

“He Ascended into Heaven”

January 30, 2022

Psalm 68:1-18

Psalm 68 (st 7-12)

Ephesians 4

One of the things I really appreciate about the Trinity Psalter Hymnal is that they include the music with the words as much as possible.

Even in our own PHSS books,  
we sometimes just put a whole page of words without music.

But the Trinity Psalter Hymnal uses four full pages for Psalm 68 –  
which allows us to do what we are doing today –  
and just sing the second half of the Psalm!

Psalm 68 is a war Psalm.

It opens with the triumphant reminder that  
*God shall arise, his enemies shall be scattered;  
and those who hate him shall flee before him!*

The wicked will perish – but the righteous shall be glad and rejoice. (68:1-3)

David calls upon the righteous to:

*Sing to God, sing praises to his name;  
lift up a song to him who rides through the deserts;  
his name is the LORD; exult before him.* (68:4)

Why should we sing praise to God?

Verses 5-18 then recount the story of God’s deliverance.  
Verses 7-10 remind us of the Exodus and the Conquest.  
Verses 11-14 speak of how God routs his enemies.  
Verses 15-18 then celebrate the coming of God to Zion,  
as we celebrate the mountain that God has chosen.

We just heard in verse 17, that “Sinai is now in the sanctuary.”

What does that mean?

What happened at Sinai?

The LORD had led Israel from Egypt to Sinai –  
where the earth quaked before God – “the One of Sinai” (v8).  
And then, at Sinai, the glory of the LORD went from the top of the mountain  
and came down and filled the holy of holies –  
at the dedication of the tabernacle.  
God’s presence had been at the mountain.  
Now God was present with his people in the sanctuary.

Or, you could say, “Sinai is now in the sanctuary.”

The mountains of Bashan were jealous –  
because God chose to make his name dwell at Zion!

The idea here is that all creation – even the mountains themselves –  
longs for the coming of God – for God to arise – to ascend on high!

As we continue to sing this Psalm,  
we will sing of the procession of God into the sanctuary (v24),  
and in verse 29 it is because of the temple in Jerusalem  
that the kings of the earth bring gifts!

The Psalm closes in verse 32-35:

*O kingdoms of the earth, sing to God; sing praises to the Lord,  
to him who rides in the heavens, the ancient heavens;  
behold he sends out his voice, his mighty voice.  
Ascribe power to God, whose majesty is over Israel,  
and whose power is in the skies.  
Awesome is God from his sanctuary;  
the God of Israel –  
he is the one who gives power and strength to his people.  
Blessed be God!*

All the kingdoms of the earth will praise God and bless his name –  
because the God of Israel is the one who gives power and strength to his people.

Psalm 68:18 is the central verse of this Psalm –  
a song that is all about the procession of God to Zion;  
a song about the ascension of God to his dwelling place –  
a song about the gifts that will be brought *to God*.

*You ascended on high, leading a host of captives in your train  
and receiving gifts among men,  
even among the rebellious, that the LORD God may dwell there.*

Sing Psalm 68 – stanzas 7-12  
Read Ephesians 4:1-16

Do you see what Paul did with Psalm 68?  
“When he ascended on high he led a host of captives,  
and he gave gifts to men.”

Paul is thinking about the *whole* of Psalm 68 –  
not just verse 18.  
He blends verse 18 with verse 35–

because Jesus is the God who arose and ascended –  
and Jesus is the God who gives power and strength to his people

As we are working our way through the Creed,  
we have talked about how we confess our faith in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.  
The Creed follows a Trinitarian structure,  
because our God has revealed himself to us as one God in three persons.

For the last several weeks we have been talking about how our Lord Jesus Christ  
was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate, was dead and buried,  
he descended into hell, and the third day he rose again from the dead.

And today we come to the phrase,  
“he ascended into heaven.”

The Apostles’ Creed says:  
the third day he rose again from the dead;  
he ascended into heaven,  
and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;

The Nicene Creed says pretty much the same:  
and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures;  
and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father;

So what are we confessing when we say ‘He ascended into heaven’?

