

Text: Ephesians 1:15-23  
Title: “Look Who Is On The Throne Now”  
(Series: Navigating An Alternative Reading of Reality)

As I said last Sunday, I love to hear the Apostle Paul preach. But I also love to hear the Apostle Paul pray.

One of the leading scholars of our day, N.T. Wright of England, is on the mark when he says that Paul is the greatest interpreter of the mind of Jesus who ever lived. I love to listen to Paul preach the mind and message of Jesus. But I also love to listen to Paul then pray the mind and message of Jesus.

Or, to put it in terms of the title I have given to our journey through Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. I love to listen to Paul preach “the alternative reading of reality” shaped by Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, ascension and coming again. But I especially love to listen to Paul pray us into this alternative reality.

In his letter to the believers in the first century city of Ephesus the third most influential city of the Empire, right behind Athens and Rome – Paul prays two times: in the second half of chapter one, and in the second half of chapter three.

I invite you this morning to focus on just one section of his first prayer. I invite you to focus on Ephesians 1, verses 20 to 22. A number of Biblical scholars have identified these verses as “the thesis statement of the letter”. (so, Timothy Gombis, “The Drama of Ephesians: Participating in the Triumph of God”, 89) I want to focus on Paul’s amazing and audacious claim that the crucified and resurrected carpenter now sits on the throne of the universe.

But before we do, I want to make some observations about the letter as a whole. If you have been following the suggested reading guide printed each Sunday in the worship folder, you have now read the letter seven times. You have read Ephesians 1 on Monday, Ephesians 2 on Tuesdays, chapter 3 on Wednesdays, chapter 4 on Thursdays, chapter 5 on Fridays and 6 on Saturdays. I trust that you have come to see that the letter is written in two halves: chapters one to three and chapters four to six. The turning point is chapter four, verse one. “I, therefore ...” “I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord ...” Note: Paul does not say “the prisoner of Caesar”. “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, entreat you to walk worthy of the calling to which you have been called”. In chapters one to three, Paul preaches and prays God’s call upon our lives. Then in chapters four to six, Paul shows us how to live God’s calling in this world.

Or to put it more simply: in chapters one to three, Paul gives us the indicative of the Gospel, the “is”, the “now is”. Then in chapters four to six, he gives us the imperative of

the Gospel, the “do”, the “now do”. In chapters one to three, Paul develops the expansive scope of the Gospel. In chapters four to six, he then spells out the behavioral implications of the scope of the Gospel, implications for every arena of our lives.

Or to put it even more simply: in chapters one to three we have the “good news”; in chapters four to six we have the “good advice”.

This is typical of Paul: good news before good advice. He is simply following the Lord Jesus. Before Paul gives us any “good advice” about how to live as disciples of Jesus in this world, he lays out the “good news”. For the simple reason that the “good advice” is impossible to live without the “good news”.

A number of you have observed that in my sermons I have not been telling anyone to do anything ... except to listen to the text ... and trust the Lord of the text. I am being very intentional. I am following the Apostle Paul’s pattern. Before he gives us any “good advice” he makes sure we first understand and live in the “good news”.

Many thoughtful Christian leaders in our day are lamenting the fact that for all the preaching that takes place in North America, North America appears to be drifting further and further away from the Gospel. May I be so bold as to suggest why? Most of the preaching in North America is “good advice”, not “good news”. “Good advice” without “good news” changes no one. Only heavy doses of good news changes us!

Now, Paul will give a lot of “good advice” in his letter! Beginning with verse one of chapter four – “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord” – the Apostle will develop a number of “therefores”.

“Therefore, walk work of the calling to which you have been called” (4:1).

“Therefore, walk no longer as the Gentiles do in the futility of their minds” (4:17).

“Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth to one another, be angry but do not sin ... do not grieve the Holy Spirit” (4:25, 26, 30).

“Therefore be imitators of God ... ” (5:1) Holy moly! “Walk in love” (5:2).

“Therefore, walk as children of the light” (5:8)

“Therefore, be careful how to walk, not as unwise, but as wise ... be filled with the Holy Spirit” (5:15,18)

“Finally” – “be strong in the Lord ... put on the full armour of God ... ” (6:10-11)

But before we can do the “good advice” we have to be gripped by ... and changed by ... the “good news”.

