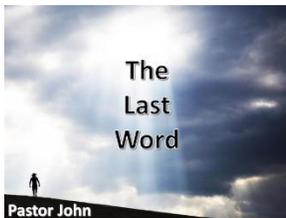


"The Last Word"

November 26, 2017

Ephesians 1: 15-23

¹⁵ I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason ¹⁶ I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. ¹⁷ I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, ¹⁸ so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. ²⁰ God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. ²² And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.



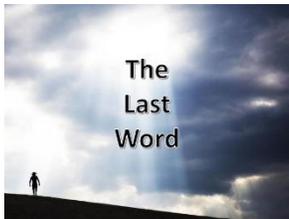
Today we come to the close of "The Good News About Death" series. To begin the series we looked at the hope we have in our eternal life that lies just on the other side of the curtain.

Then the next week we looked at grieving with hope as we remain prepared in this life. And last week we looked at how we are called to count and live each day as if that day were all that mattered. Today we conclude our series by looking at the power and authority of Christ, realizing that no matter what life or even death may bring, that Jesus Christ always has the final word. Let us pray.

As we begin today, I invite all the parents in the audience to think about when your children were born. In particular, I want to draw you back to the anticipation you had as you waited for your baby to speak their first words. Can you remember the waiting for the first “mommy” or “daddy” to escape those little lips? As I



think back on that season of waiting for each of our children to finally talk, I have to admit that I was hoping “Daddy” was the first word out of Matthew’s or Samuel’s or Abby’s mouth. To be honest, I cannot remember what any of my children’s first words were. But I am pretty sure my wife Kristin could tell you.

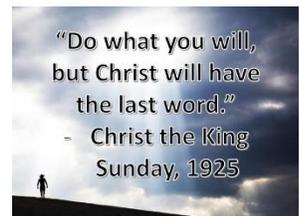


As we think about words, most of the words we speak are soon forgotten and most of the rest are of little lasting value or impact. Just think about the hundreds of texts and emails and polite little conversations that you have every week. While it is true that on occasion we will offer some prophetically wonderful and amazing words of wisdom or insight that our child or coworker or spouse will remember forever, these occasions are very few and are very far in between. While we do often try and get the last word in in our conversations and especially in our arguments, we will only have one chance to say our last words. I hope that for each of us, when our time draws to an end, that we will be surrounded by family and friends, able to share just the words we want to share with exactly whom we want to share them. Then these last words will be how we are remembered. Given the chance, we all want to choose our last words carefully. This leads me to the question: Have you ever thought about what you want your last words to be? This answer speaks of the way we want to be known and remembered.

Many famous people have last words that are well-remembered. The great evangelist Henry Ward Beecher used his last breath to say, "Now comes the mystery". John Wesley, the founder of our Methodist faith, spent his last breath saying, "Best of all, God is with us". And Jesus, from the cross, said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" as He breathed His last breath. These are all great words to be remembered by. Again, what final words do you hope to be remembered by?

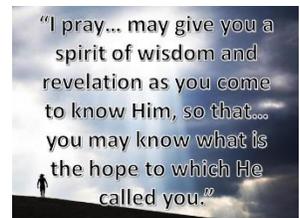


In the Christian calendar, today is Christ the King Sunday. It is the final day of the Christian year. On the day that Christ the King Sunday was first celebrated, the church was trying to get in the last word. The year was 1925 and the world was reeling from the effects of World War I. Dictators were rising up in some countries and in other countries there was a general movement to secularize the government. Both sides of the political spectrum were doing all they could to weaken the influence of religion in society and on the government. In the creation of this special Sunday, in response to the shifting tides that sought to weaken Christianity and therefore the church, the church sent a bold statement out on the last Sunday of the Christian year, saying, "Do what you will, but Christ will have the last word". The church was saying that the things of the world, the decisions and choices leaders and people make, do not really matter. In the end, Jesus will have the last word. This is the message echoed in our passage for today from Ephesians. Paul is writing to bring hope to this church that is struggling amidst the chaos,

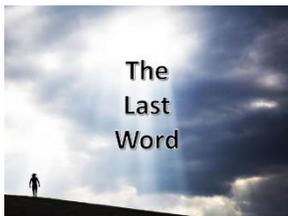


fear, illness, persecution, and uncertainty of the world around them. Do you ever feel like chaos, fear, illness, persecution, or uncertainty are swirling around you? Do you know people who feel like this? These words of hope and promise that Paul offers to the church in Ephesus are certainly words we need to hear today in our lives and in our world.