At the most basic level, we are confessing a historical event:

**46. Q. What do you confess when you say, He ascended into heaven?**

A. That Christ, before the eyes of His disciples, was taken up from the earth into heaven, and that He is there for our benefit until He comes again to judge the living and the dead.

A couple weeks ago, we heard from Romans 10,  
how Paul teaches that Jesus is the one who descended into the abyss –  
into the realm of God’s wrath and curse.  
Jesus has taken upon himself the cursed death of the cross,  
and as we heard last week, because God has raised him from the dead,  
therefore God will raise up to eternal life all who believe in Jesus.

The descent into hell refers to how Jesus endured the curse of God,  
and remained under the power of death for three days.  
But God raised up his beloved Son from the dead.

We usually talk about the death and resurrection of Christ.  
And that is for a good reason!

The death of Christ is the atoning sacrifice that paid for our sins.  
The resurrection of Christ is his victory over the powers of sin and death.

We don't usually spend a lot of time talking about his ascension.

But if you think about it, without the ascension of Christ,  
the death and resurrection of Christ would have no meaning.

The Heidelberg Catechism asks a helpful question at this point:

**47. Q. Is Christ, then, not with us until the end of the world, as He has promised us?**

Jesus said, "I will be with you always – even to the end of the age" –  
so if Christ has ascended into heaven, how is he still "with us"?

The Heidelberg answers:

A. Christ is true man and true God. With respect to His human nature He is no longer on earth,  
but with respect to His divinity, majesty, grace, and Spirit He is never absent from us.

To put it another way,  
according to the properties of his human nature,  
the person of Jesus Christ is not present on earth  
But according to the properties of his divine nature,  
he continues with us to the end of the age.

This naturally prompts the next question:

**48. Q. But are the two natures in Christ not separated from each other if His human nature is not present wherever His divinity is?**

A. Not at all, for His divinity has no limits and is present everywhere. So it must follow that His divinity is indeed beyond the human nature which He has taken on and nevertheless is within this human nature and remains personally united with it.

So once again we see the unity of the Person of Jesus Christ –

Jesus – the eternal Son of God – acts according to the properties of two natures.  
He is truly man – and truly God – in one person.

(The simplest way to say it is that *persons* act – *natures* are.

Your "nature" refers to a set of properties or characteristics.

The humanity of Christ does not "exist" as a separate entity  
from *the person* of Christ – who is the second person of the Trinity.

But the person – Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God –  
acts according to the properties of two distinct natures)

But the most important question about the ascension is where we will focus!

**49. Q. How does Christ's ascension into heaven benefit us?**

The Heidelberg Catechism suggests three main benefits:

A. First, He is our Advocate in heaven before His Father.

Second, we have our flesh in heaven as a sure pledge that He, our Head, will also take us, His members, up to Himself.

Third, He sends us His Spirit as a counter-pledge, by whose power we seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God, and not the things that are on earth.

Let's look at each of these three in turn:

**1. We Have an Advocate with the Father**

*First, He is our Advocate in heaven before His Father.*

Hebrews 9:11-12 talks about the ascension of Christ as the completion of his sacrifice.

*But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come,  
then through the greater and more perfect tent  
(not made with hands, that is, not of this creation)  
he entered once for all into the holy places,  
not by means of the blood of goats and calves  
but by means of his own blood,  
thus securing an eternal redemption.*

Hebrews goes on to say in 9:24 that

*Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands,  
which are copies of the true things,  
but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.*

And how did Christ enter into the heavenly holy of holies?

*9:26 – he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages  
to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.*

Think about how the OT sacrifices were offered.

What did the death of the animal accomplish?

Nothing.

If, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest just slaughtered the animal  
and left the carcass lying there,  
what good would it be?

Could he make atonement for the people?

No!

Even so, if Jesus had died on the cross, but stayed dead,  
what good would it do?

For that matter, if Jesus had died on the cross and been *raised* from the dead,  
what good would it do?

If Jesus was still walking around on earth in his resurrected body,  
we would still not have a perfect sacrifice.

We only have peace with God because Jesus has entered into the heavenly holy of holies  
as our High Priest who has brought the blood of the final sacrifice  
(his own blood!).

