

He Lives... 6) to Bring Riches and Power

Ephesians 1:15-23 • 2023-05-14 • Easter Series [Ascension Day Observed]



A writer once decided to talk about an elusive bunch of people. He wanted to write an editorial piece on individuals who are very wealthy, namely, “those who would be able to keep a luxurious and comfortable standard of living and yet never have to work another day in their life if they didn’t want to.” But he was targeting a particular type of wealthy person. He wanted to interview those who were wealthy and yet never revealed it. He wasn’t interested in the type of people who would flaunt their private jet or show up to parties in a limousine or put their name on towers downtown. He was interested in the wealthy who had poor friends, worked lowly jobs, and never flaunted their wealth. And their friends would never have guessed them to be so well-off financially. He called them the “stealthy wealthy.”

That’s sort of what God’s Church is like. Little do we sometimes remember this truth. In a sense we are all a type of “stealthy wealthy.” I’m not talking, however, about ordinary and limited riches and power. I’m talking about what the apostle Paul prays for the Christians in Ephesus. He prays their eyes might be open to see the glorious riches that are theirs. It is richness and glory and power beyond all measure! How are we rich and powerful? Today we celebrate the Ascension of Jesus and look at Ephesians chapter 1 to see: riches and power are yours from our ascended Lord.

The Church of God has certainly not always appeared rich and powerful. In fact, it most often appears just the opposite. When Paul wrote the church in Ephesus, he wrote to those who had faith in Jesus and love for God’s people. The criteria for belonging to the Church wasn’t anything more than faith. He didn’t arrive at Ephesus to cater only to the wealthy and powerful. Paul simply showed up at the synagogue to teach and preach. He was rejected there and proceeded to meet at someone’s private home. Many began to believe and were included in the Church of God through faith. About three years went by. Finally, the rich and influential of Ephesus, the silversmiths and idol makers, got tired of Paul’s preaching. They were losing influence and power. Paul was forced to leave town.

Paul later spoke parting Words to the Ephesians, “*You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. ²⁹ I served the Lord with great humility and with tears and in the midst of severe testing.*” (Acts 20) Paul wanted to make it very clear he was different from the silversmiths and those who profited from religious ventures. “*I have not coveted anyone’s silver or gold or clothing. ³⁴ You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions.*” He worked hard just to get by.

And if that wasn’t enough, Paul wrote his letter to them three years later as one imprisoned. I don’t see much in the way of wealth or power. He was without financial means. He was under the power of the Roman rulers who held him for a very long time. He had been forced to flee under attacks from pagan men. And in other cities too it had been “the men who were leaders and the women of high standing” that often chased the missionaries Paul and Silas and Timothy out of town. The last thing you’d use to describe Paul would be rich and powerful.

Riches and power make the world run, right? The kings of Israel fell into this trap of thinking. We see at one point David hardly even counted the number of stones needed to face a fierce grown warrior. The Lord was his strength. But what happened? Later in life he was carefully counting all his fighting men to see just how strong his kingdom really was! The same thing happens to God’s church today! We open our eyes to see the wealth and power of the world and think, “That’s where the power of God’s church resides!” We think, “If only we had more of that! If only we just had more wealth and influence, we’d be able to do more and have more success in ministry.” But we don’t. We can’t.

Then too we begin to despair and worry how will God ever help us if we don’t have riches and power in this world. If we are looking to accomplish things as God’s people with riches and influence, we’re out of luck! If we are hoping to stand as a congregation and church body on the legs of financial holdings and influencing people by our worldly power and influence, we won’t. We’re but a very small congregation. I’m sure that most of our leaders and members wouldn’t hesitate to point out: we do have limited resources. We can’t do what some church bodies do with their money. So do we despair and wonder at how the fastest growing religion in the USA isn’t Christianity. The fastest growing group are the “nones,” people who don’t affiliate with any Christian church. Money and wealth and power increases for the ungodly. Meanwhile for Christians the numbers, influence, wealth, and power, go down.

Wouldn’t God make his church run by riches and power? He does. But it is not with the riches and power of this world. Paul prayed for the Ephesian Christians to see: riches and power are yours from our ascended Lord.

The problem isn’t that we don’t possess great and glorious riches and power. The problem is that we are blinded to seeing it and cannot see it without God’s help. So Paul prays, “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened.” By nature, we are blind to what God has done and what is in store for us. But by his Spirit and with his good news God opens our eyes to see and trust in what he has for us. Paul is praying that they not only know and trust in Jesus, but begin to see all the more clearly his riches and power for us.

