

The Power of God, Ephesians 1:20-23

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Introduction

Hey church, happy Easter! My name is Brad and I'm one of the pastors here. Maybe it's just the isolation getting to me, but when I read today's passage, I thought about the movie Sling Blade. One of the most memorable scenes happens when the main character, Carl Lee, walks up to a group of men who are desperately trying to get an old lawnmower started. They're at their wits' end as they have gone over every single part to make sure everything is working properly, all the bells and whistles. They're so desperate, in fact, that they ask Carl Lee what *he* thinks is the problem. Now no one ever asks what he thinks because no one thinks much of him. To their surprise, Carl Lee takes one look at the lawnmower and says, "Ain't got no gas in it." All these expert mechanics had missed the simplest, yet most important part of the lawnmower's power.

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So, it's Easter and we're in the middle of a pandemic. People are sick, dying, isolated, fearful, discouraged, and some are apathetic. There is so much need. And my temptation as a pastor is to get up and preach all the bells and whistles, to slap on the most inspiring parts of the Bible so we can all continue right along working properly, pretending like nothing is wrong. But as good as that would *feel*, I'm afraid we would arrive at the end of this message or this holiday or this crisis with the humiliating reality, *this ain't got no gas in it*; it doesn't have the power we need most.

In today's passage, Ephesians 1:20-23, I believe Paul the author is laying out precisely what we all need most—and it has everything to do with Easter. So, here's a bit of a guide for today's message: the title is "The Power of God" and the main idea is "Easter is what we need most". What I mean by "Easter" is the powerful realities of what God did at Easter:

- 1) God Raised Jesus - 20a
- 2) God Seated Jesus - 20b-21
- 3) God Exalted Jesus - 22a

¹ Sling Blade, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0117666/>

4) God Gave Jesus - 22b-23²

With that said, if you are able, please stand with me to honor the reading of God's word. Again, today's passage is Ephesians 1:20-23. Church, hear the word of the Lord:

[The immeasurable greatness of God's power toward us who believe is] ²⁰ *that* [which] *he 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 and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.* ²² *And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church,* ²³ *which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.* Ephesians 1:20-23

The Lord has spoken to us. [Congregation] Thanks be to God! You may be seated.

Exposition

When Paul wrote these words, he was speaking to a group of witchcraft-background followers of Jesus in a city called Ephesus. And what he was saying in this specific section of the letter was actually a prayer for these people. He was giving thanks for them, and he was praying that they might know the immeasurable greatness of God's power toward them.

When I think about great power, I usually think about the strength to move or control things. Springtime in Louisville, Kentucky is typically the season for these kinds of displays of power:

- Whether it's the fireworks of Thunder Over Louisville or the jet engines of the pre-Thunder air show, either one leaves you shuddering at *the power*.
- Whether it's the thoroughbreds of the Derby or the millions of dollars that change hands, it's clear that what's happening in our city is something *powerful*.

Maybe I would've fit in well in Ephesus, because they, too, thought of power as strength—the ability to control spiritual forces to get what they wanted. And if we follow this way of thinking about power, then here's where I think we end up right now: God, if you are all-powerful, then why don't you end Covid-19? If power is the strength to control, and you have it all, then God who don't you get this pandemic under control?!

² Adapted from Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010)

Yet perhaps the issue is not God's power to control, or his willingness to use it. Maybe it's our misunderstanding of the power of God. Paul tells us in another of his letters,

*17 And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. 1 Corinthians 15:17*³

Far worse than being dead or bereaved or impoverished by a pandemic is being left dead in our sins. What does it ultimately matter if we gain the momentary safety of the world and yet forfeit our souls? This is not side-stepping the issue, but putting it in its proper place. At Easter *the most powerful expression of God's power is put on display*. How?

1) God Raised Jesus - 20a

Well, that brings us to the first way: that God raised Jesus. We read in verse 20 that God's power is

20 that [which] he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead, Ephesians 1:20a

What we see first of all is that the power of Easter has nothing to do with *our work*—that we made the effort to stream church this morning, or that we did more good than bad this week, or that we aren't as bad as the guy who went to the grocery store when he knew he had coronavirus. No, the power of Easter is all about the work that *God did*. According to the plan he made before the world was even created, God sent his Son to die in our place on the cross, and then in three days he raised him from the dead. All God's. Work. The only thing we contribute to God's salvation is what a hair contributes to food—we need someone to get us out of our predicament! We are dead sinners who need a living Savior.

Now because of how we think about power we might look at this work of raising Jesus from the dead and not really be that impressed. After all, he is God, and if he can create life and end life, then why couldn't he also bring back to life? What's the big deal?

