

King Jesus and His Church: The King Above All

Ephesians 1:15–23

Main Idea

Before we trust Christ's design for His church, we must first stand in awe of Christ Himself.

Before We Discuss the Church, We Must See Christ

When people hear the words *church governance*, they often begin thinking about constitutions, bylaws, committees, meetings, motions, and votes.

Those things have their place. Churches need order. We need to know how decisions are made, how leaders are recognized, how responsibilities are assigned, and how we remain accountable to one another.

But the New Testament does not begin its vision for the church with procedures. It begins with Jesus.

The theologian and pastor John Stott wrote, “The church lies at the very center of the eternal purpose of God. It is not a divine afterthought.”

The church was not God’s emergency response after another plan failed. The church is not an accidental gathering of people who happen to share similar religious interests. The church is not a human organization that belongs to the people who attend it, support it, lead it, or have been part of it the longest. The church stands at the center of God’s eternal purpose because the church belongs to His Son.

That is why Paul’s letter to the Ephesians is such an important place for us to spend these next several weeks. Paul will eventually teach us how believers should live together. He will speak about unity, spiritual gifts, leadership, service, maturity, marriage, family, work, spiritual warfare, prayer, and mission. But he does not begin with any of those things.

Paul begins with God’s eternal plan accomplished through Jesus Christ. He begins with redemption through Christ’s blood. He begins with forgiveness, grace, adoption, inheritance, resurrection power, and the exaltation of Jesus above every ruler, authority, power, dominion, and name.

Before Paul teaches us how Christ's church is to function, he invites us to stand in awe of Christ Himself. And that is where we must begin.

Over the next six weeks, we are going to examine Christ's beautiful design for His church. We will talk about shepherds whom Christ gives to oversee and equip His people.

We will talk about servants who meet needs, protect unity, and demonstrate the humble character of Jesus. We will talk about saints, every believer who is gifted by Christ and called to participate in the ministry of the body. And We will talk about the mission that Christ has entrusted to His church.

Christ. Shepherds. Servants. Saints. Mission.

But before we discuss any of those gifts, we must look at the One who gives them. Before we consider the design, we must behold the Designer. Before we examine how the church should function, we must remember whose church it is.

Because we will never fully trust the design of Christ until we see the greatness of Christ. That is Paul's concern in our passage today. He does not first pray that the Ephesian church would develop a better strategy. He does not pray that they would restructure their ministries, increase their attendance, improve their finances, or eliminate every difficulty.

Paul prays that God would open the eyes of their hearts. He wants them to see. He wants them to know. He wants them to comprehend the hope of God's calling, the riches of God's inheritance, and the immeasurable greatness of God's power.

And then Paul directs their attention to the risen and reigning Jesus Christ. The health of a church is inseparably connected to its vision of Christ. When a church has a small vision of Jesus, it will have small worship, hesitant obedience, shallow confidence, and competing centers of authority.

But when a church sees Jesus as Paul presents Him—risen from the dead, seated in authority, reigning over every power, with everything placed beneath His feet—that church can trust Him. It can follow Him. It can submit to His Word. It can receive His design as wise and good.

So, our purpose over these next several weeks is not merely to evaluate a proposal. Our purpose is to open God's Word and admire our King. Come with me and admire how beautifully Jesus has cared for His church.

But today, before we admire His care, His gifts, and His design, let us first stand in awe of Christ Himself.

Paul's Prayer

If Paul were standing here today and knew our church was preparing for an important season in its life, I wonder what he would pray for us. We might expect him to pray for wisdom. We might expect him to pray for unity. We might expect him to pray for courage or peace. And those would all be wonderful prayers.

But before Paul says anything about the life of the church, he prays something even deeper. He prays that God's people would truly see Jesus.

Point 1: We Need Eyes to See Christ (vv. 15–19)

"For this reason..." (v.15)

Paul says, "For this reason..." Every preacher should ask:

What reason?

Paul is reaching back into verses 3–14. Think about what he has just celebrated. God chose us before the foundation of the world. God adopted us as sons through Christ. We have redemption through His blood. Our sins are forgiven. God has lavished grace upon us. He has revealed His eternal purpose. He has sealed us with the Holy Spirit.

Paul has spent almost the entire first chapter worshiping. In Greek, verses 3–14 are one enormous sentence. It is almost as though Paul cannot stop praising God long enough to take a breath. Only after worship does he begin to pray.

That alone teaches us something. Prayer grows best in the soil of worship. The more clearly we see what God has done, the more naturally we are drawn to speak to Him.

Notice What Encourages Paul

Verse 15 says, "...because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints..." These believers already possess two remarkable qualities. Faith. Love. The vertical and the horizontal.

