

But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. ⁸ *This is why it says:*

*“When he ascended on high,
he led captives in his train
and gave gifts to men.”*

⁹ *(What does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? ¹⁰ He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) ¹¹ It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, ¹² to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*

¹⁴ *Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶ From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. (Ephesians 4:7-16)*

Christ Ascended

Today, we’re celebrating Jesus’ ascension into heaven. Why does that matter? Why do we bother to have a special Thursday night service every year and recount this Bible story? Because almost all the promises that we cling to on a day to day basis are Ascension promises. Think about it: going to heaven when we die, Jesus coming back and raising the dead – those are Ascension promises. Jesus said he was going to prepare a place for us and that if he went, he would come back. But those aren’t the only ones. What other promises do we Christians cling to? God will be with us. God will protect us from the devil, the world and our own sinful flesh. God will turn all our sorrows into joys and he won’t let anything touch us here unless it has a good purpose for us. Those are Ascension promises, too, because Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father to rule all things for our good. Tonight, the Apostle Paul draws all those promises together and says, **“But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.”** Grace means gifts that God gives us just because he loves us. Each one of those promises is a grace, a gift that God gives us. And when he keeps those promises, that’s grace, too. So today we celebrate an action that is a gift and a promise of God, an action that must have been amazing to see: **Christ ascended.**

I.

Christ ascended to give us eternal victory. You see that in the opening verses of our text. The NIV renders them this way: **“When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men.”** What does “he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men” mean? It’s a parade. People have been watching parades for as long as recorded history goes back. Just like today, in the ancient world, people would line the streets and watch a parade go past. Why go to a parade? Isn’t it to see things that we don’t often get to see, like marching bands and firetrucks and sometimes military hardware? There are often comic elements, like clowns passing out candy. When we lived on the other side of the state, every Memorial Day we went to a parade that had hundreds of classic cars along with all those other things and we’d point out things that we thought our kids would especially enjoy seeing.

I don’t know if they had clowns at parades in the ancient world, but there were a lot of similarities. In the ancient world, the biggest reason to have a parade was to celebrate a military victory. Soldiers would march in their armor. Sometimes, they would even have floats with the king or his family on it. But right at the end of the parade they had two things that we don’t see a lot of. They would march the enemy’s king and all his captured soldiers in chains. Sometimes they’d even finish the parade with a public execution or two. Then quite often when the parade reached its end, the victorious king or general would hand out gifts, money or food, so that the people could continue to celebrate. That’s the picture Paul uses when he says that when Jesus ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men. Jesus’ ascension is his victory parade into heaven.

Who are the captives? The devil and his angels. They were defeated when Jesus died and rose. He ascended into heaven to take up his position of power and glory again at the right hand of the Father. No more wandering the dusty streets of Israel and living on the charity of other people while the movers and shakers of this life persecuted him. Jesus marched home to heaven in triumph. And there in heaven, he gives gifts to us. What gifts? Heaven and eternal life. Those are the greatest gifts we get as a result of that triumphant return to heaven. The people in ancient times lined the streets and cheered for those returning soldiers not just to feed the king's or the general's ego. They understood that his victory was their victory. The gifts they received at the end of the parade underlined the benefits that came from having a successful commander of their forces: security, wealth, power. That is true for us, too. When Jesus marched into heaven, he was celebrating a victory that he won for us. Jesus died and rose to defeat death and hell and sin for us.

Each of us was born a sinner. Our natural inclination is to be selfish and to try and turn every situation to our own advantage. We're really good at convincing ourselves that if other people get hurt in the process, that's not really our fault. But God isn't fooled. He says that our sin deserves death and hell. He warns us that our sin makes us slaves of the devil who constantly tries to convince us that sinful behavior is fun and exciting. But he really enjoys the pain and destruction that it wreaks on our lives. We were born sinners doomed to hell. But Jesus came. He was perfect in our place. He died and he rose in our place. He defeated sin and death and hell and set us free. And when he ascended, he marched victoriously back to heaven to prepare a place for us to go. We will live with him in heaven. He will return and wipe away sin and death and send the devil and his evil angels and all his followers to hell. And he will give us a grace, a gift: a new and perfect world where we will live without sin forever.

