

# **The Ascension of Jesus Christ a Sure Foundation of Our Faith**

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## **Ascension Day**

{Prayer}

Oh Jesus, how glorious is your name in all the earth! For our redemption you not only descended into the lowest places of the earth, but also ascended with divine majesty over the heaven of heavens. As you did not come into this world poor and miserable for your sake, so you also did not leave it in glory and honor for your sake; as you did not struggle for yourself, so you were also not victorious for yourself but for us whose sins you bore and whose righteousness you became. That is why you still make known your great deeds to men; that is why you have again today given us the great grace of being able to gather and hear of your victory.

Gracious, universal, and glorious Savior, let not today's preaching of your glory be in vain. Let everyone know that he shares in your being received into heaven and seated at the right hand of the Father. Oh Lord Jesus, all of us are already victorious with you because you are our head and the Lord of our salvation. Drive away our unbelief which supposes that your ascension does not concern us. Give us that faith, which says not only when you hung on the cross but also how that you sit on your throne. You are mine! Hear us, King of heaven and King of sinners for your own sake. Amen.

In the Ascended Christ, dear hearers.

We are gathered here before God to commemorate a great, precious, and glorious fact. Today we celebrate the coronation of our King of grace, Jesus Christ. I mean the festival of the glorious ascension.

It would be reasonable that today everyone who knows that he is baptized into this great Lord and Savior should joyfully enter and leave the house of the Lord.

Yes, it should be reasonable, because we find the believers of the Old Covenant happily praising God when they merely foresaw this day in the spirit. David cries out, "O clap your hands, all ye people; shout unto God with the voice of triumph. God is gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet. Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises unto our King, sing praises. For God is the King of all the earth; sing ye praises with understanding. God reigneth over the heathen; God sitteth upon the throne of his holiness." (Psalm 47:1,5-8).

The author of the 68th Psalm also rejoices and says, "The chariots of God are twenty thousand, even thousands of angels; the Lord is among them, as in Sinai, in the holy place. Thou hast ascended on high, thou hast led captivity captive; thou hast received gifts for men, yea, for the rebellious also, that the Lord God might dwell among them. Blessed be the Lord, who daily loadeth us with benefits, even the God of our salvation. Selah. He that is our God is the God of salvation; and unto God the Lord belong the issues from death. Sing unto God, ye kingdoms of the earth; O sing praises unto the Lord; Selah; to him that rideth upon the heavens of heavens. Ascribe ye strength unto God; his excellency is over Israel and his strength is in the clouds. Blessed be God." (Psalm 68:17-20,32,33a,34,35c).

You see, thus believing Israel rejoiced when it thought of the future ascension of the Messiah. The Church of the Old Testament really believed that his ascension was something which did not concern only Christ but all redeemed, because it was the keystone, the brilliant crown, of the entire work of redemption.

And so it is, if we consider the ascension of Christ only as the happy conclusion of his being freed from all suffering, all disgrace, all imperfection, all persecution and, as it were, receiving the reward for his faithfulness unto death, we would consider it without its real profit. We must in faith gaze after the Ascended as our *Redeemer*. We must see ourselves triumphing in him and make his whole work the foundation of a joyful faith. Then, and only then, do we enjoy the blessed fruit which it should bring us.

*Scripture text: Mark 16:14-20. Afterward he appeared unto the eleven as they sat at meat, and upbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believed not them which had seen him after he was risen. And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned. And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover. So then after the Lord had spoken unto them he was received up into heaven and sat on the right hand of God. And they went forth, and preached every where, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following. Amen.*

The Gospel just read briefly relates the story of Christ from his resurrection until his entrance into glory. As the heart of all commissions, which the Lord gave the apostles in this time, Mark mentions this, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, but he that believeth not shall be damned." Believe in me is the last testament of Christ, which at his departure he left behind for all men; he afterwards immediately confirmed and sealed it with his glorious ascension. Therefore, consider with me today:

## **THE ASCENSION OF CHRIST A SURE FOUNDATION OF OUR FAITH.**

1. It Bases Our Faith on the Perfect Deliverance from All our Enemies, and,
2. It Bases Our Faith on the Continual Gracious Presence of Christ with His Congregation.

### **[1. It Bases Our Faith on the Perfect Deliverance from All our Enemies]**

Through the fall of our first parents all men have come under the power of three great enemies; these are sin, the Law, and death. Men became subject to the authority of sin. The Law pronounced the sentence of damnation; death obtained the power to swallow them up. These three enemies are most closely united with each other. They bind men as with one chain. The apostle describes this in the words, "The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law." (I Cor 15:56). First, sin makes death the king of terrors; the Law then gives sin the power to condemn us.

