

The Chief Shepherd

Ephesians 1:11-23; Revelation 7:9-17; 1 Peter 5:4

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Ascension of the Lord

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Today's message is the last one of three that focuses on Jesus as Shepherd. The first one, based on Psalm 23 and John 10, pointed to Jesus as our *Good Shepherd*, the one who provides for and protects his flock. The Shepherd whose voice his sheep recognize. The Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep.

The second message, based on Hebrews, chapters 10 and 13, pointed to Jesus as the *Great Shepherd* who comes, by his Holy Spirit, to perfect his sheep.

We looked at how we, who are Christians – who are believers in Christ – are constantly being made more and more complete in our faith and service as we grow and study and serve each day. Jesus' spirit is transforming us from glory into glory, sanctifying us, shaping us into his image.

Today we see Jesus as the *Chief Shepherd*. Jesus, who sits in power at the right hand of God, who ascended into heaven and who will come again to finally take us to the place where there will be no more tears, no more heartache or suffering. That is the place where our perfection will finally be made complete.

1 Peter 5:4 says "*And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away.*" Peter is especially speaking to Elders and Pastors who are overseeing Jesus' flock until he returns, but that reward is for all of us as we are all called to care for, and to pray for others in his name.

We read in the gospels, and in Acts 1 where Jesus was taken into heaven, after he blessed the disciples and gave them the great commission to go into all the world, making more disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

He told them to preach the good news of forgiveness and teach others to obey God's commandments. And he promised the coming of the Holy Spirit that would empower them to continue his work until he comes again.

The Ascension of Jesus is an important day to remember. Jesus died and rose and appeared to many before he was taken to be with the Father. We say in the Apostles' Creed that Jesus ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God, the Father, Almighty. From there, he judges the living and the dead.

Jesus reigns in power over the Kingdom that exists already today, but someday we will see the final Kingdom that he will establish when he returns, as he promised he would do. It will be the perfect place where sin and evil no longer has any rule over us at all. Death is no threat. Sickness, suffering, sorrow – will be non-existent.

Jesus, the Lamb of God, the perfect sacrifice who died for our sins, once and for all, is now King.

In the vision that John saw of the end times, there are all the churches – all the believers who had gone through so much persecution and suffering, now are there, worshipping Christ. He writes in Revelation:

*“They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them,
nor any scorching heat;
for the Lamb at the center of the throne will **be their shepherd**,
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’*

Jesus, the Chief Shepherd, is still providing. He said, even before he died that no one can snatch his sheep from him. And now in Revelation, we continue to see how the Shepherd – Jesus, the Chief Shepherd – brings us (his sheep) safely home to him.

Paul promises in his letter to the Ephesians that we will obtain an inheritance; that we have been created – designed – according to God’s purpose so that we can live a glorious life of praising God. The rich inheritance we are receiving is full of many blessings and joy now, in this life on earth, but will be full of immeasurable joy in the eternal life where Christ rules over everything.

I want to read that last part of the Ephesians text again, but from the Living Bible Translation.

Paul writes:

¹⁶⁻¹⁷ I have never stopped thanking God for you. I pray for you constantly, asking God, the glorious Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, to give you wisdom to see clearly and really understand who Christ is and all that he has done for you.

¹⁸ I pray that your hearts will be flooded with light so that you can see something of the future he has called you to share. I want you to realize that God has been made rich because we who are Christ’s have been given to him!

¹⁹ I pray that you will begin to understand how incredibly great his power is to help those who believe him. It is that same mighty power ²⁰ that raised Christ from the dead and seated him in the place of honor at God’s right hand in heaven, ²¹ far, far above any other king or ruler or dictator or leader.

Yes, his honor is far more glorious than that of anyone else either in this world or in the world to come. ²² And God has put all things under his feet and made him the supreme Head of the Church— ²³ which is his body, filled with himself, the Author and Giver of everything everywhere.”

You see, we may not be perfect, or completely holy, but we – Christ’s Church – are as close as it comes because Jesus has made us his body in the world. Did you get that – God is richer because of the Church! *God has been made rich because we who are Christ’s have been given to him!*

On Pentecost Sunday we celebrate the coming of the promised Holy Spirit and how, on that day, the Church was born. The Holy Spirit empowered the disciples to speak in all the languages that were represented at that Feast.

The good news of salvation was heard by all who were present and many were saved that day. And they went back to their countries and spread the gospel there. The spark that happened on Pentecost spread like wildfire and the Church was born.

But, the event of Jesus ascending into heaven – leaving earth after his 33 years here – is an important event to observe. We could argue that the spark that started the church actually happened right there up on that mountain before he ascended into the heavens.

Kevin Scott Fleming, whose article on Ascension was in the Presbyterian's Today magazine, says that "the Ascension marks a critical turning point ... it marks the passage of Jesus' message and mission to his disciples. What is to become of his story and work is now in their care and keeping. And the disciples will be able to continue Jesus' work with the promised gift of the Holy Spirit, that comes 10 days later."

Today, we continue to be the Church – the body of Christ. We are called and commissioned for the important work of carrying on his ministry and mission. Being a member of the Church, you see, is a very high and honorable place. Christ is counting on us to be obedient to his mission.

And Peter says when Jesus, the Chief Shepherd appears again, we will win the crown of glory – a crown that signifies our faithfulness to the one who is Lord of all – Jesus Christ, our Redeemer and King.

Let us stay the course – loving one another, teaching and preaching the good news of salvation through Christ, the Lamb of God, who gave his life for us. Let us forgive and teach others about forgiveness as he said. Let us live lives worthy of our call. Let us persevere even when it might seem that no one is listening or cares. Let us be full of Christ as we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to do ministry in the name of the one we belong to. Jesus, the Chief Shepherd.