If raising Jesus from the dead is an unimpressive act of God's power for you, then you may not be understanding the reality of sin. Sin is anything that opposes God. As a perfect and just being, nothing in opposition to God can freely live on—ultimately, it

³ Arnold, Loc 2739

must be judged. That applies to us, whom the Bible describes as sinful from the moment we're conceived.⁴

Just consider one of the earliest concepts and words we learn: "Mine!" No one has to teach us to barrel through a day believing that these 24 hours belong to us and we can use them however we like. When in reality, all we have is a gift from God, which he has lent to us for a time, and he will soon take it back from us, and will require us to give an account of how we used it.⁵ We are destined for judgment, a day of accounting.

But when God sent Jesus to the cross, he *became* sin for us; he *became* the opposer facing the judgment for our opposition. Our account—and the account of all people in all ages and places—has been applied to him. 2 Corinthians tells us,

²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. 2 Corinthians 5:21

So when God by his power raised Jesus from the dead, he was raising that which had been judged to no longer freely live. He wasn't just saying, 'Ok, you can come back to life I guess,' but God raised him from the deepest depths of his disapproval to the highest heights of his approval.⁶

We love us a good comeback story. Well, here is the greatest of all time; so great that it redefines everything we thought we knew about power—the power to take the greatest evil, and turn it into the greatest good; to take winter, and turn it into spring; to take a thief on Friday, and turn him to a King on Sunday. If God can do *this*, he can do *anything*.

2) God Seated Jesus - 20b-21

But God's power is not only on display in that he raised Jesus, but also (and this is the second way) God seated Jesus. Returning to verse 20, God's power is

²⁰ that [which] he 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 and authority and power and

⁴ Psalm 51:5

⁵ Matthew 25:14-30; C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996)

⁶ Francis Foulkes, *Ephesians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: IVP, 1989), 70-71

dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. Ephesians 1:20-21

This means that God didn't just show his power in raising Jesus from the dead, but he also gave that same power to Jesus as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. That means Jesus goes from cursed on a tree in full submission, to seated on a throne in complete power.

Now, the empty tomb is usually where we stay on Easter. But Easter doesn't mean Jesus is still on earth randomly scaring the crud out of people as he pops up in gardens and passes through walls. No Easter means a cross, a tomb, and a throne—they go together.⁷

And as much as we might like Jesus to pop up every once in a while, where he belongs most, according to the Father, is on a throne at his right hand. As theologian John Calvin has said,

*[The throne] does not mean any particular place, but the power which the Father hath bestowed on Christ, that he may administer in his name the government of heaven and earth.*⁸

Again, this is the highest height of God's approval. It is Jesus taking the place "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named". Why does this matter?

Well here's why it mattered to the Ephesians. Remember that they came from a background of dark magic? In order to conjure a spell you had to know the right names and invoke them in such a way that you could harness the power of the spirits those names represented. One example from that day reads, "I conjure you by the 'great names'...You, these holy names and these powers, confirm and carry out this perfect enchantment; immediately; quickly!"⁹

So imagine the significance of Paul saying to the Ephesians, 'Here is the power available to you who believe, harnessed for you to invoke at all times: the name that is at the top of the hierarchy of all spiritual powers,'

⁷ Foulkes, 70-71

⁸ John Calvin via Foulkes, 71

⁹ Arnold, Loc 2820

¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Philippians 2:10-11

This is why we call upon the name of Jesus to be saved!¹⁰ This is why we pray in the name of Jesus to be heard!¹¹ This is why we obey in the name of Jesus to be pleasing!¹² We are willingly confessing the power now which all will confess later: that Jesus Christ is Lord.

3) God Exalted Jesus - 22a

That means if you are acknowledging the power of Easter, you are putting yourself at the feet of Jesus. This brings us to the third way God's power is displayed: that God exalted Jesus. At the beginning of verse 22 we read,

²² And he put all things under his feet, Ephesians 1:22a

If you're a footstool, you have one humble purpose: to make a seated person comfortable by propping up their stinky feet. Paul says that Easter has something to do with a footstool.

In order to know what this weird phrase is talking about we have to go back to the book of Psalms. There the author is marveling at the power God gave to humanity when he created us; God put the whole world under our feet like a footstool. He says,

⁴ what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? ⁵ Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. ⁶ You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet, Psalm 8:4-6

The picture this paints, however, is what God *intended* for humanity, not what became reality. In our sinful opposition to God we have not lived up to God's command to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it" for God's glory.¹³ Instead, we have claimed it for ourselves, and here is the accounting we will give for it: war, pandemic, poverty; blaming, infecting, hoarding; fear, guilt, shame.