Jesus Himself summarized the Law in those two directions: Love God. Love your neighbor. Paul hears evidence that the gospel is genuinely bearing fruit. This is not a dead church. This is not a compromised church. This is not Corinth. This is not Galatia. These are healthy believers. That observation is incredibly important.

Because sometimes we think prayers like this are reserved for struggling Christians. Not at all. Paul prays this over mature believers.

Which means...No matter how long you've walked with Christ...No matter how much Scripture you know...No matter how faithfully you've served...You have not outgrown your need to see Christ more clearly.

There is no point in the Christian life where we can honestly say, "I've seen enough of Jesus." The greatest theologian still has infinitely more to learn. The oldest saint still has infinitely more to admire.

"I do not cease..."

Verse 16. "...I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers..." This tells us something beautiful about pastoral ministry.

Paul's ministry is not merely public. It's deeply private. The churches know his preaching. Only God knows his praying. That's convicting.

People often evaluate pastors by sermons preached, books written, meetings attended, or decisions made. Paul would probably measure ministry differently. How much time have you spent before God on behalf of His people?

Churches are rarely transformed merely because pastors preach better sermons. Churches are transformed because someone has been praying that the eyes of God's people would be opened.

Then We Reach the Heart of the Prayer

Verse 17. "...that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory..."

"The Father of glory." What a magnificent title. Paul doesn't merely say, "Our Father." He is that. He doesn't merely say, "The Almighty." He is that as well.

He says, "The Father of glory." Glory is the radiance of God's infinite worth. His holiness displayed. His beauty revealed. His majesty made visible. And Paul says, The God who possesses all glory is the One to whom I am praying for you."

"...may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation..."

This verse is often misunderstood. Paul is not suggesting they need a new revelation outside of Scripture. He's praying that the Holy Spirit would enable believers to understand and delight in what God has already revealed. There is a tremendous difference between reading words on a page...and having your heart awakened to their beauty.

We've all experienced this. You've read a passage dozens of times. Then one morning...it's as though God turns the lights on. The text hasn't changed. Your eyes have. That's what Paul is praying.

"In the knowledge of Him."

Everything comes down to those five words. Not... Knowledge about Him. Knowledge of Him. Look, Christianity is wonderfully doctrinal. But doctrine exists to bring us into deeper fellowship with Christ.

The goal of theology is worship. The goal of Bible study is communion. The goal of preaching is not merely informed minds. It's captivated hearts.

Church family, if all we gain over the next six weeks is a better understanding of church leadership, we will have missed Paul's prayer.

My prayer is that we leave this series knowing Christ better than when we entered it. Because everything else flows from that.

Transition

Paul has prayed that God would open the eyes of our hearts. But what exactly does he want us to see? Is it ourselves? Is it our potential? Is it our gifts? Is it the church? No.

He wants us to lift our eyes until they rest on one Person. The risen, reigning, victorious King Jesus. Brothers and sisters, Christianity has never primarily been about discovering ourselves. It has always been about beholding Christ.

Point 2: We Need a Bigger Vision of Christ (vv. 20–23)

"...according to the working of His great might that He worked in Christ..." Paul now gives us four pictures of Jesus. Each one is bigger than the last.

A. See Christ Raised

Paul begins with the resurrection. "...when He raised Him from the dead..." That sounds almost ordinary to us because we've heard it our whole lives. But stop and think. Death had never permanently surrendered its grip.

Kings had come. Kings had died. Prophets had come. Prophets had died. Empires had risen. Empires had fallen. But on Easter morning something happened that changed the entire universe.

Death itself was defeated. The greatest enemy humanity has ever known met Someone greater. Jesus didn't merely survive death. He conquered it.

Paul is reminding us that every promise God has made rests on a living Savior. Our hope isn't built on memories. It isn't built on moral teachings. It isn't built on a historical movement. It is built on a living King.

Application

If Christ has conquered death, what circumstance in your life is too great for Him? What burden is beyond His reach? What future is outside His hands? The resurrection isn't merely something we celebrate every Easter.

It is the foundation beneath every ordinary Monday morning.

B. See Christ Enthroned

Paul continues. "...and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places..." The resurrection tells us Jesus is alive.

The ascension tells us Jesus reigns. The right hand was the place of supreme authority. It was the place of honor. The place of power. The place from which a king ruled.

Jesus isn't simply alive somewhere. He is governing the universe. At this very moment...Christ is not wringing His hands. He is not nervous. He is not surprised. He is not reacting. He reigns. This is one of the greatest comforts in all of Scripture.

Our world feels chaotic. Wars. Elections. Economic uncertainty. Disease. Division. Church conflict. Personal suffering. None of it has threatened Christ's throne. Not once.

We often live as though the throne of heaven is occupied by anxiety. It isn't. Jesus still sits there.