In verses seventeen and eighteen, Paul offers up this wonderful prayer for the Ephesians: *"I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, ... may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, ... you may know what is the hope to which he has called you"*. It is a prayer that we could use in



our day to day lives as well. We all need God's wisdom and for Him to revealed to us more and more as we seek to grow in Him. As God's truth takes root in our hearts, we come to know this hope of which Paul writes. It is the hope of eternal life. It is the ultimate good news about death. Death does not win. Death does not have the last word. Jesus does. On that day when we pass from this life into life eternal, in that moment, Jesus will welcome each of us into *"his glorious inheritance among the saints"*. He will say welcome home.



But in today's passage Paul is not relegating Jesus to being just to the one who helps us transition from this life into the next. It is not all about Jesus being *"seated at his right hand in the heavenly places"*. The text today from Ephesians is also about how Jesus walks with us in the here and now as we live out our days here on earth. Jesus' kingship here on earth transforms us into new creations and it reworks our

understanding of life and death. Christ's place in eternity as Lord and King demands our attention in the here and now. A story to illustrate:

Carl was a very rich man who owned a great estate. One of his favorite pastimes was riding horseback through his valley, looking at everything he owned and congratulating himself on his great wealth. One day, as Carl was riding along, he came up over a hill and, in the distance, saw one of his tenant farmers, an old man named Hans. It was lunch time, and Hans had set a little table under a shade tree and was getting ready to eat. But before he ate, he bowed his head and folded his hands in prayer to thank God for his food. Carl watched the old man as he prayed. Then he looked at his meal as he approached the old man. It was only a slice of coarse bread and a piece of cheese. With a sneer Carl said, "If that's all I had to eat, I wouldn't even bother to pray." Hans replied humbly, "It's enough, and I'm thankful that God has provided it."

Taken aback by the old man's answer, Carl turned his horse and prepared to ride away. But before he could leave, old Hans said, "Wait a minute. I need to tell you something. I had a dream last night. In my dream, I saw a beautiful scene, and then I heard a voice saying, `Tonight the richest man in the valley will die. Tonight, the richest man in the valley will die.'

"Poppycock!" said Carl as he rode off toward home. But as he was riding, the words of old Hans haunted him, "Tonight the richest man in the valley will die." Up to then he had felt quite well, but now he was beginning to experience pains in his chest. He wondered, "Could it possibly be true? Am I going to die

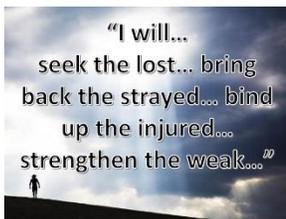
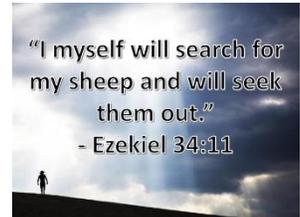
tonight?" When he reached home he called his doctor and told him of old Hans's dream and of the pains that he had been feeling. The doctor said, "Well, it doesn't sound like anything you ought to be concerned about, but just to put your mind at ease, I'll come over and examine you."

So the doctor did. After the examination was over he said, "Carl, you're as strong as a horse. There's no way you're going to die tonight." Carl said, "Well, I feel mighty foolish that I paid any attention to the old man's dream about the richest man in the valley dying tonight. But I just wanted to be certain."

So, reassured, Carl went to bed. The next morning there was a knock on his door, and the messenger said, "Carl, old Hans died last night." Truly, the richest man in the valley died last night.

Hans was not a man of wealth or position or status. He was a poor and humble man who recognized God's presence and provision in the simple, here and now of his daily life. He was grateful for whatever God would bless him with, even if it was just a meager meal. Each night when he laid his head down to rest, it was with the quiet assurance that God was with him. No matter what life could or would bring, Hans knew that Jesus was Lord of All. In the humble way that he chose to live his life, in the simple prayer that Hans offered for his food, in the sincere recognition of Jesus as all that he truly needed, Hans truly honored Christ as the one who sat on the throne of his heart in the here and now as well as on the throne in the life to come.

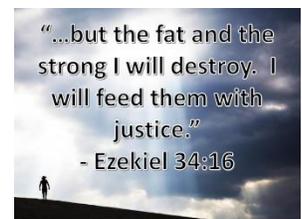
Ezekiel 34: 11-24 is also one of the lectionary readings for this week. The theme of this reading is that the Lord wants to be our good shepherd. Verse eleven begins with these words: *"Thus says the Lord God"*. Ezekiel then continues on to share exactly what the Lord says. Verse eleven continues with, *"I myself will search for me sheep and will seek them out"*. Ezekiel is writing at the end of the time of exile in Babylon and the sheep are scattered. The people are discouraged and broken. In verses twelve through fifteen, the Lord promises to gather up His sheep and to bring them to *"good pastures"* where they will lie down and be protected. I think this is what Hans felt in the story I shared earlier – safe, secure, loved. I think this is also what we feel when life is good, when God is looking down lovingly on us, the sheep of His pasture. This is a good place to be. But the passage from Ezekiel does not end here.