Therefore the ascension of Christ benefits us in giving us an Advocate before the Father.

All throughout John's gospel,  
Jesus always spoke of the Father as "my Father."  
He always insisted upon his own special relationship to the Father.

But after the resurrection, when making it clear that he cannot stay on earth,  
Jesus himself said in John 20:17  
*Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father;  
but go to my brothers and say to them,  
'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'*

So the ascension of Christ gives us an Advocate with the Father!

And this is closely connected to the second point that the Catechism makes:

## **2. One Who Shares Our Humanity Sits at the Right Hand of God**

*Second, we have our flesh in heaven as a sure pledge that He, our Head, will also take us, His members, up to Himself.*

Because of the ascension of Christ,  
there is now a man sitting at the right hand of God.  
"Our flesh" is in heaven as a pledge that those who believe in Jesus  
will also be with him one day.

All through the OT, the focus was on God coming down to us.  
This is what Psalm 68 was pointing to.  
All that language about "Sinai being in the sanctuary" –  
as the glory of the LORD filled the earthly sanctuary.

But Psalm 68 had also said something about ascending on high.

How can humanity enter the holy of holies?  
Only the high priest could enter the *earthly* holy of holies –  
and that once a year!  
How can we enter God own presence in the heavens?!

Only if one who shares our humanity enters into heaven *for us!*

And that leads to point three:

### **3. He Sends Us His Spirit as the Downpayment of Our Inheritance**

*Third, He sends us His Spirit as a counter-pledge, by whose power we seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God, and not the things that are on earth.*

Peter speaks of this in Acts 2:32-33

*This Jesus God raised up, and of that we are all witnesses.  
Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God,  
and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit,  
he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing.*

Jesus has ascended into the heavens.

Therefore those who belong to Jesus are connected to him by his Holy Spirit.

This is the point that Paul makes in Ephesians 4:7-10

*But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.  
Therefore it says,  
When he ascended on high he led a host of captives and he gave gifts to men.*

This is a quotation from Psalm 68:18

But Paul's usage of this text is rather interesting  
(like what he did with Deuteronomy 30 in Romans 10,  
Or like what he did with Isaiah 22 in 1 Corinthians 15).

Because Psalm 68:18 is very much about God ascending on high,  
leading a host of captives,  
and *receiving* gifts from men.

But Paul turns it around.

Jesus is the Yahweh who ascends on high, leading a host of captives.  
But in contrast to the Psalm, where the ascended one receives gifts,  
here in Ephesians 4:8, the ascended one *gives* gifts.

Paul sees that what Psalm 68 was talking about has come true in Christ.

In Jesus Christ, Yahweh has ascended, leading a host of captives,  
but rather than receive gifts from men,  
the Christ has given gifts to men.

Paul explains this in verses 9-10:

*In saying, 'He ascended,' what does it mean  
but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth?  
He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens,*

*that he might fill all things.*

There is some debate about what “lower parts of the earth” means.

Some say that it refers to the fact that the earth is lower than heaven,  
and thus that the “descent” here is a reference to the incarnation.

Others say that it refers to the “underworld” or Sheol/Hades,  
in which case it would be a reference to Christ’s descent into hell.

Either one can work.

But for now we are talking about the ascension of Christ,  
and either way, we are told that Christ has ascended far above the heavens,  
and that he has now given gifts to his church.

Why is the ascension important?

Because only one who sits at the right hand of God  
can pour out the Holy Spirit on us.

Only one who is God and man in one person –  
can give gifts.

Sometimes we can start to think that “if only Jesus was here...”

Oh, but he is!!

When he was physically present in the incarnation,  
only a few believed.

If he was still living on earth – two thousand years later –  
there would be some who would believe –  
but given humanity’s tendency toward rebellion and selfishness,  
I daresay that his kingdom wouldn’t be that big!

And without the Holy Spirit,  
what good would it do?

He’d have a little kingdom in the middle east –  
which he would have to protect with wars and battles.

Sure, he could destroy his enemies with a word –  
but all that would do is alienate more and more people!

He didn’t come to *receive gifts from men* –  
he came to *give gifts to men*.

Because the ascension of Christ is for the good of his church.

