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## The Greatness of His Power

### Ephesians 1:20-23

**Intro:** You don't need to read very far into the NT to realize that large portions of it are focused on important events that are still in the future. Jesus references many such events in the Gospel; the Epistles are thick with eschatology and, of course, there's the Book of the Revelation. Now, the NT also tells us of Christ's work in the past, providing salvation for His people, but we're also told that He will return in power to subdue His enemies and subject all things to God. Paul even mentions this in [v10](#). One of the earliest Christian prayers, as seen in [1 Cor 16:22](#) and [Rev 22:20](#), is, Come, Lord Jesus. The church looks forward to that future day and longs for Christ's victorious return.

Unfortunately, sometimes an interest in the past work of Christ and a concern for future things has often obscured in the minds of many believers Christ's present exalted position in the universe. It is true, as the author of Hebrews writes that "but now we do not yet see all things put under Him" ([2:8](#)). But, he also writes, "We see Jesus . . . crowned with glory and honor" ([9](#)). Paul was thinking along these same lines at the end of this chapter. He's been talking about the greatness of our salvation—grounded in the electing purpose of God from eternity, accomplished in history by the atoning death of Jesus Christ, and applied to individuals personally by the Holy Spirit. He prayed for the Ephesians, asking that they might be more fully grounded in God's truth. He prayed for them to know power of Christ. But when he began to dwell on God's power Paul's mind expanded to marvel at the greatness of that power, and his thoughts turned to the present exalted status of Jesus in whom that power has already been displayed.

The subject of God's power is meant to mean more than just an interesting topic for a lively theological discussion. Sitting around a table trying to decide how many angels can fit on the head of a pin is a pointless endeavor, an exercise in futility; but that doesn't mean that theological knowledge isn't important. In our study of the first part of Paul's prayer ([15-23](#)) we have seen the importance of knowledge for sound faith. Paul makes his concern for sound knowledge plain. He prayed that the Ephesian saints

might know God better (17) and that they might know the hope to which He had called them, the riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints, and the incomparable (exceeding) greatness of His power to all who believe (18-19). It's impossible to look at these verses without realizing that Christianity is a religion of knowledge. It's for the head as well as for the heart.

But having said this, we must also stress that Christianity is not just about "head" knowledge. It's not a religion of ideas only. It's not merely a philosophy. Some Christians treat the faith as if it were just that, taking care to master Bible doctrines, thinking that when they have done this they have done all that needs to be done. They believe that in knowing the truth they have it all. This wasn't enough to satisfy the Apostle Paul and it shouldn't satisfy us either.

For important as sound theological and doctrinal knowledge is, it is given that we might know God better and thus live in His power and be victorious over sin in this life. Christianity is knowledge, yes. But it is also power, power from beginning to end. Without the power of God not one person would ever become a Christian. The salvation of the soul is a resurrection, the recovery of a person from the dead. Without God's power not one person would ever triumph over sin, live a godly life, or come at last to the reward God has for all His own in heaven.

So we begin to see why this is so important and why Paul develops and emphasizes it as he does. It's by the power of God displayed in Jesus Christ that we are to live Christianity.

**19-23** – So, having introduced the power of God he wants Christians to experience, and before explaining what he expects that power to do in us (ch3), Paul outlines the equivalence of this divine power: according to the working of His mighty power when certain things took place. What are the events Paul uses to describe God's power?

What would we choose to describe God's power? When you think of God's sovereign power, to what does your mind turn to? You know what my mind turns to because I did it just last week. When I think of God's power on display, I naturally focus on His power in creation. God speaks and worlds, galaxies – the entire universe leap into existence. His power is displayed in the macro and the micro. He designed water molecules with a remarkable atomic structure that ensures greater density is achieved at temperatures

slightly above freezing so that lakes and rivers freeze from the top down, providing a blanket of ice so that marine life can survive in winter.

I think of the intricacies of the human body, the complexity of atomic physics and consider the pleasure He took in specially designing the tail feather of a woodpecker to enable it to peck with such force and put shock-absorbers in it's skull to endure all the pounding. This is the God who creates emus and cheetahs and the duck-billed platypus: a mammal that lays eggs; has poisoned claws and a face like Daffy Duck! The seasons, the oceans currents, the Aurora Borealis! The power of our God extends way beyond the limits of our imaginations.

