



Ascension

5/17/2026

Ephesians 1:15-23

The Meaning of Ascension

For High School I went to Luther Prep, and I can still remember the day my parents dropped me off. The dorm room was set up, and it was time to say my goodbyes. My dad gave me a little speech – I'm sure it was filled with lots of good advice and encouragement but I don't remember much of it. What I do remember is my little brother coming up to me after, putting his hand on my shoulder, and saying, "Daniel, don't get beat up." Right after he left and I didn't see him again for a few weeks.

It's sort of a goofy story, but I couldn't help but think of it as we take a look at Jesus' Ascension. Because doesn't it often feel like the Ascension is bad news? For a lot of the other festivals of the church year, the benefits seem a lot more obvious! We see the brutality of the cross on Good Friday, but we know that it's the place our forgiveness was won. There's the glorious victory of Easter Sunday, we've been able to hear many of the exciting resurrection appearances that happened after. But then, after all that, Jesus just leaves. I don't know about you, but I almost picture him floating up in the air and saying, "See you later guys! Hope you figure it out! Don't get beat up before I come back!"

Why is that? One of the reasons it's easy to feel discouraged when looking at the Ascension is that a lot of the time, the church doesn't feel all that victorious. Might even look like we've been left behind.

I think it's possible some of the Christians in the city of Ephesus felt that way. On the one hand, they were an incredibly blessed congregation. They had a very close relationship with the Apostle Paul – one that you can see reflected in the thanksgiving and rejoicing he does in these verses. But the reason Paul wrote this letter in the first place was because this congregation had a lot of difficult things going on.

Ephesus was the central hub for the cult of a goddess named Artemis. Much of the life in the city revolved around pilgrims and ancient "tourists" who came to worship this idol. In fact, this got the church into trouble. Back in the book of Acts, a group of silversmiths closely tied to the temple of Artemis started a riot because they were so fed up with Christian teachings! By the time Paul writes this letter a few years had passed, but the hostility was still there.

On top of that, there were some divisions in the church itself. Some disagreements had popped up between Jewish and Gentile Christians. People were asking questions like, "Do gentiles have the same standing as someone who is ethnically Jewish? Are we really unified? With all those problems inside and out, what is the way forward for our church?"

And really, what's the way forward for the church today? Even 2000 years removed from this letter the more things change the more they stay the same. To be honest, I think Ephesus and Reno have a lot in common. Sure, we're not the center for Artemis worship. But we are a center for unbelief. We are still listed in a number of charts as the second most unchurched city in America. That widespread unbelief contributes to other problems – loneliness, addiction, greed.

And just like Ephesus, we have internal struggles too. I don't think it's Jew/Gentile relations – unless I've really missed something in the last 2 years. But there's plenty of other things to deal with. LOV is planning a new building – in many ways, a blessing. But what if they don't put the utilities in at the property as fast as we think? What if funding becomes more difficult than we thought? What happens if the projected growth in this area doesn't end up happening the way we think it will? There's plenty of changes happening here in the next few months. And that's not even to mention the everyday problems and difficulties that happen at the other two Reno congregations. It's not even to mention your own personal problems that you seem to be slogging through all the time!

So I ask you, is this what you think a victorious church would look like? Not just our own congregation, but the church as a whole? Would you think that it would so often seem bogged down by unexpected problems? That it would struggle to gain momentum? Why does it feel like Christ left us behind when he went back up into heaven? What is the solution to all this!

In the book of Ephesians, the Apostle Paul doesn't say that those problems aren't that big of a deal, that the danger isn't real or that there's a quick solution to them. Instead Paul tells us, "If you're looking around with just your physical eyes, you're not seeing reality as it really is. See with eyes of faith. Open the eyes of your heart. Take a look at what's really going on." Listen again to what he describes: READ last verses...

Think of the biggest problem your church is facing right now. Think of the biggest problem you are facing personally. You know where it really is? Right under Jesus' feet.

That was true for the Ephesians. There were plenty of things stacked against them. Demetrius the influential silversmith and all his pagan friends. An entire economic system meant to benefit worship of a false god, with leaders who were at worst outright hostile to the church, at best interested in benefitting from the sinful status quo. The divisions, the straying Christians, the struggles with sin... all of it under the Savior's feet.

How did they know for sure? Thankfully Paul explains that too. It's because the Resurrection and the Ascension prove it to you. When Jesus rose from the grave, it was for your justification – to prove that God had accepted the sacrifice for all of your sins. And it was to prove he was a conqueror like no other. No other victory is permanent. No matter how many battles a country wins there will always be more. No matter how many superbowl's a team wins, they have to defend their title the next year. But Jesus' victory cannot be challenged, and it never goes away. Satan's head is crushed. Your sins are forgiven. Death is now the doorway to eternal life for God's people. Those victories cannot be undone.

But Christ is not just a conqueror like no other. The Ascension also proves he is a King like no other. Most kings rule with an iron fist as they control the lives of their people. But the hands that hold the life of the church were the same ones that were pierced with nails for you. Most kings spend their reigns trying to expand or anxiously preserve their power. Their people are means to an end. Jesus set his power aside and walked through hell for you. And even now that he is on his throne, Jesus makes every single thing down to the most minute detail work for the good of his people.

Take a moment to think about how mind blowing that is. By all rights, there is no reason that God should care about the people in Reno, NV. There's plenty of sin in this city. It's not all that important in the grand scheme of things. But God chooses to care about this city. You know he does because his church is here. Because in a million different ways large and small, the gospel is being proclaimed to people right here so that through God's Word the Holy Spirit opens their eyes to see a hope that goes far beyond this life, and glory that not even the mountains that surround us could touch.

To be honest, there is no reason that God should love any of us. He isn't obligated to. He doesn't need anything from us or anybody else. Frankly, you could make an argument that God could share the gospel a whole lot more efficiently if he didn't take so much time working through sinful people like you and me.

And yet he loves us anyway. So much that he ties us together to him at our baptisms, and creates a bond so intimate that he calls the church his "body". We don't have anything that makes us attractive or worthy to the Almighty, and yet Jesus puts so much value in us that he calls us his "inheritance". And no, God doesn't NEED us to get any of his work done. But he chooses to need us. Or as Paul puts it, READ verses about fullness...

The church is filled by Christ. And yet at the same time, when Christ looks at the church, he says "You complete me." How that's even possible is a total mystery to us. All we can really do is stand right there alongside the Apostle Paul in total wonder at the love that Christ shows to us every single day.

As God's people living on the far side of the Ascension, it's easy to think we've been left to fend for ourselves. Our lives don't seem glorious. The church has plenty of problems. Maybe it feels like you are treading water in your life as a Christian, just barely getting by. But the good news? Through faith you already know the One who sits on the throne. It's the King who understands you, who suffered for you, who knows what you need better than you do. A King who sits on the highest throne, and walks through the darkest valleys of your life at the very same time. A King who shares his life with you right now, and who gives you the victory forever. Amen.