No human power was able to conquer these foes. Man had become their powerless, defenseless prisoner. If God had not taken pity on men, they would have been lost. However, the Son of God

undertook the astonishing task of freeing them from their prison. And what did he do: He was made sin for us, submitted to the Law in our stead, and sprang into the jaws of death for us. He took the sins of the whole world upon himself. He fulfilled the Law and thereby earned for us a perfect righteousness. He permitted death to swallow him up and conquer him through the power of his almighty life.

When Christ rose victoriously from the dead, the entire fallen world triumphed with him, the sins of all men were erased, eternal righteousness won, hell destroyed, death disarmed, life and immortality brought to light, and deliverance by God the Father himself sealed to all men in the most wonderful manner. All our enemies lay at the feet of him who for us had entered the arena against them.

Only one thing remained if Christ should be our perfect Savior. After he had defeated all our enemies, he had to be installed as their absolute Lord. The scepter of omnipotence must be given him; he must be crowned with heavenly glory; he must ascend the throne of divine majesty. The prophecy of the Second Psalm must be fulfilled, where the heavenly Father says, "Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion. Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession. Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron, thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel." (Psalm 2:6,8,9).

And this took place through Christ's glorious ascension and sitting at the right hand of the Father, which followed and was connected with it. Christ as victor then held not only a public triumphal procession through the gates of heaven, but he also became the absolute Lord over sin, the Law, death, the devil, and hell. For that reason he ascended in divine splendor from the very place where in bloody sweat he waged his severest conflict against these enemies, the Mount of Olives.

If we want to consider the ascension of Christ correctly, we must view Christ as the substitute and forerunner of the whole human race. David was a prototype when he killed the giant Goliath. As all Israel was delivered from the Philistines through the victory of David, so all sinners were made lords with Christ over sin, the Law, and death through his triumphant ascension. This is expressed in the 68th Psalm, "Thou hast ascended on high, thou hast led captivity captive; thou hast received gifts for men, yea, for the rebellious also." (Vv. 4-6).

As we all are resurrected in Christ and justified by God in him, so we have also already ascended with Christ into heaven and become lords over all our enemies in him. And as certainly as sin can no longer harm Christ, no law condemn him, no death rule over him, so certainly are we also freed from their prison and translated into a heavenly life with him, if only we believe it with our whole heart.

This shows us what a secure basis we have for a joyful faith in the ascension of Christ. If we do not want to believe that sin, the Law, and death lie at our feet, we must deny completely the ascension of Christ, deny that he, who ascended into heaven, is our Savior, our Redeemer, our Brother, our Head, our Lord, deny that his labors for us have such a wonderful result. If our sins wish to worry us, we should not let them cause us to despair, but look in faith to the ascension of Christ and say: Sin you are conquered; you will not conquer me anew but as my captive you should make me cling only the more firmly to my Savior. He is ascended into

heaven and I with him, because I lay hold of him with the hand of faith and am baptized in his name.

If the Law wants to condemn us, we should ignore its sentence and say: You are fulfilled; your demands are completely satisfied. God's Son subjected himself for me; you have lost all your power to subjugate me, for there is nothing with which you can reproach me; yes, he has ascended to the highest throne and is now your Lord. I do not receive my sentence from you but from him, and it is: Grace, mercy, forgiveness!

If death wants to frighten us and hell open its jaws for us, we do not have to fear; through Christ's ascension they have now become empty phantoms. Confidently we can and should mock them and say, "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? But thanks be to God which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

(I Cor 15:54,55,57).

## **[2. It Bases Our Faith on the Continual Gracious Presence of Christ with His Congregation]**

Furthermore, the ascension of Christ also confirms our faith in the continual gracious presence of Christ with his congregation. And this is the second point which I now wish to present to you.

In our day especially, it is generally believed that after his ascension Christ is no longer on earth with his human nature. Consequently, the doctrine of the ascension is misused to deny that Christ's body and blood are truly present in the Holy Supper.

This error rests upon a completely false conception of the real nature of the ascension of Jesus Christ, Son of God, and Son of man. It is mistakenly supposed that Christ ascended into heaven just as Enoch or Elijah did; he now lives in a certain place in heaven, as is believed of all the other saints.

We must note, first of all, that we are much too weak to grasp and fathom the real nature of ascension. We do not even have an idea of what the Scriptures call heaven, for it says that heaven has no time or space. Yet our mind has absolutely no conception of something not bounded by time and space.

The Holy Scriptures do not once say that Christ only ascended into heaven; it rather speaks this way, "He that descended is the same also that ascended *up far above all* heavens, that he might fill all things." (Ephesians 4:10).

Now who can begin to grasp this mystery, to say nothing about describing it. Bear in mind, that the ascension of Christ is like the sun. The more clearly one wishes to look into it, the more it blinds our eyes, so that finally we see nothing. This work belongs to those which we are not to *fathom* but in childlike faith simply to believe what the Scriptures say of it. The more simply we hold to what the Scriptures say of it, the more faith-strengthening this mysterious article becomes.