¹⁰ Acts 2:21; Romans 10:13

¹¹ John 14:13; 16:23

¹² Colossians 3:17

¹³ Genesis 1:28; Habakkuk 2:14

But the wonder of Easter is that New Testament writers like Paul apply this psalm to Jesus Christ. He is the Son of Man who for a time is made a little lower than the heavenly beings and “crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death” (says the author of Hebrews).¹⁴ In all the ways we failed to have dominion over the work of God’s hands, Jesus didn’t; and therefore all things are now rightly *under his feet*—he is the man who is able to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it” for God’s glory.¹⁵

That means he has the power not just to make humanity a humble prop for his feet, but to restore us to the dignified work God meant for us to have, to fill his world with his glory—but only for those who believe.¹⁶

4) God Gave Jesus - 22b-23

You see Easter is the *offer* of good news to everyone—but it is only good news to those who receive it. This brings us the final way God’s power is displayed at Easter: that God gave Jesus. Let’s look again at verse 22:

22 And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, 23 which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. Ephesians 1:22-23

When Michael Jordan came back from early retirement, it was good news for the game of basketball. A world of fans would get to watch and admire the undisputed greatest of all time. But ultimately the only team that benefited from it was *his team*, the Chicago Bulls, with whom he went on to win multiple championships.

Listen, with Jesus returned from the dead and given authority over all things, it’s good news for heaven and earth. But the only team that will benefit from it is his team, the church. These are the ones who have stopped running from him, and instead run to him. Many may watch and admire his accomplishments, but only those who seek him as “head” of their lives will be bound to his body. Lots of people want a Savior; not so many want a Lord.¹⁷

¹⁴ Hebrews 2:9

¹⁵ Arnold, Loc 2840

¹⁶ Foulkes, 72

¹⁷ Arnold, Loc 2840

To be Lord over the church is to be like a head over a body, filling that body with the powers of perception and movement, and thus filling the whole body with life and direction.¹⁸ That means a power so great that there is a body of people across the ages and across the nations who not only fill the earth with God's glory, they fill the heavens with the announcement that Jesus has defeated all angelic powers of darkness.¹⁹ How do they do this? When's the last time you, Christian, wielded this the greatest power in the world? (You're like, "I'm a stay-at-home mom—the only power I wield is over those five minutes I lock myself in the bathroom.) Well, Paul will go on in his letter to describe what this power looks like. They include things like this:

- When you walk in good works (2:10)
- When you live in unity with others in the church who are different from you (2:14–16)
- When you express patience, humility, and gentleness (4:2–3)
- When you serve the body of Christ according to your gifts (4:7–16)
- When love replaces self-centeredness (5:1–2)
- When you refuse sexual immorality, greed, lying, rage, stealing, condemning, and the abuse of food and drink (4:25–5:18)
- When your family relationships reflect the love and humility of Christ (5:22–6:9)
- When you resist the demonic influence to bail on Jesus (6:12)²⁰

I know that may seem like normal, everyday stuff. But in it *you are a display of God's power through Jesus Christ your Lord.*

Conclusion

If we're honest, many of us may find our celebration of Easter today to be like a group of mechanics standing around a old lawnmower. We've done everything we know to do, but it still just won't start. There doesn't seem to be any power in it. If there was, then surely we'd *feel* different; we could get over the fear and anxiety and weariness and boredom and anger and uncertainty. But that way of thinking, my friends, *it ain't got no gas in it.*

Right in the midst of our empty tank, God is meeting us with the power we need most. He's using our *lack* of power over a pandemic to awaken us to his *supply* of power over

¹⁸ M. Barth via Foulkes, 75

¹⁹ Arnold, Loc 2968; Ephesians 3:10

²⁰ Arnold, Loc 3038-3056

sin and death. You see, God raised, seated, exalted, and gave Jesus, so that he could also raise, seat, exalt, and give you who believe:

- Raise you from being disapproved to approved before God
- Seat you with access to the name above all names
- Exalt you to the glory-filling work you were intended to have
- Give you as a display of his power to the heavens and the earth

Is that a lot to take in? Yeah—that’s why Paul was praying for the Ephesians, and why I pray for you, that you might know the immeasurable greatness of God’s power toward you.

So, as your pastors, here is our encouragement and invitation for you: in light of these things, take some time today and feast together as a household. This does not mean we are expecting you to make a special trip to the grocery store. But rather, that you prepare the choicest goods already in your home, the items you’ve been saving for a special occasion (or you order out from your favorite restaurant that’s still open). And consider using one of the liturgies we attached in the church-wide communication during your meal (one for families and one for singles). And let this be a powerful declaration that, as Psalm 23 says,

[God has prepared] a table before [us] in the presence of [our] enemies, Psalm 23:5

—that Jesus has conquered sin and death for all who believe—and that is what we need most.

And if you’re listening today, and God has revealed to you during this message that he has not yet raised you, that you’re still shouting “Mine!” over your life, and that the account that you will one day give will not be approved before God, then don’t be a fan who watches and admires Jesus but doesn’t benefit from his work. Let him be both Savior and Lord today—the Bible says “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”²¹

²¹ Romans 10:9

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