Creation might be what we think of when discussing God's power but it's not what Paul turns to. After all, for an omnipotent God there cannot be levels of difficulty. There is no one act that is most powerful. Jesus revealed as much to the unbelieving scribes in [Mt 9](#). A paralytic was brought to Jesus and when he saw the man's faith He said, "Your sins are forgiven you" ([2b](#)). The scribes immediately began to accuse Jesus of blasphemy (in their minds, of course). But Jesus perceived their thoughts and asked them a pointed question: "Which is easier to say 'Your sins are forgiven you' or 'Arise and walk'?" Those scribes may have had a criterion of power in their minds but Jesus' whole point was to prove to them that He was in fact God and had power on earth to forgive sins. The evidence was that He was able to do both with equal ease.

There can be nothing difficult for an omnipotent God. So, Paul doesn't hunt for the most powerful or most difficult displays of God's power, since such categories are essentially meaningless. Instead, Paul points to the most glorious and the most revealing demonstration of God's power in the exaltation of Jesus. He focuses on 3 events:

His Resurrection - When Paul thinks of the displayed greatness of God's mighty power in Christ, he looks first at the resurrection. If the death of Jesus on the cross was the supreme demonstration of God's love (as [Rom 5:8](#) says) then the Resurrection of Jesus from the tomb was the supreme demonstration of God's power. Jesus had predicted that God would raise Him from the dead after the leaders of the people had arrested, abused, and crucified Him ([Mk 10:33-34](#)). That rightly seemed impossible. Since the beginning of time, people had lived and died. So far as anyone could see,

death was the end. (That's all, folks!) Yet Jesus said that after He died (precisely 3 days after), He would triumphantly return to life. What power on earth could possibly accomplish this miracle? Obviously, no power on earth could. Only a heavenly power could—and did! On the 3<sup>rd</sup> day God raised Jesus Christ from the dead, just as He said He would. God thus vindicated Jesus' claims, declared that Christ's atonement for sin was accepted, and revealed that all who are united to Christ by faith can also live triumphantly through that power.

We sometimes speak of Christ's resurrection as the forerunner of our own resurrection—and the proof of it. Because He lives, we shall also live again. That's true enough. It's a glorious certainty. But it's not just at the end of all things - at our own resurrection, that the power of God displayed in Christ is to be seen in us. It's to be seen in our present victories over sin in this life. It's to be seen in our victory over the world, the flesh, and the devil—our 3 great adversaries. The world constantly bombards us with its values. We get them from television, internet, movies, the competitive world in which we earn our livings and from casual conversations. How are we to be victorious over this great enemy? It's by the power of God displayed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. This power is able to transform us “by the renewing of our mind[s]” (Rom 12:2). It's what makes us “new creation[s]” (2 Cor 5:17).

Our 2<sup>nd</sup> great adversary is the flesh, which in the Bible means the nature of sinful man untouched by the Holy Spirit. The flesh is a formidable enemy. It draws us to inactivity when we should actively be reading the Bible, praying, or performing good works. It locks us into sinful patterns of behavior when we should be living a Christ-like life. How can we triumph over these strong forces? Only by the power of God displayed in the resurrection of Jesus.

3<sup>rd</sup>, there's the devil. What a foe he is! Many people, even some Christians, regard him almost as an invention or at least a joke. But when Satan met our first parents in Eden it was no laughing matter. They had been created perfect with not even a disposition to evil. Yet when Satan appeared, so great were his power, his wiles, and his subtlety that it was only a short time before he'd brought about the fall of all humanity. Thus did sin and its consequence (death) pass upon the human race. No wonder Peter warns us that our adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour (1 Pt 5:8). No wonder Paul warns the Ephesians to Put on

the whole armor of God that you might be able to stand against the wiles of the devil (**Eph 6:11**). Because of these realities we need to be enlightened on the power of God working in us. Nothing else can enable us to stand against the devil's schemes.

His Ascension - With all these spiritual enemies, is Christ's power adequate to overcome them? We might doubt that it is—were it not for this next step in Christ's exaltation. God's mighty power was not exhausted in raising Jesus from the dead but it also worked to seat Him at His right hand (**20b-21**). The exaltation of Jesus carries with it 2 great ramifications for the believer.