What do the Scriptures say? They do not tell us that Christ is circumscribed by heaven as other saints are, but that He fills all things, not that he was received by heaven, but rather that he has

received heaven, yes, that he has ascended *up over* all heavens, and, as our text says, now "*sits on the right hand of God.*"

What does this mean?

If we do not want to go astray, we must consult the Scriptures.

It says that God led Israel out of Egypt with his right hand, and hurled Pharaoh with his army into the sea. It says in Psalm 77:10, "I will remember the years of the right hand of the most High." (German: "The right hand of the most High can change all things.")

It says, "If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me." Psalm 139:9,10.

From this it is clear that by God's right hand the Scriptures understand his omnipotence, omnipresence, rule, and eternal divine majesty and glory. That we are not mistaken in this exposition of Christ's sitting on the right hand of God the Scriptures again show us.

St Paul says, "Which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in heavenly places, far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come; and hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all." Ephesians 1:20-23.

And even in Psalm 110 we read, "The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool. Rule thou in the midst of thine enemies." (Vv. 1,2b).

Naturally, all this is not said of Christ's divinity but of that nature in which he went about in the form of a servant, his human nature; his divine nature could be neither humbled nor exalted, experience neither ebb nor increase of its glory, as Psalm 102 expressly says of the divine nature, "Thou art the same." (V 27).

Now decide for yourself whether according to Holy Scripture Christ is no longer with us according to his human nature.

Far be it!

To be sure, he left the world in such a way that he no longer walks among us like a human being, visible, touchable, and occupying space as once he did with his disciples. Christ could in this sense say, "I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world; again, I leave the world, and go to the Father." (John 16:28).

The angel also could speak in this sense, pointing to Christ's empty grave, "He is not here; behold the place where they laid him." (Mark 16:6). We speak in this sense at the close of the Second Article of the Apostle's Creed, "From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead."

But be it far from us to believe that this applies also of Christ, what Abraham said to the rich man in hell, "And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed; so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence." Luke 16:26).

Be it far from us to believe that Christ is King in a kingdom from which he is separated, and which he can rule only from a distance.

No, Christ has taken a local departure from his disciples. With his glorified body he truly lifted himself ever higher and higher, as far as the eyes of his disciples could reach. But that should only assure them of the truth of the great change, which now took place in the state of the man Jesus. We dare not suppose that, when the clouds received Jesus like a triumphal chariot and hid him from the sight of the disciples, he now continued to rise slowly ever farther and farther from the earth and raised himself up above the starry heavens.

No, as soon as the clouds closed behind him, he in that instant also entered into the state of divine majesty, appeared in heaven full of glory before all angels and saints, and also as a man began to share in the omnipotent and omnipresent rule over heaven and earth and all creatures.

If we consider the ascension of Christ in this way, oh, what a firm basis for a joyful faith we then have! Far be it that Christ should have withdrawn himself from his congregation; he has rather come real close to us. We need not first go to Judea to seek him. No, shortly before his ascension he promised, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." (Matthew 28:20). Through his visible entrance into his invisible glory he confirmed and brought this about. In all places he as God and man is now near us with his grace, with his help, with his protection.

If during his sojourn on earth Christ dealt with his Father chiefly for us, now his own attention is continually directed toward us, his redeemed, to bring us to faith in him, to preserve us in it, and to carry out the good work in us until that day when we shall see him as he is.

Christ has not ceased completing his work in sinners; he does not rest in the enjoyment of salvation, resting from his labors as those do who fall asleep in him; but he has appeared for us before God in the Holy of Holies; as Aaron bore the names of the tribes of Israel on his breastplate when he entered into the Holy of Holies, so also Christ carries the names of all believers on his heart when he appears before God as the true High Priest. There he unceasingly intercedes for his own, rules them, provides for them, and protects them, that the gates of hell cannot overpower them.

Oh, then, let everyone today be awakened to faith in Christ and be strengthened in it through his glorious ascension.

Let no one say: How does this concern me?

If you are a prisoner of sin, the Law, and death, as you can not deny, then Christ's ascension concerns you most intimately; through his ascension Christ has led your captivity captive.

If you at your death do not want to descend into the eternal prison, then in faith cling to the Ascended. You are then free even here, and some day you will follow him into his glory. He thought of you when before his ascension he gave the command, "Preach the Gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned." (Mark 16:15,16).

Now if in the meantime before your Savior brings you home into his Father's house, you experience misery, many temptations and dangers of soul, do not give up. Cling to him who today received the kingdom of his Father. For your sake all power in heaven and on earth was

given to him. He will permit nothing to tear you from his hand and will be your shield and protection until he has placed you among those whom he has delivered, who sing an eternal hallelujah to him in the temple of heaven.

To him be honor and praise here and hereafter, forever and ever. Amen

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