

Ascending to Take Captivity Captive

Ascension Day – 05/09/24 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Psalm 68:18 Pastor Keith Besel

[A literal translation from the original Hebrew, where King David prophesies of the ascended Christ and says,]

“You have ascended to the heights to take captive captivity; You received gifts among men and even the angry/stubborn ones, so that Yahweh God dwells there.”

Introduction

✘ Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed. Alleluia!*

✘ For centuries this festival; this holy day for the Christian Church called *Ascension Day* was included as one of the seven most important days for us Christians to remember; to set aside for worship. In case you're curious, those seven holy days are: 1) Christmas Day, 2) Epiphany, 3) Good Friday, 4) Palm Sunday, 5) Easter, 6) Ascension Day and 7) the Day of Pentecost.

➔ Sadly though, within the last 50 or so years, Ascension Day has almost dropped off of the list so that most churches don't even gather for worship anymore. Why? The short answer is probably because we've become “too busy” to gather on a Thursday evening, especially to remember an event that is so easily summed up in only one sentence in both the Apostles' and the Nicene Creeds: “He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.”

✘ For many Christians, that's all they know about Christ's ascension and that's all they think they need to know about it. “It's certainly not worthy of missing out on my Thursday evening TV or getting ready for school or work tomorrow.” At least that's what goes through many people's minds regarding this day.

I. “You ascended on high...”

✘ But I believe that we in the Church of Christ have done ourselves a great disservice by allowing this holiday to become less “holy”. In fact, I would say that because we have not taught believers why Christ's ascension is so important to our faith; why it gives us such a great cause for celebration, then we have allowed ourselves and our fellow saints to be taken captive by our own earthly desires and priorities, as well as the Devil's favorite weapons of apprehension and laziness of faith so that this wonderful day for celebration is now nothing more than a minor blip in the lives of Christ's people.

➔ But the great king and prophet, King David would say otherwise. He foretold the Promised Messiah's ascension “to the heights” of heaven some 1100 years before it ever took place here in verse 18 of this processional hymn; teaching us as well, the “why” of its significance.

✘ Martin Luther, who lived at a time when Ascension Day was absolutely a major festival of the Church, latched onto David's words here in Psalm 68:18 and he preached a wonderful sermon on it. He said that David shows us here about both “the power and the fruit of Christ's ascension, for our comfort and well-being. It is for our sakes,” says Luther, “so that we do not become lax and indolent (i.e. idle) like carnal-minded people...”.¹

➔ In fact, I appreciate Luther's sermon so much that I actually considered just reading it to you here tonight, but it is, after all 13 pages long; at least twice, if not three times longer the sermons you're used to hearing now today. So I decided instead to share many of Luther's key points about Christ's ascension that David was pointing us believers to see and celebrate.

¹ *Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, vol.6, Baker Books, © 2000, pgs 116-125.

- He preached his sermon on Ascension Day, 1534 in the parish church of Wittenberg, Germany, where he served as their pastor for 24 years.
- ✘ The temptation, as Luther says, is for us to hear the story of Jesus ascending to heaven in human flesh, as we heard it earlier in both our Second Reading from Acts, chapter one and in our Gospel Reading from Luke, chapter 24, and think that this occurred only for the sake of Jesus and not for us – so that He could finally return to heaven, from where He came before His birth.
 - We might wonder, “What good is it to me that Jesus ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God”, because after all, I’m still here on earth. I’m still facing great tribulation and distress while Jesus now sits on His throne.
- ✘ But David, the great earthly king, is pointing God’s people of his day forward – and you and me, as God’s people both backward and forward, to see that Jesus “ascended to the heights” – that is to heaven, to both occupy and establish a new and everlasting Kingdom.
 - Luther says, “This is part of the story, and it is imperative to know it” because Jesus’ kingdom must be understood as entirely different “from all other kingdoms on earth.” Other kings set their thrones in castles, cities, countries, among people on earth; but this King sets His throne in the heights at the right hand of majesty in heaven, where He governs for eternity, just as Psalm 45:6 declares, “Your throne O God, is forever.”
- ✘ So, it would not have been right or appropriate for Jesus to take up His eternal throne here on earth, for the day will come says Hebrews 1:11, when the earth “will perish” and “wear out like a garment”, but God “will remain.” For Jesus is “the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb. 13:8).
 - That’s why Jesus, as King must reign “on high” with His Father, at His right hand, with the Holy Spirit, to reign, as 1 Peter 3:22 says, “with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to Him.”

