

“There is no one like the God of Jeshurun, who rides on the heavens to help you and on the clouds in his majesty. The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms. He will drive out your enemy before you, saying, ‘Destroy him!’ So Israel will live in safety alone; Jacob’s spring is secure in a land of grain and new wine, where the heavens drop dew. Blessed are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the LORD? He is your shield and helper and your glorious sword. Your enemies will cower before you, and you will trample down their high places.” (Deuteronomy 33:26-29)

Look up and See!

This week I had chapel here in the sanctuary with our preschool. I wanted to explain to those little children what Ascension means, so I bought a helium balloon. I used it to illustrate the idea that Jesus went up into heaven. I asked them, “If I let go of the balloon and it floated up to the ceiling of our church, would I be able to get it down?” “No,” came the answer. Obviously, that would be much too high. And we used that to talk about the fact that Jesus is in heaven and we can’t make him come down here. But we also noted that eventually, the helium would leak out of the balloon and it would come back down on its own – but only when the time was right. Of course, Jesus is going to come back when the time is right. Now, obviously, it was an illustration for very small children and there is a great deal more that we can say. But tonight, as we study the Word of God recorded for us in the book of Deuteronomy, I want you to imagine that I really did let that balloon go and that it’s knocking around the rafters of our church right now. And I want you to remember that it represents Jesus ascended into heaven. **Look up and see!**

I.

Now, strictly speaking, the words that the Holy Spirit inspired here don’t specifically address Jesus’ ascension. Moses was writing about God in heaven. But Jesus is God and since his Ascension, he is in heaven once again. **Look up and see that there is no one like God!**

Moses wrote, **“There is no one like the God of Jeshurun, who rides on the heavens to help you and on the clouds in his majesty.”** What does “the God of Jeshurun” mean? It’s another name for Israel. The word means “the upright one.” When God calls himself the God of Jeshurun, the God of the upright people, he’s making a point about faith. Whether we’re talking about Israel thousands of years ago or Christians today, it’s easy for our faith to become little more than a family tradition. You go through the motions at Easter and Christmas. You say the right things at the right time. But when push comes to shove, it doesn’t really affect much the way you think or the way you act. If asked, you’ll say you’re a Christian. But you would be hard pressed to explain what that means. When God called himself the God of Jeshurun he was calling himself the God of people of faith, the God of people who hear and believe his Word and then are upright because they strive to put their faith into practice on a day to day basis.

There’s no one like that God of the true believers in Christ. Moses says that he rides on the heavens to help you and on the clouds in his majesty. Israel was on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea. They experienced the power of storms that roll in off the ocean. They didn’t have satellites that tracked the weather. So when storms blew in, they recognized much more than we do the power of God. And they pictured him riding the storms like they rode chariots. He controlled and steered those clouds like they steered horses and we steer cars. Those dark storm clouds underline the majesty of God. But Moses said that God rides the heavens to help you. He is a God of love who rides to rescue his people over and over again. And his greatest glory does not come from people making a big show of how pious and dedicated they are. His greatest glory comes from what he does to save us.

Moses says, **“The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms. He will drive out your enemy before you, saying, ‘Destroy him!’”** A couple of years ago, I read an account of a flash flood in the Grand Canyon. A father and his son were there and it was like something out of movie. The water and mud came rushing down on their party and they ran for higher ground. The father made it, but turned and realized his young son wasn’t going to. So he went back for him – and they both died. That father’s arms simply were not strong enough to carry that boy to safety. But the eternal arms of God are. No matter what danger we face, he protects us. He himself is our place of safety. He will drive out and destroy our enemies.

That promise applies to all the difficulties and hardships that we face in this life. And above all, it applies to our greatest enemies: sin, death and the devil. Without sin, there would be no idols. Without sin, there would be no Christians who just go through the motions, but don't really take what God says seriously. Without sin, everyone would be Jeshurun, the Righteous People. But we don't live in a world without sin. We all wrestle with sin in our hearts. Inside every one of us there is a slacker who thinks that if I go to church on Thursday night for Ascension, then I shouldn't have to go back on Sunday. And, oddly enough, next to that slacker, there's a Pharisee who looks down on those members who didn't drag themselves to church on Thursday night. And if he does get guilted into coming back on Sunday, he figures he must have racked up some extra points with God. That slacker/Pharisee does everything he can to avoid living the way God tells us to. And he constantly pats himself on the back for the little bit that he does and says, "Man, am I good Christian."

