

# *Wading River Congregational Church*

## SERMONS IN PRINT

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**Ephesians 1:15-23**

*"Christ Rules"*

If you were a pastor writing to a church you knew and loved and admired, what would you write? Paul the Apostle's message to his old friends in and around Ephesus, in the churches he had founded a decade earlier, begins with praise to God for what he has done among them, and with prayers for them all. They know that in Jesus Christ, God has called them, redeemed them, forgiven them, blessed them, marked them as his own; Paul wants them to grasp how all this fits into God's great plan to *"bring all things together under Jesus Christ."* The Christians of the 1<sup>st</sup> century are the "first-fruits" of God's great project of reconciliation, which will one day encompass his whole world and even his whole Creation.

Now Paul repeats the pattern: praising God for the faith and love the believers already have, and then praying that God will give them even deeper understanding of him and his plans. He wants them to know God better. He wants them to grasp the hope they have and the inheritance that is waiting for them. He wants them to experience the power of God in and among them. How? Through prayer, he asks God to work in them by his Spirit, which he has already given them as a deposit on what is to come.

1) *Knowing God, Hoping For the Future*

They have faith, they love one another, but their understanding needs to be deepened. The Spirit needs to work in them to bring wisdom so that they can grasp what God has revealed. The "eyes of their hearts" need light. The goal is not just to know God's plans, but to know *him* better. That is almost a definition of what it means to be people of faith and disciples of Jesus. God can be known personally - known as Father, *Abba* (a tender name, like Daddy or Poppa) - just as Jesus knew him.

The Spirit can also help them grasp the hope that God offers to people of faith. What is that? That they have "an inheritance" stored up for them - a certain promise of a glorious future. Not simply that they will go to be with him when they die, but that *"one short sleep past, we wake eternally, and death shall be no more"* as John Donne famously wrote. The resurrection lies ahead, and Jesus himself has shown us what it will be like: we will have transformed bodies, fitted for *"a new heavens and a new earth"* when the holy city *"comes down out of heaven... and the dwelling of God is with men and he will live with them."* At last *"all things in heaven and on earth will be brought together under one head, Jesus Christ."*

Hard to believe? Oh, yes! But that is the Christian hope. Those who are “in Christ” will be made new. All that we have become will be made perfect, and we will live on a renewed earth, imperishable and incorruptible. 1<sup>st</sup> century people had as many questions about that as we do. How will God do that? What would new bodies be like? One of the early Church Fathers surmised we shall all be about 33 years old, as Jesus was when he rose! Doesn’t sound too bad!

God has the power to do this, says Paul. The same power and strength and might that he exerted to raise his Son will be at work to raise all Christ’s sisters and brothers. And God has already used that power to exalt his risen Son to the right hand of the throne of heaven, where he has been declared King and made ruler of all things in heaven and earth. Christ rules, already, from heaven!

## 2) *Christ Rules*

Well, you may say – and no doubt the Ephesian Christians said – it sure doesn’t look like it yet! Where and how can we see Christ ruling? The world looks like a mess, the Romans still rule around here, and being a Christian is a matter of faith and not sight for us. Hope we may have, but our daily experience does not exactly manifest that Christ rules!

Paul’s answer to that, which still comes as a surprise, is that Christ clearly rules already in one place, or better, among a certain group of people. He rules in the church! His rule is already demonstrated in his appointment as “*head of the church.*” It is among these people, even now, where you can see and experience how Christ rules. His rule is that of “*the head over the body:*” he is the source, the power, and the Lord of the church “*which is his body*” and he “*fills it*” with his presence and power. That should be visible, a daily experience for communities of faith, a sure sign of God’s

future, a down payment – the church as a kind of “first fruits” of a Springtime that reveals what God’s harvest will be like when time has matured and all is ripe.

