

Receive Now With Glad Hearts the Blessing of our Lord

“He said to them, ‘This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.’ Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, ‘This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.’ When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.”

People have asked why I raise my arms during the benediction and hold my two fingers close together. Well, I raise my arms because that is how the pastor always did when I was growing up. Is it absolutely necessary? No. There is nothing magical here like some laser beam shooting out of my hands to convey the blessing. Hopefully the raised arms help you understand that God’s blessing is being placed on you. And why I put my first two fingers together? I don’t know; it is just comfortable.

In our text we are told that Jesus raised his arms over his disciples as he blessed them and kept them raised as he ascended into heaven. Was it necessary for Jesus to raise his arms? No. Was it necessary for Jesus to ascend into heaven as he did? No. Remember, Jesus was able to appear in locked rooms out of nowhere. He could have just said to his disciples, “Bye, guys,” snapped his fingers and immediately left them. But Jesus did raise his arms in blessing and he did slowly ascend into heaven. It was important for us to see him doing that because that is the last impression he wants us to have. And what is he telling us? Though in heaven he is still blessing us with his Word and with his continued presence.

I. The Lord Jesus blesses us with his Word

To understand how important the Word of God is, let’s go back to the rich man and poor Lazarus. You remember how poor Lazarus went to heaven and the rich man went to hell. The rich man begged God to send Lazarus back to earth from the dead and appear to his brothers so they would not spend eternity in hell. Remember what Abraham said? ***“He said to them, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”*** If they do not listen to God’s Word, then not even something as spectacular as dead people rising from the grave will do them any good. So there is something special about God’s Word. What is it?

God’s Word is important because it is God’s faithful Word. ***“Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.”*** Must is must. If God says it, it must happen. If he says that we will rise from the grave to heaven, it must happen

But God is not just a stickler for accuracy; he has a purpose or plan with his Bible. Jesus, I believe, summarizes the purpose when he says, ***“This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations.”*** Repentance is twofold: confessing our sins and believing Jesus died for them. Yes, the Lord wants us to realize what we deserve for our sins. Someday we will get our hymnals back. Maybe you have one at home. On p.156 in our hymnals we have a personal preparation for Holy Communion. In it we ask ourselves: *“Have I loved God with all my heart, gladly heard his Word, and patiently endured affliction? Have I been disobedient, proud, or unforgiving? Have I been selfish, lazy, envious, or quarrelsome? Have I lied or deceived, taken something not mine, or given anyone a bad name? Have I abused my body or permitted indecent thoughts to linger in my mind? Have I failed to do what is right and good?”* The answer, of course, is yes, we have done such sinful things and more.

But that is not all God wants to tell us. ***“The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, . . . and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations.”*** God forgives, or to use the literal meaning of the Greek word here, he “releases” us from our sins. As the personal preparation for Communion summarizes it, *“His Word assures me that Jesus led a pure and holy life for me and died on the cross for me to pay the full price for all my sins. Through faith in Jesus, I have been clothed in my Savior’s perfect righteousness and holiness.”* His Word assures us we have forgiveness and are accepted by God because of Christ. Do not our hearts burn hearing what Jesus has done for us?

But there is more. ***“Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.”*** This tells me that the disciples would not have understood what Jesus said unless he enabled them to. My friends, if left to our own devices, we would read the Bible but it would have no more impact on our lives than if we read *Field and Stream* or *Time Magazine*. ***“I am going to send you what my Father promised,”*** Jesus assured his disciples. He is referring to the Holy Spirit. We could not believe or understand on our own. As Paul states, ***“No one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.”*** God just doesn’t give us his Word, he enables us to believe it with the power of the Holy Spirit.

You heard the old adage, “Give a man a meal and you feed him for a day; give him a plow and you feed him for a lifetime.” God gives us everything we have and need for this world, and for this we are thankful. But that is only for today. These blessings come and go. He gives us something that feeds eternally: his Word. It opens up the gates heaven for us. Now you

know why God Lazarus in hell that the only thing that can change the eternal fate of his brothers is the Word of God. Dead people coming back to life may get our attention, but only God's Word can change us.

II. He blesses us with his continued presence

Jesus has ascended into heaven. He has given us all we ever need, God's faithful Word. But that is not all. He promises to be with us at all times. We can learn something when we compare the death of John the Baptist with the death of Jesus Christ. Concerning John's death we are told in Matthew, ***"John's disciples came and took his body and buried it."*** His followers buried him and then disbanded. Some went to Jesus and became his followers. Others, disillusioned, were scattered never to meet again. Their master was dead; there was nothing holding them together. The same could be said when the disciples laid Jesus' body in the grave. The bond that held them together was gone. Two disciples left Jerusalem and headed back home to Emmaus. Thomas was absent the evening of Easter. If Christ did not rise again, another sect would have disappeared into history.

But he did rise and the disciples quickly rallied to him. Now, forty days later, Jesus was about to leave them again. Notice the change. ***"Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God."*** When Jesus left them the first time, they reacted by hiding behind locked doors. When he left them again in his ascension, they reacted by going to the temple every day and praising God. Why the change?

Jesus, though visibly ascending into heaven, did not leave his disciples. As Matthew states, ***"And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*** No more locked doors. They praised him openly right there in the heart of the enemy camp, the temple. His presence gave them comfort and boldness. Jesus is with us as well. He is with us this evening. He is with us in our home when we pray, "Come Lord Jesus, be our guest. . . ." He is with us when we are in the hospital or alone at home or when a loved one dies or when we are celebrating a birthday.

His presence alone should give us all confidence and boldness. But he is also present as one who can and does something. You heard it in our reading earlier from Ephesians 1: ***"That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church."*** Christ rules, controls and governs everything for the sake of his church. This may seem hard to believe at first. The church struggles and suffers. But faith is being sure of things not seen, and just because we cannot always see Jesus' controlling things doesn't mean he is not doing it. That ought to be a real comfort for us. The Church will suffer. But it will survive. Not even the gates of hell can destroy his church or snatch us from God's hand. And the same is true with every misfortune in our lives. God works everything for our good.

And finally his continued presence will culminate in his return. We read in Acts earlier, ***"This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."*** Just think of it. Jesus left slowly ascending into heaven with his arms stretched out in blessing of us and he is going to return the same way. Though he returns as judge of the world, he will not greet us with anger over our sins but with arms outstretched in blessing.

I am glad Jesus ascended into the heaven the way he did, with his arms stretched out in a blessing. They are still stretched out in a blessing to us. The next time you stand over the grave of a loved one, the next time you suffer pain or illness, the next time you feel embarrassed for being a Christian, the next time you fight with your family or neighbor, the next time it seems to you as though the world is going to hell in a hand basket, the next time you are tempted to think it is not worth it anymore, remember Jesus' ascension. See his arms stretching out and blessing you with his Word. Look for the nail wounds on those hands. Remember he is with you and will come for you again. Don't be surprised then to find yourself wishing to worship him everyday for time and eternity. INJ Amen.