C. See Christ Above Every Authority

Now Paul stacks phrase upon phrase. "Far above all rule and authority and power and dominion..." Paul isn't merely piling up synonyms. He's exhausting the vocabulary of authority. Every ruler. Every government. Every spiritual force. Every earthly institution. Every human power. Every unseen power. Every kingdom. Every throne. Christ is above them all.

Then Paul adds, "...and above every name that is named..." Every emperor. Every president. Every celebrity. Every philosopher. Every billionaire. Every denomination. Every pastor. Every movement. Every ideology.

Every name history remembers, Jesus is greater. Not only in this age, but in the one to come. There will never be an era when Christ is not King.

Application

Church family, if Christ is above every authority then He is certainly above ours. Which means our greatest question is never, "What do we prefer?"

Our greatest question is, "What has our King said?"

D. See Christ Given to the Church

"And He put all things under His feet and gave Him as Head over all things to the church..." There's one little phrase that changes everything. "...to the church."

Paul could have stopped after saying Christ rules over everything. That would have been glorious. But he doesn't. He says this exalted Christ, the One above every power, the One before whom every knee will bow, has been **given to the church**. Think about that.

The greatest gift the Father ever gave the church wasn't a program. Wasn't gifted leaders. Wasn't resources. Wasn't buildings. Wasn't influence. He gave us His Son. Christ Himself. Our Head. Our Shepherd. Our King. Our Bridegroom. Our Savior.

Brothers and sisters, this is why we don't begin a series on the church by talking about elders. Because Christ is the greatest gift the church has ever received. Everything else flows from Him.

The Body and the Fullness

Verse 23. "...which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all."

This is astonishing language. The church is Christ's body. The church, this church, is NOT an organization. The church is an organism. It is alive. It is to be united to Him like a bride to a groom in marriage. The church is to be dependent upon Him, not a corporate structure. The church is to then express or represent His life in the world.

Christ has chosen to display His glory through ordinary redeemed people. Not because we are impressive. But because He is.

Transition to the Conclusion

Do you see what Paul has done? He hasn't argued us into better church leadership. He has lifted our eyes to the throne of heaven.

Because once you see Jesus like this, everything else begins to find its proper place.

Pastoral Reflection

Church family, can I simply speak to you as your pastor for a few moments?

Over the past thirty years of vocational ministry, I've had the privilege of serving in different churches, partnering with churches across our convention, preaching in camps and conferences, sitting in associational meetings, and building friendships with pastors all over this country.

During those years I've watched churches devote enormous amounts of energy to committees, constitutions, bylaws, budgets, policies, personalities, traditions, buildings, programs, and leadership structures.

None of those things are unimportant. Churches have to make decisions about those things. But I've also noticed something that has increasingly burdened my heart.

Rarely have I heard believers walk away saying, "Wasn't Jesus magnificent?" Rarely have I heard someone say, "I can't stop thinking about the glory of Christ." "His grace overwhelmed me." "His authority humbled me." "His mercy brought me to repentance."

Somewhere along the way, many churches became consumed with the work of the church while quietly losing their wonder at the Christ of the church.

And before we assume that's someone else's story, could it be ours?

Is it possible to know the songs...know the Scriptures...know the routines...know the language...and yet slowly lose our sense of wonder?

I think that's exactly why Paul prayed the way he did. He didn't first pray that the Ephesian church would become more organized. He prayed that they would see Christ more clearly.

Churches don't need a greater fascination with church. They need a greater fascination with Christ.

I've learned something over these thirty years. Churches that are captivated by Christ can work through difficult questions. Churches captivated by preferences rarely can.

Churches that stand in awe of Jesus tend to become humble. Humble people listen. Humble people learn. Humble people are willing to discover that God's way may be wiser than their own.

But when Christ becomes small, our opinions become very large.

Invitation

So let me ask you something. When was the last time you truly stood in awe of Jesus? Not merely appreciated Him. Not merely believed the right things about Him. But found yourself overwhelmed by His glory...amazed by His grace...humbled by His authority...changed by His presence?

When was the last time you saw Him answer a prayer that only He could answer? When was the last time you watched Him rescue someone from darkness into light? When was the last time you realized that you yourself are not the man or woman you once were because Jesus has faithfully been at work in your life?

Paul isn't asking God to give us a dramatic emotional experience. He's asking God to open our eyes. Because when we truly see Christ, worship deepens. Obedience becomes joyful. Humility grows. The church flourishes.

Final Charge

Over the next six weeks, I'm not asking you to become more fascinated with church leadership. I'm inviting you to become more captivated by King Jesus. Because when we see Him clearly, we begin to trust that everything He has designed for His church is beautiful, wise, and good.

Come with me over these next several weeks and admire how beautifully King Jesus has cared for His Bride.