

THE SECOND MOST POWERFUL FORCE IN THE UNIVERSE

Ephesians 1:16-23

¹⁶I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. ¹⁷I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. ¹⁸I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, ¹⁹and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength ²⁰he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, ²¹far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. ²²And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, ²³which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

They were about to become the targets of the second most powerful force in the universe. Forty days after Easter, Jesus' disciples met their Lord on top of a hill outside Jerusalem. They didn't know what to expect. I can't blame them. Jesus was always doing things you didn't expect. He fed 5000 people with one lunch. He raised the dead. He claimed to be God. But then he surrendered to an angry mob, took a beating from soldiers, and did nothing to prevent his execution. And then, his body disappeared. His tomb was empty. Then he showed up for dinner alive and well.

And that seemed like the happy ending. That's what the disciples thought, at least. They asked him, **"Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"** (Acts 1:6) Oh, Jesus, it will be great! With your wisdom, and your power to feed people. This is going to be a great kingdom! You can resurrect our dead soldiers, and you'll live forever. Maybe you can set up like eleven mini-thrones, and we'll be like your dukes or something! So, is it time, Jesus? You can't blame them, but once again, Jesus did something they didn't expect. He said this isn't the ending. This is the happy beginning, which means you've got work to do. **"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in Samaria and to the ends of the Earth."** (Acts 1:7-8)

ASCENSION

And with that, Jesus did the most unexpected thing. He flew. He went up until he punched a hole in the sky. Jesus ascended through endless ranks of angels. Hundreds of millions of Christians in heaven joined in a deafening roar. Trumpets blared. Crowns and jewels and a scepter, and the Prince of Heaven returned to his rightful throne.

But back on that hill. The disciples rubbed their necks in awkward silence. Two of the angels left the party and came back to help those poor disciples out. "You heard him. Go back to Jerusalem."

I wonder what they talked about as they went down the hill? Apparently, there was not going to be a kingdom in Israel and no mini-thrones. Plus, now they have this huge mission. *They* were supposed to be the ones to take the message of Jesus to the world. The world is a lot of people. And if that mission wasn't hard enough, they were about to become the target of the second-most powerful force in the universe. That brought them all kinds of trouble.

DISCIPLES VS. SIN DEATH & THE DEVIL

Don't get me wrong, seeing Jesus ascend was breathtaking, and they returned filled with joy. But before long, they felt the wrath of the second most powerful force on earth. You see, when you become a witness for Jesus, you become a target for all the forces of hell. At first, it was just teasing. Peter got up to preach, and the cynics said he was drunk. But then it got dangerous. Peter and John were arrested. When they wouldn't shut up, they were beaten. Then it happened again. It wasn't much better outside of Jerusalem. Spies would infiltrate Christian meetings and try to change their teachings. The devil tried everything. Ultimately those men who thought they might get a cushy job in Jesus' kingdom, some of them were exiled, many were crucified, and one was filleted.

When you consider the second most powerful force in the world, I bet it makes us all think the same question: "What's the most powerful force?" That's the question Jesus answers on Ascension day. Ascension doesn't get as much love as Christmas or Easter, not in this century. But it used to, back when more Christians got beheaded. Because on Ascension, Christians see their huge mission, we see that sin, death, and the devil combine to form the second most powerful force in the universe, and we learn the one thing that's stronger. On Ascension Day, Jesus said, "**You will receive power.**" (Acts 1:7)

YOU VS. SIN DEATH & THE DEVIL

Maybe you need a little bit of Jesus' power tonight. Perhaps you're feeling the wrath of the second most powerful force on earth. Lee was. Lee was a mentor of mine, a preacher. Like most of us, nobody ever threatened to cut off Lee's head. But that didn't mean he was immune to the effects of sin. One spring, Lee was planting tomatoes in his garden, when he got a headache—or really, when he got a brain tumor the size of a baseball. That was a hard summer, and before his tomatoes were ripe, Lee was gone. Why does that happen? Because Satan and sin and death are the second most powerful force in the universe.

I've felt that force. I'm thinking of the sins that give me fits. You know yours, the ones that you just can't quit. And you see the wreckage that causes in your life—or for sure the people around you know. Why does that happen? Why are millions of people looking for jobs? Why are addictions destroying families? Why do moms or dads leave their kids? Why are church doors closed? Why is there a worldwide pandemic? Because Satan and sin and death combine to form the second most powerful force in the universe.

THE MOST POWERFUL FORCE IN THE UNIVERSE

We need to know about the most potent force. We need an ascension lesson. Did you know that the Apostle Paul prayed just that? He prayed for people to know the power of our ascended King Jesus. **"¹⁸ I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, ¹⁹ and his incomparably great power for us who believe."** (Ephesians 1:18-19) Jesus' power isn't just great; it's **incomparably great power.**" The second most powerful force isn't even close to as strong as Jesus.

And here's the evidence. **"That power is the same as the mighty strength ²⁰ he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, ²¹ far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come."** If anyone thinks that death is stronger than Jesus, perhaps they should check his tomb. He rose from the dead! If anyone thinks the devil is stronger than Jesus, perhaps they should recall his Ascension, when God raised him above everyone, even the devil. If you believe that your sin is too big for Jesus, then don't forget that the King of heaven once lived on earth. He set aside his divine power and wore a crown of thorns. He died. Not to see

what it's like, but to take up your sin and drop it in the boundless depths of the mercy of God. And now that crucified, living, and ascended King, well now...