And the heart of the “good news” Paul preaches and prays in the letter to the Ephesians is chapter one, verses 20-22. “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened ... to know the surpassing greatness of God’s power toward us who are believing ... power in accordance with the works of the strength of His might,” and here’s the text ... “ which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead, and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the age to come. And He put all things in subject under Christ’s feet”.

All the “therefores” of chapter four to six only make sense in light of this good news. Indeed, the “therefores” of chapter four to six are impossible to live without living in the “good news” of chapter one, verses 20 to 22.

Notice again how Paul addresses God in his prayer; Paul prays to “The God of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:17). Explosive works! For a life-long Jew and for a life-long Roman citizen. Had he prayed that way at a civic gathering he would have been he would have been in big trouble! “Lord”, “Lord Jesus”, “Lord Jesus Christ, Messiah”. “Our Lord”.

Here we have to remind ourselves of the historical context. The Roman Empire revolved around the word “Lord”. *Kurios* is the actual term: Sovereign one, Final authority, Last word. “Caesar is *Kurios*.” “Caesar is Lord”. The words were the glue that held the Empire together.

“God of the Lord Jesus”. Lord Jesus, Messiah”. “Our Lord Jesus Christ”. Having huge implications for every arena of life: the political, the economic, the relational, the spiritual, the sexual. You could get crucified for saying the words, “the crucified Jesus is Lord”.

In his first prayer in the letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle of the Lord Jesus, prays that we might “know”. That is the burden of the prayer – know. That we might know “the God of our Lord Jesus Christ”. That we might know this God who comes to the world in Jesus, the God who comes to the world is Jesus. That we might know the One whom God has installed as Sovereign of the cosmos.

Doing so in fulfillment of the two Psalms the New Testament quotes the most: Psalm 2 and Psalm 110. Psalm 2: To the nations and their kings who want to run the world their way, God says: “as for me I have installed my King upon Zion, my holy mountain” (2:6). And Psalm 110: King David says: “The Lord said to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’” (110:1) The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob ... of Moses, and of David, and of Isaiah and Jeremiah ... has installed Jesus of Nazareth on the throne above all thrones. It is the heart of the Gospel. It is the drumbeat of the good news that swept through the Roman Empire.

Interestingly, the English word “church” declares this news. “Church” comes from the Scottish word “kirke”. “Kirke” came from the Greek word “Kuriokos”, meaning “of the Kurios”, “of the Lord”. To be the church in the world is to be the people in the world who belong to, who swear allegiance to, who love and obey the new Lord of the universe.

So Paul prays that we might know this Lord. And that we might know, that we experience, the benefits of knowing this Lord. “I pray that the eyes of your heart” ... the eyes of the control centre of your very being ... “may be opened to know the hope of His calling, the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and the surpassing greatness of His power being exercise to the advantage of use who are believing.”

He especially wants us to know God's "power toward us who believe". The power we need to actually live the Gospel in the world. It's the power that raised Jesus from the dead. It's the power that seated Jesus on the throne. It's the power that subjects everything under Jesus' feet. It's the power that gives Jesus, the Head of the cosmos, as the Head of the Kirke, the church.

Focus on the phrase "seated Him" v.21 – "seated Him at His right hand, far above all rule and authority ... " This is the "news" undergirding the "advice" to come in the rest of the letter. Up and coming New Testament scholar, Timothy Gombis, in his book "the Drama of Ephesians", puts it this way: "The basic thrust of Paul's story is that God has defeated the fallen powers and authorities in Christ Jesus, and has installed Christ Jesus as cosmic ruler over all of reality" (p.86). Isn't that a magnificent title? Jesus – friend of sinners, healer of broken bodies and minds – has been installed as "cosmic ruler over all of reality"! It makes me want to dance!

Timothy Gombis goes on: "God is manifesting his victory by creating the church, in which He is overcoming the effects of evil powers in the world" (86). How is THAT for what it means to be the church at the corner of Nelson and Burrard?

