power, has done all that He has promised from the beginning of the world to this present day and will accomplish from this present day to the end of all time.

Seeing these things is not possible with the human eye or our church would be filled to overflowing, not only on Ascension Day, but every Sunday of the year. Our spiritual sight has been blinded by sin which clouds our vision and our understanding, as well. That is why we focus our attention on earthly equivalents (confidence, wealth, power), spend our time trying to acquire them only to be constantly disappointed in them.

Our hearts, darkened by sin, must be enlightened. Paul prays that this may happen. He says, “May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, give you the Spirit of wisdom and of Revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened.” In your baptism, the Holy Spirit washed away your sin, gave you a share in the inheritance of the saints, and enlightened your heart so that you may see all of these things.

We celebrate the Ascension of our Lord (or, at least we should) joyfully and boisterously. On the day of our Lord’s Ascension we can look back with confidence and see the hope that we have in Christ’s mission of salvation which he completed successfully – from his birth in Bethlehem, to His death on the cross outside of Jerusalem, to His glorious resurrection from the tomb, to his completion on the Mount of Olives from which He ascends.

We now see the true wealth that is ours, but yet do not possess, namely, eternal life with our Lord and all of His people in heaven forever. Jesus’ death and resurrection purchased that inheritance. Jesus’ Ascension prepares us for that inheritance to become our own.

We have the power, the power of God to make sure that all of this happens. His power to raise Jesus from the dead and His power to seat Jesus at his right hand is the same power which works for us and within us as we await the glorious day of our Ascension’s into heaven. It is the power which the Father has given Jesus to be head over all things for the church.

It is no wonder that the early church considered Ascension Day to be so important. It signals the successful completion of all our Lord set out to do. It gives us true and lasting hope for the future. It guarantees an inheritance which will last us forever. And it demonstrates a power, shown in resurrection and ascension, which will bring all that God has promised, all that Jesus has obtained, and all that the Spirit gives faith to believe will happen. You can count on it because of Ascension Day. Amen