But that’s not all – Christ *does rule all things already*, but in ways that are invisible to us. And unknown to us, he is ruling all things “*for the church.*” That is an extraordinary claim, but those are Paul’s words – Christ is already “*head over everything for the church.*” He rules for the benefit of his church, which he loves and cares for as anyone does his own body.

## 3) *The Body of Jesus Christ*

Well, what might all this mean to us? First that the goal of any pastor and any preacher is that the flock under his care should come to know God better. We all have more to learn, more to experience of God. We all need our eyes opened, our understanding deepened, our wisdom increased not only to know about God and his plans, but to know him personally.

Are you and I doing that? What have we learned about God in the past year? I have learned that he can be trusted even in the darkest moments, that my life and ministry and even family are not “all about me,” but about him; that when I have nothing left is when he is most free to work in and through me, that suffering is a path to understanding and trust, and in turn helping others who suffer... I have learned to drop the word “Why?” from my vocabulary. What about you? Are you going through tough times? Then there are lessons to learn, and trust to be deepened. There are promises to hold onto, and people to lean on. There is a loss of self-confidence, and a growth in God-confidence. Or has it been a good year for you? Then there are lessons to learn about gratitude, and generosity, and what God’s

grace is like – things you can now share with other people who need to know.

What about hope for the future? Can you and I begin to grasp what it means for our lives now to know that we shall live again? That all we have learned, and become, and done, has a future; that our future is not all about decline and loss of memory and vigor and friends and loved ones? That “our labor in the Lord is not in vain” because it is all going to be used in his plan. Paul says to the Colossians *“your life is now hidden with Christ in God.”* If you like a modern analogy, all those things that we have forgotten are stored in “God’s copy” of who we are “on his server,” and will one day be “fully restored” to us. The lame will walk, and the deaf hear, and the blind see! We will be who we are, but better by far! We may still have scars, as Jesus had nail-prints in his hands, but they will become medals of honor! Can you believe this? Even a little? What difference would it make to life now if we did believe it!

And what about “the rule of Christ” in the church? What does that mean to us? Do we understand that this, or any other Christian community, is never “my church” or “our church” or “some denomination’s church,” but always “his church”? Do we acknowledge that he is our head? That we derive our life and our direction and our reason for being from Jesus Christ – nothing and nobody else? That we are not first and foremost members of a historic church, or Congregationalists, or residents of Wading River, or New Yorkers, or Americans, but we are primarily members of the body of Jesus Christ, over which he is the head?

Does the fact that Christ rules show itself in our little church? Is all we do bathed in prayer? Are we free of power-plays and “having things our way?” Do we care for each other as parts of the body should do,

valuing what each contributes - ears, eyes, hands, feet? Do we know that *“if one part of the body suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it”*? Is our common life so valuable that we gladly set aside our individual wants and needs for the sake of the common good? Do we thank Christ daily that he is ordering all things for the benefit and blessing of his people, the church? Does he “fill” our church community as he will one day “fill all things”?

In all this, are we an example to an unbelieving (or at best skeptical) world of what happens when Christ rules? Are we a kind of “first fruits,” the buds and snowdrops and crocuses that signal winter will soon be over, to a world that desperately needs hope? Are we ready to work for the common good of our wider communities, as a sign of God’s plan to reconcile all things?

Paul the Apostle and pastor would pray that our good church, and all other good churches, learn all these things more deeply. Dear old Matthew Henry, that great 16<sup>th</sup> century Puritan commentator, famous for his aphorisms and illustrations, said of this passage that *“God has laid up spiritual blessings for us in his Son. He has appointed us to draw them out by prayer.”* It’s a picture of a great bank account that God has created for us, treasure in heaven, spiritual blessings credited to us by Jesus Christ. We can draw from that great deposit by prayer, asking our Father, *Abba*, “who art in heaven,” to give us each day what we need, to forgive us our sins, to protect us from temptation and from evil; and to give us hope for the future, and love for the present, and power to live, and grace to submit ourselves gladly to the rule of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Let us pray...