Here is the amazing thing: Paul preaches and prays this news about Jesus and His church in circumstances that seem to call the news into question! Paul is in prison. He is waiting to stand trial before Caesar ... who calls himself "*Domine et Deus*", "Lord and God". And who demands that all citizens of the Empire call him "Lord and God". Caesar decreed that all citizens regularly "go to worship". That they go to a temple dedicated to Caesar, take a pinch of incense, throw it on the altar fire, and say the words, "Caesar is Lord". Once could believe just about anything else, as long as one said, "Caesar is Lord".

Disciples of Jesus could not obey the edict. Respect Caesar, yes. Work with Caesar, yes. Pray for Caesar, of course. Treat Caesar with dignity, certainly. Even if Caesar treated them badly ... treat him with dignity. But confess him as Lord. No. For the single reason that it is not true. Caesar is only Emperor, not Lord. Only Jesus is Lord.

Exalted. "Far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named". (1:21) To what is Paul referring?

The terms were used in reference to human beings: human rulers, human authorities, human powers, human dominion. But they were also used in reference to extra-human, supra-human rulers, authorities, powers, dominions. At the end of his letter Paul uses the terms in this way. He speaks of the nature of our struggle in the world, saying, "our struggle is not again flesh and blood" – humans only – "but against the rulers, against the power, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places". (6:12)

French sociologist Jacque Ellul names some of the supra-human forces at work in our world. They include: mammon, the prince of the world, the prince of lies, Satan, the devil, death. And Ellul points out that these names are each "characterized by their

functions: money, power, deception, accusation, division, and destruction. ” (Subversion of Christianity, 176) And we all experience these forces in work in our part of the world.

The person who helps me the most to understand this “alternative reading of reality” is Walter Wink. He is known for his series of books, “Naming the Powers”, “Unmasking the Powers”, “Engaging the Powers”. I do not agree with everything he develops. But he helps me begin to understand how the human and supra-human interact. He uses the little equation:  $P = O + I$ . “P” – the powers at work in the world, = “O” – the outward human dimensions, + “I” – the inward spiritual dimensions.

Here is how Dr. Wink puts it. “ $P = O + I$  Remember that simple formula and you can avoid the confusion of the centuries about the principalities and powers. The powers (P) are not spiritual spooks inhabiting the air and leaping on the unwary. That is an earlier way of putting it. Nor are the powers (P) merely institutions, political or economic systems, ideologies, or social structures. That has been the modern way of coming at it. Neither is adequate, though both contain some truth. The powers consist, it turns out, of an outer manifestation (O) and an inner spirituality (I).”  $P = O + I$

Dr. Wink continues: “As the inner aspect of material reality, the spiritual powers are everywhere around us. Their presence is real and inescapable. The issue is not whether we believe in them but whether we can learn to identify our actual, everyday encounters with them – what Paul called ‘discerning the spirits’. . . . The powers, whether benign or satanic, always consist of an outer, visible form (constitutions, judges, armies, leaders, buildings) and an inner, invisible spirit that provides the power its legitimacy, credibility, and clout.” Makes sense does it not?

Wink then speaks to us in the Western world. “We in the West are so individualistic that we have ceased to regard corporate entities as anything more than the mere aggregate of their parts. But an institution is more than the sum of its parts. Our incapacity to recognize the spirituality of institutions has left us tinkering with their parts while ignoring their essence. I am suggesting, in short, that the spiritual and material aspects of the powers are the inseparable but distinguishable components of a single thing – power in its manifestations in the world.  $P = O + I$ .” (in Sojourners magazine, Summer 1984)

So take for example something we all know and have to deal with every day: money or mammon as Jesus calls it. “No one can serve two masters”, says Jesus, “for you will either hate the one and love the other, or you will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon”. (Matthew 6:24) Many of us, of course, think we know better, and are trying to prove Jesus wrong! But that is another story.

Money. Mammon. Toonies – mere metal. Dollar bills – mere paper. Right? Debit cards, Visa cards – mere plastic. Right? Banks – buildings, vaults, employees just trying to make a living, advertisements, monetary policies, Board of Directors. The “O” – the outer, visible manifestations of mammon. And the “I” – the inner, spiritual dynamics at work. A real force, a real power, a god, if you will, who wants to be lord of our lives. Seeking to keep us captive.