Which side of that slacker/Pharisee do you find the hardest to beat? Both sides are there in all of us. But one or the other usually dominates. Either the slacker wins regularly and we just don't make the sacrifices God calls his people to make, or the Pharisee wins and we go home sure that we're a cut above all those slackers out there. Either way, we're sinners. The slacker deserves nothing but God's punishment in hell because he ignores God's call to an active faith that constantly engages with the Word of God. And the Pharisee deserves God's punishment in hell for thinking that he's righteous by his own efforts.

Which one do you wrestle with the most? The devil wants that sin to drag you down to hell. He doesn't care which side of the coin destroys your faith as long as it's dead. But God drives out our enemies. He sent Jesus to live the perfect life we never could. Jesus was no slacker. Every day of his life, he lived for God perfectly. And he was no Pharisee, either. He had no sinful pride to corrupt his love for God. He had no sin in his heart at all. His perfect life counts for us. Then he died and he paid for our all our pride and Phariseeism, and for all our laziness and slackerism. He paid for all the sin in our hearts and in our lives. He defeated the sin inside us and the devil outside us. He set us free from death. Jesus rose and we will rise with him. Jesus rose and when he returns, he will destroy death forever. That's the God we worship and there simply is no God like him in any of the many philosophies and religions that mankind has invented.

II.

We are that God's people. In the past, peoples were united by culture and blood. In the modern world, that's much less true. We Americans are descended from every other people on earth. Yet, there are still things of this life – culture, values, where we were born and who our parents were – that make us Americans. The people that God is talking about is different. Even though God spoke these words first to Israel, which was an ethnic people, just being born in that nation didn't make you part of Jeshurun. What makes us the people of God? Faith in the promises of God. And where does that faith come from? From the power God built into those promises. **Look up and see that there is no one like the people of God.**

Moses wrote, "**So Israel will live in safety alone.**" Is being alone a good thing or a bad thing? People who struggle with loneliness would probably say it bad. And the Bible does assure us that God is always with us. But if you lived in a very scary neighborhood and every time you went outside, you were in danger, if you worked in an office or attended a school where you felt that everyone was against you and you had butterflies in your stomach every time you went in there, you might long just to be left alone. Israel was surrounded by powerful enemies. But God provided a place where they would be out of reach of their enemies. Right along with that picture of peace came a picture of prosperity. He said, "**Jacob's spring is secure in a land of grain and new wine, where the heavens drop dew.**" Why say that their springs would be safe? In a desert region, the difference between living and dying is water. God promised a land with water, where grain and new wine would be abundant. God promised a life of peace and plenty.

But he wasn't talking about the physical land of Israel. That place was never out of reach of their enemies. In that place droughts and famines struck again and again. And he wasn't talking about the United States of America, protected by our oceans and more prosperous than any society has a right to be. God was talking about heaven. When eternal life comes, we will be free from all our enemies, free from all harm and danger, free from all sadness or want. That's what Ascension is really about. Jesus ascended into heaven to prepare a place for us. And he promised that he will return and take us there. While we wait, he promises to provide for us and protect us from all the enemies that life in a sinful world brings against the people of God.

Moses says, **“Blessed are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the LORD? He is your shield and helper and your glorious sword. Your enemies will cower before you, and you will trample down their high places.”** Who is like us? We are the true Israel. We are a people saved by Christ! Moses says that God is our shield and our helper. No matter what danger we face in this life, God will always take care of us here and he will bring us home. And the thrust of the devil that seems to get past our shield and wound or kill us hasn't really gotten past God at all. He allowed it come because that thrust actually helps us. And he is our glorious sword. It's not our job to defeat the devil or the forces of unbelief in this world. That's God's job. Jesus won the battle at the cross and the empty tomb. He ascended into heaven to carry that battle to the ends of the earth and to the very ends of time. On Judgment Day we will triumph over all false gods and all the enemies of our faith.

There simply is no other religion on earth like Christianity. No other religion makes promises like our God promises. No other religion teaches that God died to save us his people. No other religion understands that faith is no more than a simple trust in what God is doing for us. In all other belief systems, you have to be a good person, you have to do something or sacrifice something to appease the gods or to please God or to somehow contribute to your own salvation. But Christ gave us something different because there is no God like the God of the Bible. And there is no people like the people of faith. Jesus ascended to prepare a place for that people to come home to. He will return and take us there. Until that day comes, he will provide for us and protect us every day of our lives. Amen.