

“A PURPOSEFUL SALVATION”

Ephesians 1:15-23

Sunday Sermon 10/21/07 FBC, Rutland by Rev. Mark E. Heiner

The letter to the Ephesians has been called the “Epistle/Letter of the Ascension.” Here we meet the ascended and exalted Christ. Jesus is no longer on earth, no longer on the cross, no longer making any post-resurrection appearances. He is now the ascended Lord who is seated at the right hand of God-the majesty on high.

Jesus did not leave this material earthly world in order to escape from anything or anyone. Rather, Jesus ascension implies his complete exaltation over all. Furthermore, Jesus only left this world physically-not spiritually. He is still present in the world and has left a complement of himself on earth---namely you and I---the church his body. We are the officially designated replacement of Christ's physical presence on earth.

Understood rightly then, the church is the body of Christ, complementing or fulfilling all that Christ wills to do on earth just as if he were here in physical bodily presence this morning. Therefore, the ascension and exaltation of Christ has as its natural corollary-the exaltation of the church. We are not just here as window dressing or something in a glass display case in a museum.

The church is the active presence of Christ in the world.

Now, we have to be clear when we talk this way about the church in order to avoid a huge misunderstanding. First, when we refer to the exaltation of the church we're not talking about the institutional church with all of its formal machinery and government created by man.

It's always been a problem and a temptation to hide behind church membership as an insurance against a future judgment and to substitute loyalty to an institution for a personal living, dynamic relationship with God.

On one leg of the my flight back home from Colorado last Friday, thru no fault of my own-I ended up on unscheduled flight out of Chicago to Burlington. I sat down in my seat and almost immediately, began a conversation with the man to my left. Turns out he was a Christian returning from Tiawan to be with his mother-in-law who was in the final stages of cancer. His name was Will Haigh and for the next two hours we discussed and analyzed the state of the church in detail.

We conversed as if we'd known each other for 20 years and even agreed that it would be great to be close enough to study the Bible together.

As the trip concluded we exchanged contact information and said our good byes. Then a strange thing happened. In the airport at Burlington I was headed to the baggage claim area when a middle aged woman stopped me in the hall. She said, "You know, I heard you both talking and I just want to tell you that I recently moved from NY to Stowe, VT and it's been hard." She explained, "I consider myself a spiritual person, but lately I've been getting nothing out the Catholic church I attend."

Then in so many words she added, "I wasn't eavesdropping on you, but it was so good to hear you talk about something deep. I even said to my husband, I wish I lived closer to hear you." The whole interchange was only about one minute and I gave her my card.

Now please understand, I wasn't even aware that the couple in front of us were awake during the trip--they looked tired and seemed to be trying to sleep in rather uncomfortable positions. The point is that whether Catholic or Protestant---church memebership means more than institutional connection. The hunger of the soul is for a vital, dynamic relationship with Jesus Christ and anything less than that is deformed Christianity.

Secondly, to speak of the church as the body of Christ means that if we are to find and fulfill our purpose in the Rutland and the world, we must be informed by the Head. Just as the brain sends impulses that tell the hand to move away from a hot burner, or to lift your foot as you approach a step---so Christ must be enlightening the church.

In this regard, God's spirit comes to our aid of the body of Christ, the church to enlighten us in some specific ways:

1. love of the saints - that is, we are grateful to God for our fellowship in the spirit. This love is fostered in prayer. No prayer-no love. Christianity without love is drudgery.

2. to know Christ better - there were those in Paul's day who wanted to turn knowledge of divine things into an esoteric study just for the intellectually elite---like an exclusive college fraternity. But in the Bible wisdom and knowledge are the birthright of every Christian. This is not head knowledge-but heart knowledge of God himself.

Think of it like this, when a baby is born it cries and screams. As the mother attends to the new baby it develops trust in its mother. It knows her actions, her nursing, her care when ill and her discipline.

So it is with the true Christian's knowledge of God. It's based on experience-not just our own but what we read in the Bible. We see the faithful way God dealt with others. We see how he dealt faithfully with Noah and his family. We also see how he dealt with Jonah-the unwilling prophet who refused to obey, was swallowed by a giant fish and then was rescued and finally went to Ninevah and preached.

John D. Rockefeller's three simple rules for anyone who wants to become rich:

1. Go to work early.
2. Stay at work late.
3. Find oil.

Frankly, many well-intentioned Christians are miserable, unhappy and spiritually poor because they won't expend any effort. They lack the discipline to stick with Bible study and tap the rich oil reserves for the soul.

So the spirit aids our enlightenment or development in love and in knowledge of God.

In turn, this knowledge of God, especially as it relates to Christ's ascension does 3 things:

First, it amplifies the hope to which we have been called.

Second, it discloses our inheritance like the reading of a will in the attorney's office.

Third, it puts us in touch with the power of God.

Do you remember his prayer when Solomon took the reigns of power from his father, King David. He was overwhelmed by the enormity of the task and he prayed and asked God for wisdom and understanding to lead the nation of Israel.

The request pleased God and consequently God not only answered that prayer and made him the wisest man to ever live---but along with that God gave him riches and honor. God is not a cheapskate! He is not stingy! He is not a tightwad! He is generous with his love and power.

When the early Christians wanted to draw attention to power of the Gospel they didn't start with past history. They started with the now! When they appealed for conversion to the new faith-they didn't dust off some ancient history book to show anybody.

Instead, they said, "You want to see what the Gospel of Jesus Christ is all about, look at my life. Look at what Jesus is doing in me! Look at how he's rescued me from hopelessness and despair and has given me a purpose to know him and make him known.

Then they pointed to the community of faith! Not to an institution, but to a living organism that is constantly being renewed and infused with new life and zeal because of the Holy Spirit's. In other words, if you and I want the church to grow-we have to witness.

If we want to be able to witness with conviction-we have to be personally acquainted with the power of the Gospel---it's as simple as that.

In a seminary missions class, Herbert Jackson told how, as a new missionary, he was assigned a car that would not start without a push. After pondering his problem, he devised a plan. He went to the school near his home, got permission to take some children out of class, and had them push his car off. As he made his rounds, he would either park on a hill or leave the engine running. He used this ingenious procedure for two years.

Ill health forced the Jackson family to leave, and a new missionary came to that station. When Jackson proudly began to explain his arrangement for getting the car started, the

new man began looking under the hood.

Before the explanation was complete, the new missionary interrupted, "Why, Dr. Jackson, I believe the only trouble is this loose cable." He gave the cable a twist, stepped into the car, pushed the switch, and to Jackson's astonishment, the engine roared to life. For two years needless trouble had become routine. The power was there all the time. Only a loose connection kept Jackson from putting that power to work.

J.B. Phillips paraphrases Ephesians 1:19-20, "How tremendous is the power available to us who believe in God." When we make firm our connection with God, his life and power flow through us.