He has ascended to the Father so that he might pour out his Spirit upon his people.  
And the Spirit has been given to each us so that we might build each other up.

Paul goes on to say:

*And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers,*



The first thing that he gave was the apostles, the prophets,  
the evangelists, the pastors and teachers.

What all of these have in common is that they proclaim the word of God to his people.  
Jesus gives gifts to his church.  
And the first gifts that he gives are *men*.

Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers –  
gifts from the ascended Christ to his people.

And what are they for?  
Well look at what they do (v12):

*to equip the saints,  
for the work of ministry,  
for building up the body of Christ,*

These three things are the particular calling  
of the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers.

My calling is to equip the saints.  
To do the work of ministry – serving as the emissary of Christ –  
For building up the body of Christ.

And then notice the goal of this equipping –  
notice the purpose of this ministry – this building up the body of Christ:

It is:

*until we all attain to the unity of the faith  
and of the knowledge of the Son of God,  
to mature manhood,  
to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,  
so that we may no longer be children,  
tossed to and fro by the waves  
and carried about by every wind of doctrine,  
by human cunning,  
by craftiness in deceitful schemes.*

The preaching of the gospel – the ministry of the word –  
what I'm trying to do right now! –  
is so that you may grow up to maturity!  
So that you may not be swept away by human cunning.  
So that you may *know* the Son of God –  
and be mature and complete!

So that...(v15)

*Rather, speaking the truth in love,  
we are to grow up into him who is the head,  
into Christ, from whom the whole body,  
joined and held together  
by every joint with which it is equipped,  
when each part is working properly,  
makes the body grow  
so that it builds itself up in love. (4:11-16)*

How does the body grow?

Yes, Jesus has given pastors/teachers – he has given gifts to his church –  
to equip and to minister and to build up the body –  
but the body *actually* only grows when each part is working properly!

Because only then do we grow *into Christ* –  
because *he* is the one who holds the body together –  
he is the one who joins us together as one!

I've told many of you the story of our first intern –  
who after a few months said to me,

“Peter, I don't get it.  
You preach and you teach about the importance of community –  
the importance of living as the body of Christ –  
and I see you practicing it with your family.  
But I don't see it in the rest of the church.  
And what really puzzles me is that you don't seem to be bothered by it.”

I said to him,

“I'm not the Holy Spirit.  
I don't change hearts.  
All I *can do* is preach and seek to put it into practice.  
The rest is his problem!”

A few years later, we had another intern who commented  
that he had never seen a church with such community.

What happened?

It wasn't that I did anything different.  
It was simply that what Paul says is true.

The Ascended Lord Jesus has given gifts to his church –  
so that when the gospel goes forth in word and deed,  
the whole body builds itself up in love.

Notice the parallels in verses 11-12 and verses 15-16.

The gifts of verse 11 are speaking gifts.

What does the body do in verse 15?

Speak the truth in love!

The purpose of the gifts who are people in v12 is to build up the body of Christ.

What happens when each part of the body is working properly?

“makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”

What I do specially in preaching and administering the sacraments,  
the whole body does generally in encouraging one another  
and building each other up.

Likewise, what the elders do specially in shepherding the flock,  
you all do generally in watching out for one another.  
And what the deacons do specially in ministering to the poor,  
you all do generally in caring for those in need.

In other words,

the officers of the church – the pastors, elders, and deacons –  
are supposed to be exemplary Christians  
who model the way of Christ,  
encouraging you and calling you to walk in that way!

(I mention this especially at this time,  
because the session has opened nominations for elder and deacon –  
and so as you consider who to nominate as elder,  
look for those men whom you see as faithful followers of Christ –  
men whom you look up to as examples of the Christian life.

For deacon, look around for those men whom you see as heading in that direction.)

But the church can only grow up in every way into Christ  
because Jesus has ascended to the Father!

Without the ascension of Christ,  
none of this is yours.

It is only because Jesus Christ has ascended to the Father  
and poured out the Holy Spirit upon his church,  
that you and I have been given these mighty gifts.

And so let us live as is fitting of heirs of the kingdom –  
as those who share in the inheritance  
through the promised Holy Spirit.