"God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church." It's a good thing we don't do this anymore, but in the old days, kings were accustomed to putting their feet on heads. When one King conquered another, he would make the loser lie on the ground, and he'd put his foot on top of his head. Usually, he wouldn't squash him. But he wanted everyone to know, "From now on, you do what I want."

God placed all things under Jesus' feet, even sin and death and the devil. However you are feeling their power, know that Jesus has it under his feet. And usually, he doesn't squash it. Usually, he says, "From now on, you do what I want." If Jesus wants cancer to die, it will. And if he wants it to bring you to heaven, it will. If Jesus wants your job search to end, it will. And if he wants it to clarify your priorities, it will. If Jesus wants your pain to stop, it will. And if he wants your pain to make you yearn for heaven, it will. Jesus is the most powerful force in the universe, and he uses his power for you.

PAUL IN EPHEBUS

Which makes you think, why is Paul praying? If Jesus is the King, he'll do what he wants. That's true, but Paul prayed because of his relationship with the Ephesians, and with Jesus.

Paul was close with the Ephesians. He started churches all over modern-day Turkey and Greece, but he spent the most time in Ephesus. When he left, there were tears and heartache and a lot of love.

But things weren't always warm and fuzzy. Paul started preaching in Jewish synagogues, but they wouldn't trust him. So Paul took his message to the city. For two years, he was a public witness for Jesus, and many people believed, which was dangerous. Satan hated it. Their society hated it. Because Paul was a target for the second most powerful force in the universe.

A RIOT

Ephesus was not primarily a secular city. It was the world headquarters for the worship of the goddess Artemis. They even called her Artemis of the Ephesians. The temple of Artemis was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. And Jesus was a threat to all that. Specifically, he was a threat to the businesses that made money off the tourists.

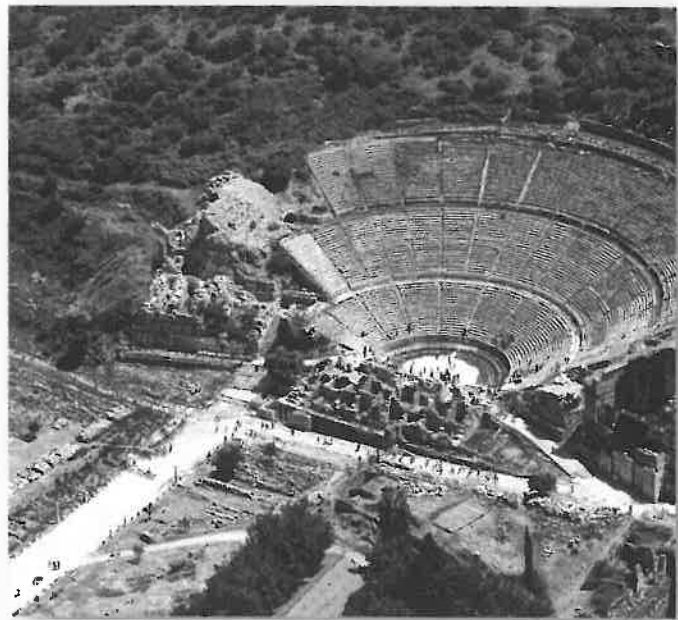
So they got the whole city together in their vast theater. They accused Paul of hating their goddess, ruining their city. Whenever anyone tried to explain, they would just shout, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" Can you imagine being a witness for Jesus on that stage?



Temple of Artemis at Ephesus

You can still stand on that stage if you make it to the west coast of Turkey. The city is in ruins, but the theater is still there. And from the theater you can look down a road that leads to the harbor, it's called Harbor Street. In the middle of that road, two or three generations after the Apostle Paul, the Ephesians built five statues on five pillars. The statues are gone, but the pillars are still there. They were not statues of Artemis. They were statues of the four men who wrote Jesus' story; Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and the fifth statue was for a cross. The crowd shouted about Artemis, but their grandchildren loved Jesus. And those grandkids are in heaven.

How did that happen? Well, it turns out that Satan and society and idols, they look tough, but they're no match for the King of Heaven. And it turns out that Paul was not only encouraged by the most powerful force in the universe. He was *part* of it.



Theater in Ephesus

PART OF JESUS

Jesus does not unleash his power with swords or cannons. No, Jesus uses witnesses; witnesses like Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, witnesses like Paul; witnesses like grandmas and grandpas from Ephesus who told their children about Jesus. You see, witnesses are part of Jesus' power. Look what Paul said about the church. **"God placed all things under [Jesus] feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way."** (Ephesians 1:22-23). Jesus is the one who fills everything in every way. He is everywhere, and he can do everything. But who fills up Jesus? The church.

The disciples filled Jerusalem with Jesus. Paul filled Ephesus with Jesus. Now it's our turn. You are part of the most powerful force in the universe. So what's your part?

WHAT WILL YOU DO?

Not everyone can be a missionary in a far off land, but some of you can. Not everyone can read Bible stories to children, but some of you can. Not everyone can give huge financial checks to God's church, but some of you can. Not everyone can call your loved ones to encourage them, but you can. Edward Hale once said, *"I am only one, but I am still one. I cannot do everything, but I can still do something. What I can do, I ought to do. And what I ought to do, by the grace of God, I shall do."* I should warn you, though, if you do witness for Jesus, that will immediately make you a target for all the forces of hell and our increasingly secular society. But, hey, that's only the second-most powerful force in the universe.

Amen.