The 1<sup>st</sup> is in our position before God. This vision of Christ's exaltation controls part of the line of Paul's argument in **ch2** where he says that although we were dead in trespasses and sins (**1b**) and were by nature children of wrath (**3b**), still God, because of His great love for us, made us alive together with Christ (**5**) and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ (**6b**). Now, in a very real sense, we're still here on earth. But, because the Father views us as being in Christ, and Christ is seated with the Father in the heavenlies, thus, God views us as there in principle! That is our destination; that's where we properly belong, because of God's great love for us. That's why our national citizenship can never be more than secondary: we're already citizens of the new Jerusalem and we're already seated with Christ in the heavenlies.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> ramification relates to power in our Christian walk. While there are no levels of difficulty for an omnipotent God, there are levels of authority in the spiritual world, levels that we know very little about. What we do know is that the Father has exalted Jesus over and above all principality (rule) and power (authority); which involves all powers both earthly and angelic. But in the context of the Christian's struggle to live a godly life (and in the context of this book as a whole) the emphasis is focused on the hostile spiritual powers of the corrupt world system. The Bible teaches that demonic powers stand behind evil rulers so that, as Paul says later in this book, we don't struggle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness (forces of evil) in the heavenly places (**6:12**). These spiritual forces have already been made subject to Christ. So when we're told that Jesus has been exalted over them we don't need to fear attacks from these



forces any more than attacks from our flesh or the surrounding world system.

How are we to be victorious over Satan? James tells us: Therefore, submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you ([James 4:7](#)). We cannot hope to resist Satan in our own strength. But if we first submit ourselves to God so that the power of God demonstrated in the exaltation of Christ above all rule and authority flows through us, the devil will flee from us just as he fled from Christ at the end of His temptation in the wilderness.

His Headship - The 3<sup>rd</sup> step in Christ's exaltation by God's power is seen in [22-23](#). These verses continue the thought of Jesus being exalted above all rule and authority since all things have been placed under His feet. But they carry the thought further by referencing the church for whose benefit this subjugation has been made. Jesus has been exalted over the spiritual forces of evil as a conqueror. He is exalted over the church as its proper and greatly honored head.

This, too, has important consequences for us today. These verses teach us that all of God's sovereignty is mediated through Jesus Christ and that all this sovereign power is mediated for the good of the church. Jesus is the head over everything, meaning he exercises authority over everything. But this head metaphor takes a sudden shift when the body is introduced. Although Christ is the head over everything, He is in particular the head of the church, which is His body. As the head, He's ideally placed to ensure that all His sovereignty is exercised *for* His people's good.

Not a drop of rain can fall outside of the sphere of Christ's sovereignty. All of our days – our health and illnesses, our joys and sorrows, our victories and tears, our prayers and the answers to our prayers – fall within the sweep of the sovereignty of One who wears a human face, a face with a thorn-pierced brow! All of God's sovereignty is mediated through One who was crucified on our behalf. For Christians, this means God's sovereignty can no longer be viewed as just a line in a creed or a source of endless mystery. Plenty of mysteries still remain but those mysteries revolve around One who died in our place. The mystery of prayer is still there but our knowledge of God allows for our lack of knowledge to dissolve into worship and gratitude. It's much easier to accept the mystery of divine sovereignty when the divine love is as great as that sovereignty.

And to think – all this sovereignty is exercised for the benefit of the church! What a stunning thought! What gratitude this should call from us – what resolve to live holy and walk godly, to reflect the character of the One who is sovereign over us so that His power may be displayed freely and continually for our benefit. What an incentive to pray in line with God's purposes for His people!

The church is meant to be a transforming power in the world – in fact, through the presence of the risen Christ within, it's meant to be the greatest of all powers in this world. Those who belong to the church are changed; while apart from the power of Christ in their lives they can't even belong to it. But then, having been changed and having become members of the church, they're to work through the power of Christ in the church to transform the world powerfully. The victory is not achieved by arms. It is not achieved by marches or by the force of power politics. It's the victory of transformed lives as, through the church which Christ fills, the rule of Christ is extended forcefully throughout the world.

Edward Gibbon, the author of the classic study *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, saw this in the early church and wrote about it movingly: "While that great body [the Roman Empire] was invaded by open violence, or undermined by slow decay, a pure and humble religion gently insinuated itself into the minds of men, grew up in silence and obscurity, derived new vigor from opposition, and finally erected the triumphant banner of the Cross on the ruins of the Capitol. Nor was the influence of Christianity confined to the period or to the limits of the Roman empire. After a revolution of thirteen or fourteen centuries, that religion is still professed by the nations of Europe, the most distinguished portions of human kind in arts and learning as well as in arms. By the industry and zeal of the Europeans it has been widely diffused to the most distant shores of Asia and Africa; and by the means of their colonies has been firmly established from Canada to Chile, in a world unknown to the ancients."

That is the way Christ's banner is erected: by pure and humble means, but powerfully, as the strength of Christ appears in those who are his followers.