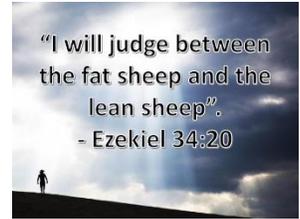
In verse sixteen, the Lord God says, *"I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak"*. This is the loving, kind,

compassionate, caring God we want to know. This is who we want God to be for us and for all people. We want our God to seek the least and the lost and to redeem and restore their lives. But even this is not the last word. Verse sixteen continues. At the end of this verse, God says, *"...but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice"*.

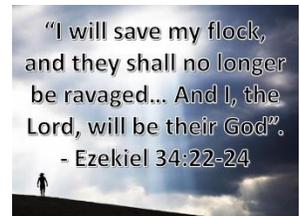
You see, these sheep became fat and strong by preying on the weak, by taking from the poor and powerless. And this is still the way of the world, is it not? It is no wonder God seeks to bring justice.



In verse twenty, God promises, *"I will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep"*. This is an ominous promise indeed. One day judgment will come. In the story I shared earlier, it was revealed in the dream, when the voice proclaimed, *"Tonight, the richest man in the valley will die."* Hans was very rich in the things of God. He was one of the lean sheep that went to the green grasses on the other side of the curtain, resting forever in God's light and love. Carl, on the other hand, was rich in the things of this world. He enjoyed riding about, congratulating himself on his great wealth. He ridiculed Hans' simple faith and honest thanks for the modest blessings that God had given to him. Carl was one of the fat sheep. And it ate at Carl that he might die that night. He was asking himself the question, what then? Is this the end? His last word was much different than Hans' last word. Hans clung to the fact that Jesus has the last word. And it was a word that Hans looked forward to hearing.

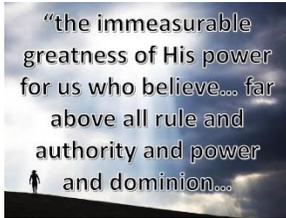


The passage from Ezekiel 34 ends with these words of hope: *"I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged... And I, the Lord, will be their God"*. It is a day we long for. One day when God restores and redeems all of His sheep, then all will be right in the world. This will be the last word. All things will be made new. Christ will reign forever.



Within this hope, we live today as well. Within this hope, we live tomorrow and the day after that. Christ reigns today because today is part of forever. Christ will reign tomorrow

because that is also part of forever. The forever reign of Christ is what Paul is writing of in our passage from Ephesians when he writes that in Jesus is *"the*

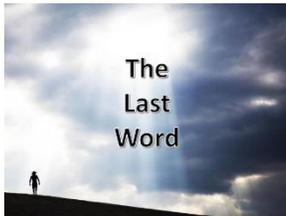
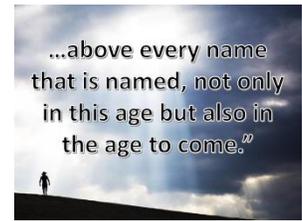


immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far

above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but

also in the age to come". He is now and forever, the first

and the last, the beginning and the end. All things are under Jesus' power and authority, in this age and in the age to come.



It is in this age that Christ will be our King when we sit in the waiting room, praying for our loved one to have a successful surgery. Christ will be our King when we wait day after day

for the test results. Christ will be our King as we hear of the mass shootings and the wars and the acts of terrorism. Christ will be our King in the darkness of this world. And Christ will be our King when the darkness is inside of us, when the depression wells up or when our dream is shattered or in the moments when the doubt seems to be winning the day or when we cannot imagine that anything can ever fill that hole that is within us. It is then that Christ will speak words of hope and love and compassion into our lives. It is then that we will feel His presence. Because Christ is the King, He will always have the last word.

This is the great “now-and-not-yet” of our faith. As we walk with Christ as our shepherd and King in this life, we celebrate a victory that the world cannot see. We hold tightly to a hope that defies every instinct, every form of logic. We trust in the King enthroned on a cross. There is nothing this world can bring that has not already been defeated. There is no power greater than His power. Christ is the last word. Christ will be the last word. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) What experiences in your life have led to a deeper trust in Christ as your King and shepherd? What “last words” has Jesus left you with?
- 2) What present situation in your life (or in the life of one you love) needs to know Christ as King and shepherd? Pray for Christ’s intervention!
- 3) How can you share words of hope and restoration with another today?