

There are many prayers that only make it as far as the ceiling; they don't make it to heaven. And there are many prayers that do not accomplish anything; they have no effect on the world.

But in Ephesians 1, the Apostle Paul is absolutely confident that his prayers are not like that. He believes that his prayers are heard in heaven, and he expects the world to be changed as his prayers are answered. He prays ceaselessly, and he prays for specific changes in hearts and minds of the Ephesians. So what gives him that confidence? How can he be so sure that his prayers will be heard and answered? Don't you want to know what Paul knows? Don't you want to pray with that kind of confidence and hope? Don't you think that if your confidence in prayer grows, you will be more eager to pray and more faithful to pray?

So what do you know, Paul? Why do you pray the way you do?

What Paul knows, and what causes him to pray is found in vv.19-23, especially in v.20: since Jesus has ascended to heaven, your prayers are heard by God and effectual for changing the world. The prayers that you make in Jesus' name are Ascension-powered prayers. To put it negatively, if Jesus had not ascended into heaven, then none of your prayers would be heard, and nothing in all the world would change. You could save your breath for cooling your porridge.

As Paul prays in Eph. 1, he is depending on something that was *promised* in John 14:13: that when Jesus departed from the earth, He would ensure that His disciples' prayers were answered. Paul is depending on something that is *confirmed* in Romans 8:34: that Christ Jesus not only died and was raised, but that He is now presently at the right hand of God interceding for us. And Paul is depending on something that is *explained* in Hebrews 7:22-8:2: you have an eternal, sinless, perfect, powerful high priest interceding before God on your behalf, a high priest who ministers in the very presence of God, seated at the right hand of the throne of the majesty in heaven.

And so this is one of the greatest blessings of the Ascension: the prayers that you make to God through Jesus make it to heaven because Jesus made it to heaven. Your prayers are effectual, that is, they have power to change the world, because Jesus sits in the place of power, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion.

Now, all sermons on prayer have two main applications: pray more and pray better. And the easiest way to motivate Christians to pursue those applications is by guilt. In fact, if I wanted to guilt trip you all into praying more and praying better, I could just stand up here, say the word "prayer", and sit back down, and almost every single one of you would be able to fill in those applications based on that one-word sermon.

But here's the thing: you already know those applications! I don't need to make them for you again! And notice that I said that guilt was the easiest way to motivate people to pray. I didn't say it was the most effective or most edifying, because it isn't.

If I were to motivate you to pray more based on guilt, I would direct your eyes onto your track record. I would point you to your prayer history – how short it is, how small it is. Now, if I did that, it might be convicting, it might be somewhat effective in the short term, or it might not. But that's not what matters. What matters is *where your eyes are*. *Guilt* puts your eyes on *yourself*. The *gospel* puts your eyes on *Jesus*. And so instead of motivating you by fixing your eyes on your failures, I want to motivate you by fixing your eyes on Jesus and His glory. I want to remind you of where He is, and what He is doing.

Brothers and sisters, where is Jesus? The joy of Easter comes from the words of the angels at the empty tomb: He is not here, He is risen. Resurrection means that Jesus is not in the grave, which is good news, the best news. But at first glance, the Ascension seems to turn that good news into bad news again: He's not here, either. He's been lifted up into heaven. So is Ascension Day the day the church lost Jesus? Think of what that must have seemed like for the apostles: the day before the Ascension, if you want to talk to Jesus, He's right there. The day after the Ascension, it seems like He's far away.

But this is why it's important to see in the text that Jesus did not just ascend into heaven generically, but to a *specific* place in heaven. Jesus ascended to the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, the right hand of His Father. Jesus entered into the control room of the universe, the place of ultimate power and authority. And it was important for Jesus to ascend there, so that He would be above all rule and authority and power and dominion. Remember when Jesus was on earth, when He stood on trial before Pilate, who said: "Don't you know I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?" Jesus responded that Pilate's authority had actually been delegated to Pilate from higher up, from above. But we shouldn't miss the fact that for a time, Jesus was in fact under authority.

But the Ascension changed that forever. In the Ascension, Jesus was lifted up to the highest place. There is no rule or authority or power or dominion above Jesus! This means that when you come in prayer to Jesus, you will never hear Him say, "Let me check with my supervisor." You know how frustrating that is here on earth, when you have to work through the chain of command, spending days on hold, jumping through hoop after hoop, trying to talk to the one competent and capable person who can actually help you. The Ascension means that since you know Jesus, and since Jesus is at the very top, whenever you have a need or a problem or a request, you can go straight to the top. No phone menus, no mediators – you get to talk directly to the one who sits in the place of supreme authority at God's right hand. Because Jesus is in heaven, you have access to heaven.

So what is Jesus doing, there in the heavenly places? The short answer is that Jesus is running the world. He's ruling over everything. All things are under His feet. The Ascension bestowed great *honor* on Jesus, but it also meant that He was entrusted with great *power*. And it is this combination of access *and* authority that makes your prayers both heard *and* effective.

Jesus *is* a sympathetic friend. He listens. He cares. But if that's all He does, then prayer would be nothing more than therapy, just getting it off your chest. But is that all you're doing when you come before God on behalf of your friend who has cancer, or your family member who is walking away from the faith? Is that all Paul was doing when he prayed for the Ephesians that the eyes of their hearts would be enlightened and that they would know God's immeasurably great power?

Of course not! When you pray, you want things to change! You want God to act in power and might to bring deliverance, to bring healing, to bring salvation! And the only reason it makes sense to pray for these things in Jesus' name is that Jesus has ascended to heaven to take up the rule of the universe. This is why Christians look first to Jesus, not to politics, first to Jesus, not to education, first to Jesus, not to medicine. Jesus is in charge of all those powers and dominions; He's above them. It's not that they are worthless or that we don't need them; not at all! But without His blessing, they don't mean a thing; they can't help at all.

When I want your hands to do something, I address your head. When I want your feet to go somewhere, I talk to your head. I can talk to the hand all day, but if the head isn't listening, nothing happens. Jesus is the head over all things, and so whatever it is we want to be different about the world, we take it to Jesus, who was given to be the head when He ascended up to God's right hand.

This is the foundation to Paul's prayer for the Ephesians: He knows that his prayers ascend with Jesus into heaven. He knows that when Jesus hears, He has the power to change the world in response to the prayers of His people. And so as you worship the Christ who ascended on high and gave gifts to men, thank God for this gift: because Jesus was lifted up, God hears the prayers that you lift up in Jesus' name. And because Jesus rules from God's right hand, God changes the world in answer to our prayers.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*