

The Glorious Feast of Ascension: Raised Up to Sit in Heavenly Places

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"And raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph 2:6).

Our Salvation was achieved by our Lord Jesus Christ's death on the cross and accomplished by His resurrection and lifting up from this world into heaven. The fullness of Christ's resurrection is given in the ascension. The ascension completes the resurrection. Without the resurrection Christ's death would be meaningless "And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty" (1 Cor 15:14). Without the ascension, the resurrection would also be incomplete for we would have a resurrected person but One who was not at the right hand of God in the place of authority. Therefore, having completed His mission in this world as the Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ returned to the Father in heaven Who had sent Him into the world. In ascending to the Father, He has raised the earthly with Him "and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph 2:6).

Raised From Death to Life

By raising us up, our Lord has moved us from the state of death to life. Adam was created a physical and spiritual being alive in both realms able to walk with his Creator. Adam and Eve could have lived in this state of divine fellowship forever; but they disobeyed God and immediately died a spiritual death by being separated from God. Since then, all of their offspring, although born physically and biologically alive, knowing good from evil, right and wrong, are born spiritually dead and destined to die physically after a certain span of lifetime.

St. Paul designates all humans since Adam and Eve to be spiritually dead and "children of disobedience" (Eph 2:1-3). We are born into a world of spiritual darkness and disobedience, knowing no better than to satisfy our natural human instincts. We are no longer Gods by birth nor do we bear the mark of His likeness that was bestowed upon Adam. We are born dead. But God the Father, in His great love and mercy, has expressed His care for the spiritually dead sending the Logos to earth from the power and glory of the heavenly places in the form of a man, to offer His life to the life of Adam's offspring, to us. What greater love than this "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). God has delivered us in spite of us and has given us the resurrected life of His Son Jesus. This same power that has raised Christ from the dead now works in us.

Henceforth the identity of believers is no longer in Adam, but in Christ. When we believe in Jesus Christ we pass from death to life. We are no longer just ordinary human beings; but new creation, linked with the life of our Lord. St. Paul describes our death and life in Christ saying "Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him" (Rom 6:4-8).

Being Joined together with Christ

We are joined to Christ; we have been identified with him. His life has become our life, and our new identity is in Christ. He is our life. "He who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him" (1 Cor 6:17). We belong to Him, we are His and He is ours, "You in Me and I in you" (Jn 14:20). We are made alive with Christ; St. Paul stresses this point with Christ as he repeats it several times: We are made alive together with Christ. We are raised up with him. We are made to sit with him. This means that when He died, we died in Him, when He was buried, we were buried in Him, when He was raised, we were raised with Him, and when He ascended on high, we went to sit there with Him in heavenly places. Buried into the death of Christ, we are raised with Him "buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead" (Col 2:12). We are raised as new creatures to walk with the Risen Christ, with our minds on heavenly things "If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God" (Col 3:1). To sit in heavenly places in our present state is to have our minds above "set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth" (Col 3:2).

Sitting with Christ the Son of God in the heavenly places, we are God's children. We belong there, that is where our citizenship, our loyalty, our life and worship belong.

God not only has raised us up with Christ but has given us access to the power that our Lord Jesus controls. Because of our union with Christ, we enjoy an exalted position together with Him and wonderful spiritual blessings "Blessed be the

God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ" (Eph 1:3).

Living in the Heavenly Places While Still on Earth

The Church on earth lives simultaneously in both the heavenly and the earthly realms. Our union with Christ makes this truth a reality. In the Holy Baptism we are by faith united with Him in His death, burial, resurrection, and ascension. Therefore, while living on earth we also, through this union, live in the heavenly places, where Christ is being blessed with every spiritual blessing. Christ is enthroned at the Father's right hand, and we, through our union with Him, are there also.

One can be in heavenly and earthly places at the same time, for the heavenly circumscribes the earthly, moving invisibly in, about, and through it continually. St. Paul spoke clearly of this when he said: "He [God] is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Neither time nor space can possibly remove us from the Father for His right hand is present everywhere.

Though physically we gather for worship in a Church building surrounded with icons, candles, incense, and an altar; but in a mystery, our worship is conducted in the heavenlies where God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, the holy angels, and the saints are enrolled in heaven. During the Divine Liturgy, the Church on earth joins the Church in heaven, as they are just one Church, in praise and thanksgiving to the Blessed Trinity.

To become spiritual beings, and to have eternal life, we must enter the deep spiritual kingdom. As new creation, we live physically on solid ground, Earth, but we must be willing to traverse upward to heavenly realms! We are to live unto Christ in the world doing good as He did, keeping ourselves from all evil as He interceded for us to His Father saying "I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one" (Jn 17:15). But we are also to live in 'the heavenlies' simultaneously, being seated in glory on thrones with the Son of Man.

Unless we discipline ourselves to become spiritual beings, we will remain fruitless and purposeless in life. St. Paul warned us not to allow our ignorance of the Holy Bible, fleshly desires, frailties, and limitations to take precedence over our high spiritual calling; we should not be concerned primarily with our troubles below but rather with His truths above. "For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace" (Rom 8:5-6).

Means to Experience the Heavenly Places and Spiritual Power

- Pray continuously. Prayer is the taste of the kingdom of God. Through prayers we taste on earth what we will enjoy in heaven. Just being in the presence of God is a great enjoyment.
- Study the Scriptures. Read daily the Holy Bible and learn how to apply it practically and spiritually in your life. David the prophet said, "Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You!" (Ps 119:11). The Scripture is our shield against sin.
- Repent and confess your sins. When we sin it is only against God "Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight" (Ps 51:4). Cleansing ourselves from our weaknesses and confessing them restore our relationship with God and make us worthy to be with His Son in the heavenly places.
- Partake of the Holy Eucharist. This is the means by which we can abide in our Lord. "He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him" (Jn 6:56). Communion does not give us a temporary union with the Lord but eternal life. For in the Divine Liturgy the priest, referring to the blessings of the Holy Eucharist in the last confession, says given for us for salvation, remission of sins and eternal life to those who partake of Him.

May the occasion of the Feast of Ascension remind us of our new status in Christ, new creatures in Him joined heirs with Him and inhabitants of the heavenly kingdom.