

JESUS IS GONE FOR GOOD.

Ascension – May 9 & 12, 2024

Ephesians 4:7–16 *Due to the length of the text it is not included here. Please read the text in your Bible.*

Dear Christian Friends:

Suppose you have cancer. You go to the hospital for treatment. You want the doctor to say, “Your cancer is gone for good.” Suppose you have mice in your house and moles in your yard. You hire an exterminator. You want him to say, “Those pests are gone for good.” When something is “gone for good,” it means all the bad stuff is wiped out. It is totally gone. It’s not coming back.

But, as is often the case, it’s the opposite with Jesus. Jesus was not like a bad cancer. His disciples did not want to get rid of him. Likewise, when Jesus ascended to heaven forty days after Easter, he did not disappear. Just before Jesus went to heaven, he told his disciples, **surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.** So, Jesus is still very much with us. But Jesus is also very much in heaven. In heaven he is sitting at the right hand of his heavenly Father. In heaven Jesus is ruling over all creation for our benefit.

In Saint Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, we see some good things Jesus is doing now that he has ascended into heaven. God’s Word tells us: **JESUS IS GONE FOR GOOD.** That is, Jesus completed his ministry on earth to begin his ministry in heaven. Christ’s ministry in heaven is all for our good and for the good of our salvation.

Saint Paul begins our text with one good thing Jesus gives us. Paul quotes Psalm 68 and says, **“When he ascended on high, he took captivity captive and gave gifts to his people.”** What good thing does Jesus give us here? He put into prison the thing that puts us into prison. Jesus captured the sin and temptation that so easily capture us.

Now, this does not mean that, here and now, you and I are totally free from sin and temptation. It *does mean* that Jesus has done everything for the final defeat of sin and temptation. Jesus died on the cross. Jesus rose from the dead. Jesus has promised he will return to earth on Judgment Day. That's when Jesus will exterminate sin and temptation for good and once and for all.

Now, from our perspective here on earth, that utter eradication of sin and temptation is a future event. But from Christ's eternal reality, the destruction of evil is a done deal. So, we can say, "Right here and right now sin tangles me up and makes my faith stumble. But sin cannot win. Jesus died to destroy the punishment of sin, the allure of sin, and the consequences of sin. So, when sin snags me and drags me into doubt and despair, I am still a winner over sin. I still have Jesus. Jesus went up to heaven to show to all creation that sin, temptation, death, and Satan are all defeated. So, now all I have to do is wait for Jesus to return on Judgment Day. Then sin and all its evil will be gone for good."

But as we wait for Judgment Day, Jesus gives us another good thing to strengthen our faith. Paul says,

Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers have at least two things in common. All these ministers are gifts from Jesus to his Church on earth. They also proclaim God's Word. They point you to Jesus Christ, **the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world**. By doing this, your ministers of the gospel strengthen your faith. And with a stronger faith you have even more joy. You have even more confidence to say, "I am still a winner over sin. I still have Jesus. Jesus went up to heaven to show to all creation that sin, temptation, death, and Satan are all defeated. So, now all I have to do is wait for Jesus to return on Judgment Day. Then sin and all its evil will be gone for good."

But your stronger faith is not just for your benefit. Jesus gives you a stronger faith **for the work of serving, in order to build up the body of Christ**. Your work of serving is another good thing Jesus gives you now that he is in heaven. Your work of serving others imitates the way Jesus served you. Jesus served you by sacrificing his

whole life. Jesus served you without asking for payment. Jesus served you simply because he loved you.

And that is the gift that Jesus gives to his church. Through the office of the public ministry Jesus trains every believer to love each other the way he first loved us. So, what does that look like? It means that every church member always puts Jesus first and foremost in their thoughts, words, and actions. It means that each Christian loves to tell the story of Jesus. It means that, without being nosy, you always pray for your fellow believers. It means you don't force your opinions and preferences on the church. Instead, you surrender your advantage, your comfort, and your preferences so there may be peace, unity, and harmony in the church.

But Jesus strengthens your faith, and he strengthens the church for a further purpose. Saint Paul says, **This [training believers for works of service] is to continue until we all reach unity in the faith and knowledge of the Son of God, resulting in a mature man with a stature reaching to the measure of the fullness of Christ.**

Paul sets the goal for each believer and every church. It is unity and maturity until we are all like Jesus. But that means growing in our faith is something that will never end while we are this earth. Since we will have a sinful nature as long as we live on this earth, our faith always has room to grow until that day Jesus calls us home to heaven. Saint Paul says this in Philippians. **Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus also took hold of me... I press on toward the goal, for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.**

Notice the two time frames. In the present tense Christians always pursue perfection. Even though we cannot obtain perfection in this life, Christians are always chasing that goal with intensity, with grit, and with drive.

On the other hand, when it comes to the future, Christians are always at peace. Why? Well, Jesus has already gone into heaven. So, Jesus is already there in eternal

glory. And where Jesus is now, we will certainly be one day. Concerning this, Jesus said to his disciples, **if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to be with me, so that you may also be where I am.** So, by his ascension into heaven Jesus gives us the good gift of a place in eternal glory.

We will have full enjoyment of eternal glory when Jesus returns on Judgment Day. And Christ's return on Judgment Day is another good thing Jesus gives us by ascension into heaven. In our first lesson, Saint Luke tells us, **[Jesus] was taken up while [his disciples] were watching, and a cloud took him out of their sight. They were looking intently into the sky as he went away. Suddenly, two men in white clothes stood beside them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why are you standing here looking up into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."**

Jesus went up to heaven in a cloud. He will return in the clouds. His disciples saw him go up into heaven. Everyone will see Jesus return from heaven. Revelation 1:7 says, **Look, he is coming with clouds, and every eye will see him, including those who pierced him.**

Yes, you will see Jesus return. On that Great Day, you will do what Jesus says in Luke 21. **[Everyone] will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory... stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is near.**

So, we celebrate Christ's ascension into heaven by looking up to heaven. Jesus went to heaven to begin his rule over all creation for our eternal good. Jesus is coming back to earth from heaven. Then, Jesus will raise your body from its grave and bring you to eternal glory. And then, as Paul says, we will all be... **mature... with a stature reaching to the measure of the fullness of Christ.** May God keep us faithful to Christ now and for all eternity. AMEN.