Paul once wrote to another group of Christians about misguided sight. They had been focused on merely worldly riches and power. *“Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.”* (1 Co 1) Some are. Riches and power aren’t a disqualifier for being a Christian. But it’s far from a requirement or prominent feature of the Church.

But far more than taking our eyes off our own strength we must look to the source of our true wealth and power. Faith does just the opposite of looking at our own hands. We turn away from trusting in our own power to do anything. Instead, we find power in the Word and promises of God. We don’t rely on showmanship and money to continue as his church. We rely on the power of water and the Word which connects us to Christ and his death and resurrection. We don’t rely on politics and getting the right people to support us. We don’t rely on our own wit or strength. It’s not “we will succeed if we just get the right man for the job.” The only right man for the job of making us rich and powerful is him who lowered himself and made himself poor and a servant. He succeeded by laying aside his power and emptying himself of all worldly riches. He paid the greatest price and gave us the worth of his precious blood. We have the value and power of the blood of Jesus Christ the Son of God. And we have the power of him who raised him from death. We have the promises from him who lives and pours out his gifts to us all. Relying on him alone makes the church truly “rich” and “powerful.” His gift of the Spirit in baptism opens our eyes and gives us a level of authority unmatched by this world. His gift of body and blood with the bread and wine is a banquet far more precious and priceless than this world could ever offer: the forgiveness of sins and life eternal! The power of the gospel to save!

“I pray the eyes of your heart may be enlightened to know...1) “in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people.” We have an inheritance! We are given something unearned from our God. An inheritance comes to a child just because the parent gives it. So it is with us. Through faith in our Lord we have been given a glorious and abundant blessing. What awaits us is the gift of eternal life. What is ours is the eternal home that God has in store for us. The mission church downtown with the leaky roof may not be able to put copper door knobs on its entryway. But it preaches and teaches the promise of God to give us something far more glorious! We stand to inherit a place in the new creation -prepared for us by Jesus. We stand to receive his righteous garments. The riches of God’s people is that “cup that overflows” as “goodness and love follow us and we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” This is the wealth on which God’s church runs!

Paul’s prayer goes on “that you may know and his incomparably great power for us who believe.” What did it matter if Paul was tossed out of town. What did it matter if he was imprisoned under Roman power and at the hands of the influential in Jerusalem who hated him and sent him to trial? What will it ever matter if God’s people face the powers of this world and are persecuted? So what if we lack political influence as Christians? What if the powerful of this world oppose our preaching and message? We have to open our eyes and see just where the power really is!

The same power which raised Jesus from the dead is our power! Not even death can hold us down or stop God’s Church! The same power which raised Christ to life also exalted him and lifted him up into glory. Jesus ascended after forty days. He will not abandon his Church, not to leave us to the savage wolves who would scatter and devour his flock. He ascended to “sit at the right hand of the Father.” He told us, “All authority has been given to me.” And when we are tempted to despair because we lack power and influence, we need only open our eyes to see the reality: none holds greater power than Christ: *“God seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, ²¹far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. ²²And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church.”*

I want to share something well-spoken by one of our pastors who had served as professor while I was at the Seminary: *“Are you afraid you might baptize a baby and it won’t take? Are you afraid you may speak the absolution and it won’t count? Are you afraid you may preach the gospel and it won’t work, afraid you may offer the Sacrament and it won’t forgive? Go and be Chicken Little and fear that the sky is falling down before you fear that Christ lacks the power to work through the gospel in Word and Sacrament. John Paul II told a billion Roman Catholics, “Do not be afraid,” and they dropped to their knees in deceived relief. The Son of God tells us, “Fear not little flock” and we worry and wonder and weep for our ailing church. Listen: Christ wants to preserve the Church and Christ WILL preserve the Church because Christ can preserve the Church. And he’ll do it with his own power.”* (James Tiefel)

How do we know this same power is ours? Did you catch it? The ascended Christ is using all his power and authority for all time “for the church.” All things are in his hands. He works all things for his purpose and his own people.

It’s kind of like we are the “stealthy wealthy.” You won’t see it. You can’t see it, not with ordinary eyes. But we hold something now and forever which surpasses the wealth and power of this age. And the Lord who holds us holds all things. May God open the eyes of your heart so that you might know the hope, the glorious and abundant inheritance that is yours and the incomparably great power that is now at work in us and for us! He lives to bring us riches and power!