Ascension celebrates that gift and promise. It is a promise. It's something that we can't see yet in this world. At times, our own sin and the pain and sorrow of this life are so great that they hide the work of Christ. But the promise stands firm, sealed in Jesus' blood. It's more than just an empty promise. It is a gift that God has already given us. Heaven is just waiting for us to get there. When the time is right, we will indeed go there and join our Savior. That's what this parade, that's what this Ascension service, celebrates.

II.

But what about right now? It's great that we can look forward to heaven where all the hurts and sorrows of this life are over and all the temptations of the devil are silenced. But what good does that do me now? Very simply, that promise is the very power of God. It strengthens your faith and changes your heart so that you are prepared to stand firm in the faith until you get to eternity. To put it another way: **Christ ascended to give us spiritual maturity.**

That grace is extremely important because most of us are going to live for years down here, facing all those hurts and challenges. So Paul reminds us that the one who ascended is also the one who descended. Jesus came down here and shared our lives. He put himself in our place, so that he could live a perfect life for us, certainly. But also so that he could conquer fear and hurt and sorrow for us. He knows what we feel and he conquered those things, too. His ascension says we conquered even pain and sorrow when he did. And to make sure that we know that, the risen and ascended Lord Jesus gave some to be apostles and prophets and evangelists and pastors and teachers. Jesus gave us the holy ministry in all its forms, as Paul says, **"to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up."**

My job is to prepare you. I do that every time I point you to Jesus. That means that if I'm doing my job, every sermon and Bible class reinforces your faith. So does every visit in the hospital and in your home. Our teachers point our children to Christ. We do that so that your faith grows and matures. Growing in faith is what prepares you for works of service. A strong, mature faith wants to serve. The end result is that the body of Christ – his church, especially the part that meets right here – is built up. Faithful congregational ministry moves you from being baby Christians to grown up Christians who don't need me to hold your hand and say, "Why don't you help that person?" Your faith sees the opportunities and seizes them. Most of what happens here – most of the love and the concern and the building up – never shows up on a report to the voters. Your faith grows and your faith acts and the faith of the people around you grows because your faith acts.

What happens then? Paul says that we reach unity in faith and knowledge and we become mature in our faith. We reach the fullness of Christ – that is, he touches every part of our lives. A mature Christian shows his faith at work and at school, at home and out in public. We become one because we know Jesus better and better and all that gospel is the power of God to give us faith and to change our lives. That gospel takes our hearts

captive so that we think like God thinks. That is the grace Jesus is giving you right now. It works because Christ in heaven, seated at the right hand of God, works through that gospel that we hear and he changes us.

Paul says, **“Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.”** This is why spiritual maturity matters. A baby Christian never knows what’s real. Every new thought sends him or her running in a new direction. And the devil is smart. He sends winds of teaching – fads and false ideas and exciting new things. And the new Christian gets blown back and forth. The more immature we are as a group, the more it feels like our church rides every fad and constantly tries to reinvent itself, looking for the right gimmick, trying to reinvent ourselves so that we can grow and make a difference. Well, we already have the only thing that makes us grow. It’s a spiritual disaster when we can’t tell what’s true and what’s false and we run after every new idea that some supposedly Christian person says on cable TV or the internet. Don’t you see that yourself? Doesn’t that constant pursuit of whatever is new just cause spiritual anxiety and unrest? When your faith is mature, those winds hit you and know it isn’t what God says and your spiritual feathers aren’t ruffled, except to be sure that the Christians around you aren’t taken in.

When we stand firm in God’s Word, then we speak the truth in love. Then our congregation holds together in the gospel of Jesus Christ. We build each other up and help each other through this dark world. We all work for the common good to serve Jesus. You know what? All those things are happening in our church right now. And not because we’re so faithful but because Jesus is in heaven. He ascended there to rule all things for our good. So he’s making sure that we have the pastors and teachers we’re supposed to have today to prepare us to face this world. He works through the gospel every time it’s preached and he reaches into our hearts and changes us. He causes us to mature in the faith. Now, it doesn’t happen all at once. Most of us won’t be able to say at the end of this service that we grew so much in this hour that now we’re totally different people. God works slowly and carefully. Each time we hear the good news, God moves us a hair farther along. But we are moving. We are growing because Christ works through the gospel. He promises that he will change our hearts. The grace, the gift, is that he always keeps his promises. That’s what we’re celebrating today. That’s why Jesus ascended. He will guard and keep us until the day comes when we join him. Trust him and hear his message and you will grow in him. Amen.