II. “...taking captive captivity”

- ✘ But David highlights a truth that is often missed or not even known by many of us Christians when he says that the Christ “ascended to the heights to take captive captivity...”. Let’s see if we can unpack that phrase.
 - What sort of captivity; what kind of prison is David teaching us about here? The captivity he’s talking about is how all people of all times are held in captivity by sin, death and hell.
 - Luther uses an example from his time in the 1500s when punishment and prison were much different than today. He said, “A public magistrate throws a person into prison, or the executioner ties up a person in order to lead him out and hang him on the gallows or cut off his head. But before God, captivity means that sin has ensnared us, that death, hell, and the devil have taken us captive, and we are under their dominion. It is of this great and extraordinary captivity that David is speaking here when he says, The King in heaven, Christ, has dealt with this captivity, has taken sin captive, [obliterated] death, and destroyed hell. Sin, death, devil and hell had taken us captive; but Christ has in turn taken them captive. He has seized and taken captive those that had taken us captive. ... He takes my captivity captive, intercepts my hangman, interdicts my sins, exterminates my death, damns my hell.”
- ✘ To do this Jesus had to ascend and take up His throne. And at the very same time, in order to prepare the courts of heaven for His arrival, Revelation 12:7-9 says that “war arose in heaven, Michael (Jesus’ general) “and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan,

the deceiver of the whole world – he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.” You see, at Christ’s ascension, Satan’s power was eternally crushed. He is now held captive by Jesus, our Victor and King.

✘ So I hope you see folks, as Luther says, this was not just a happy time of “child’s play” for Jesus. Nor was His time on earth just “inconsequential work”. No, this was where and when Jesus “ensnared man’s perpetual enemies and captors, the devil who had taken the entire world captive.” Jesus not only conquered them at the cross and in His resurrection, but “He imprisoned them, and the end result is that even though sin and the devil diametrically oppose me and want to torment me, nevertheless, when (you and) I cling to Christ, they cannot overcome [us]!”

→ Oh, what a comfort! What a relief right? But Luther warns that this does not give us the excuse, while we remain here on earth, to think that we can just become lazy in our faith since Jesus has taken our captors captive. “For if you truly believe in Christ,” Luther says, “as the text says, you also believe that He has ascended into heaven and has led captivity captive” (which includes even your every day sinful desires).

→ So, when we are tempted into sin, Luther suggests that you and I say, “Sin, your accusation means nothing to me; I believe in Him who sits above at the right hand of God and has taken you captive. For this reason, I know of no sin but that which has been taken captive and is already condemned and damned before God and will have its head chopped off at the end of the world. I know you (Sin) would like to drive me into depression, into despair, into foolhardiness, into idolatry; but you have no claim on me. You have been taken captive, your tyranny is done with, your dominion is at an end” right now in my life today and forevermore!

III. “...receiving gifts among men...”

✘ Now, Martin Luther doesn’t address the last phrase in verse 18 that says of Jesus – again in the Hebrew, “You received gifts among men and even the angry/stubborn ones so that Yahweh God dwells there.”

→ The ancient language makes this a bit difficult to understand. So, let me help you out, because it is equally rich with meaning for all of us Christians today.

✘ Remember, Christ’s ascension, while it was a departure of Jesus to those here on earth who were watching Him physically leave their presence, from the heavenly side of things this was the risen and victorious Christ’s triumphal procession to His rightful place on God’s eternal throne.

→ But as we’ve already made clear, what the Victor gained over the powers of darkness and of death, He did not gain just to boost His own ego, but instead He did it all for you and me and all mankind. These “gifts among men” that David refers to are not gifts that the men; that any human beings are giving to Him, but they are His gifts; the gifts that He accomplished; that He won as the spoils of His victory over sin, death and Satan at the cross and at the empty tomb.

→ These are the gifts that Jesus gained while He was “among” us here on earth, including while He was among the “angry, stubborn ones” that rejected Him and nailed Him to the cross.

✘ These gifts are the gifts of His grace, won by His sacrifice in our place; the gifts of forgiveness and victory over death; the promise of eternal salvation for all who humble themselves before Him in faith, confessing their sin and believing that they are saved only Jesus’ grace; only by faith in Him and not by their own works.

→ These are the gifts of the Holy Spirit, given to us at our baptism; the assurance that even as Jesus sits at the right hand of God He is absolutely “dwelling here” with us, as David says. He dwells here in His Spirit. He dwells physically with us as He feeds us His true body and His true blood in Holy Communion; filling us here at this altar with His strength; His guidance and all that

we need to endure the challenges of this earthly life; all that we need to serve Him in sharing His Word and serving all people in His saving name.

Conclusion

✘ All of this, dear friends, serves you and me whenever we might get discouraged, or doubt our faith or question Christ's presence with us now that He has ascended to heaven. It assures us that Jesus, at His ascension has now opened up the prison-house of death, which held us captive with no possible exit if we were on our own.

➔ Today we celebrate; today we praise our Savior because He has burst the brazen doors. He has broken to bits the iron bolts of sin and death; He has opened wide the gates of hell itself just as Jesus declares in Revelation 1:18, "I have the keys of Death and Hades."

✘ "Let this suffice for now concerning Christ's ascension and kingdom and how we are to understand this correctly," says Luther. "...Though sin still ensnares us, we cling to the King, our Lord Jesus Christ, who has taken captivity captive and won for us the victory. To this same everlasting King, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, be praise and thanks forever."

➔ Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed. Alleluia! Amen.*