This is why Jesus spoke so much about money. Mammon is not a neutral player in our lives, or in the world.  $P = O + I$ .

Another example. Pornographic magazines and films. Seemingly harmless in a free and “enlightened society”. “O” – photographers, editors, models ... all trying to make a living. Human bodies ... elegant, appropriately praised as works of beauty. Investors, like General Motors and AT&T. “I” – exploiting women and children, engendering lust, giving false sense of comfort, slowly taking the soul captive.

Gaming. Casinos. You get the point.

“I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened ... so that you might know ... ” that in Jesus Christ, God defeated the powers and is setting the captive free.

The powers that crucified Jesus. Yes, on one level – “O” – it was Caiaphas the High Priest and Pilate the Roman Governor who were responsible for Jesus’ death. But on another level – “I” – it was the spirit of religion-gone-off-the-rails, and the spirit of politics-gone-off-the-rails, who were responsible.  $P = O + I$ . And God won the victory over both the “O” and the “I”.

And winning by losing! At the cross, it looked like Jesus lost. But He had not. He was winning. And those who thought they were winning, were losing.

That is the Gospel Paul wants us to know. It is not always obvious. It does not always appear to be the case. I know! That is why Paul prays: “God of our Lord Jesus Christ ... enlighten the eyes of our hearts”. Help us realize and live Your victory over the powers!

So, what do we do? We co-operate with the victory. How?

Live in the Book. Live in the Book that declares the victory. If we only read the newspaper or MSN on our Blackberries; if we only read fashion and decorating and travel magazines; if we only read technical journals and political essays; we are not going to understand what is going on in our world. Soak in the Book that opens up the mystery of Jesus’ Lordship.

And live in community. In community with other believers who are also trying to live in light of the Gospel. Sunday morning is not enough. We have to be part of a group of disciples with whom we share the specific nature of our struggle to live in Christ. (If you are not now in such a group, and want to be, take one of the Care Cards out of the pew rack, fill it out and place it in the basket during the offering to come ... and someone will contact you.)

And we co-operate with God’s victory in Jesus by treating people in light of the victory. We refuse to gossip. We refuse to accuse. We refuse to speak ill of anyone for whom Jesus died. What stifles the Gospel is not the “big sins” like sexual and financial scandals ... but gossip and accusation.

And we co-operate with the victory by sharing our money. Mammon wants us to keep our money. In fact, mammon wants us to think our money is ours. It is not. It is the Lord's. Especially the first 10%. That's unequivocally His. Giving the tithe, the 10%, breaks the spell mammon weaves in our souls. That is why giving the offering in a worship service is actually a very powerful moment. It is when we give thanks, yes. But it is also when we once again declare that Jesus, not money, is Lord. Even if you give through automatic withdrawal, bring a "toonie" to give as a way to participate in the Gospel ... to declare your freedom from the lordship of money. In parts of Africa, worshippers dance at offering times, because they are celebrating Jesus' victory over mammon!

And pray. Follow the lead of Paul ... and pray. Walter Wink reminds us how disciples of Jesus living in the Roman Empire dealt with injustice and immorality of their day. Unlike us, they had no access to the political process; they had no financial resources. "But", says Wink, this seems to have done little to prevent the church from impacting the Roman Empire with devastating force. When the Roman magistrates ordered the Christians to worship the imperial spirit they refused, kneeling instead and offering prayers to God on the Emperor's behalf. This seemingly innocuous act was far more exasperating and revolutionary than outright rebellion would have been. Rebellion simply acknowledges the absolute and ultimate nature of the emperor's power, and attempts to seize it. Prayer denies the ultimate altogether by acknowledging a high power!! Rebellion focuses solely on the physical institution or its current incumbents, and attempts to displace them by an act of superior force. Prayer, on the other hand, challenges the very spirituality of the Empire itself, and calls the Emperor's "angel", as it were, before the judgment seat of God."

And we co-operate with God's victory in Jesus by eating the meal we call the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper. A profoundly transformative act. Once again declaring that He who was crucified is alive ... and coming again ... and is even now seated on the throne.

I love to hear Paul preach the Gospel. But I especially love to hear him pray the Gospel. Oh God, open the eyes of their hearts they may know Who is on the throne!