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The Ascension of Our Lord

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHRIST'S ASCENSION

The prisoner languished in the dungeon deep beneath the castle. All was dark except for a single beam of light that thrust down from a narrow air shaft high above him. Positioning himself beneath the shaft and looking up he could not see much during the daytime. The light was too bright. But during the nighttime he could stand under it and look up and see a couple of stars. Oh the stars! The sight of them set his heart racing. The stars – he imagined being out in the wide open where he could take in the whole canopy of stars from horizon to horizon. It meant the hope of freedom. One day, the ability to breathe and move and live as freely as any prince or king.

Dear believer, foreigner and in some ways prisoner in this world, can you glance up and see the stars? The shaft that offers you a glimpse of freedom is Christ's ascension into heaven. Christ's ascension revives your anticipation of some day, some day, when you can breathe and move and live as freely as any king in the land of the King of kings.

Acts chapter one tells us that about 40 days after Jesus rose from the dead He ascended into heaven. He visibly, bodily, went up into the sky in the presence of His disciples until a cloud came and covered Him from their sight. From then to this day He has no longer been visible to us as He had been for those 33 years of His earthly life.

To where did He ascend? The Bible says He ascended to the right hand of God. Do not think of Him sitting on a chair at God's right side. Rather, the right hand of God is an expression meaning the position of all power and authority. There is even a passage in the book of Isaiah that calls Jesus the right hand of God.

Here's the thing. Jesus had no need for Himself to receive the position of all power and authority from His Father. As true God, Jesus always had all power and authority before the world was ever created. So why this grandiose ascension into heaven? Because this time Jesus was being exalted to the right hand of God as a man, receiving all authority in heaven and on earth as a man. Imagine the relief you'd feel to walk into a courtroom and the judge is your brother. Imagine you're in a town in Ukraine surrounded by a Russian army, and you find out the army commander is your cousin.

What relief, what joy, what peace is ours and to anyone who trusts in Jesus! Our Brother, the one in charge! And as our all-powerful brother, He paved the way to heaven for us, Jesus promises: *In my Father's house there are many rooms. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that*

you also may be where I am. As Jesus ascended into heaven, so will we on the Last Day. The Bible says we will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.

Imagine if Jesus had not ascended visibly into heaven – there'd be no demonstrable way of knowing that His work of redeeming us had been completed. It's like the way He showed Himself to so many people to prove He had actually risen from the grave. You see, Jesus didn't merely fade away after that as though nothing had been accomplished, as though nothing had changed. Jesus ascended like a champion being lifted up on people's shoulders, the Bible says, even to the cheering shouts of the angels. He visibly ascended as a clear indicator that His work of redeeming you is finished. God will receive you into heaven too. All is well.

The fact that Jesus has ascended into heaven, do we tend to live our lives with Jesus out of sight and therefore out of mind? Sometimes our behavior can even get not so pretty - harsh, excessive, perverse even as though Jesus is long gone. There's only here and now. Yet we end up alone, alone in our dungeon of guilt like a prisoner awaiting the judgment. We realize we don't deserve anyone's sympathy and yet no one else knows our anxiety, our sorrow, and the walls of confusion pressing in. We sit there alone, unable to undo the damage, unable to change our circumstances, to change ourselves. And so we tragically languish in the lonely darkness as a precursor to that outer darkness where Jesus says there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

But now, dear believer, glance up at the stars. Your Christ has ascended into heaven - ascended high above all guilt and fear, far above all contorted emotions and life messes, far above satan and hell and every dark power, far above this world and all its cruel realities. And by His all-powerful forgiveness He whisks you up there with Him. He has redeemed you out of this world, to Himself, away from every sorrow where grace and mercy wash over you and refresh you in His presence, where you live and rule alongside Him as He governs all things in such a way that it is all aimed at bringing you more firmly, more richly into your eternal salvation.

Imagine if Jesus had never ascended into heaven - if He had remained here on earth in His humble, non-exalted mode, where He was in one physical place at a time not exerting His full power or glory. If He had given the Great Commission to His followers to go and make disciples of all nations, He could not have backed it with this promise: Surely I am with you always to the very end of the age. But from the right hand of God He can make that promise.

From God's right hand He is also able to pour out the Holy Spirit to back His Gospel message with power even as He did on the day of Pentecost. Had Jesus not ascended into heaven, His Gospel would have stayed local. It would not have gone global, nor would you ever have heard about it. But from God's right hand, Jesus governed things, every detail of earthly events, in such a way that He made sure His Gospel message reached you. From God's right hand He personally speaks to you even now through His Word. Wherever you are on this planet He visits you and gives you Himself, body and blood, in the Sacrament.

From God's right hand He keeps pouring forth the Holy Spirit through the Gospel to work in your heart even now, to convince you of His mercy and salvation, to strengthen your resolve to

trust Him, to enlighten your understanding of His Word, and in the midst of your suffering to enrich you with corresponding spiritual gifts gained through your suffering so that you may serve Him with an ever fuller spiritual life.

Next Sunday is the Festival of Holy Pentecost. Along with Christmas and Easter it is the third major festival of the Christian calendar. But Pentecost would not have happened if there had been no ascension. So today we celebrate the ascension of our Lord. Just like anything else Jesus did, the ascension was not for Himself, it was for us and for our salvation.