

**Bless the Lord, O My Soul**

*We bow our hearts in prayer:* O Lord, You descended to us to take on our humanity, and now You have ascended into heaven to bring our humanity into heaven. Proclaim to us Your many and rich blessings of forgiveness of our sins, life, and salvation. Open our minds to Scripture and clothe us in power from on High, so that we may bless You forever. Amen.

Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Our text is a combination of two very different days: Easter Sunday and Ascension Day.

However, the way St. Luke reports it here in his Gospel, it sounds like one.

This isn't to say St. Luke doesn't know what he's saying;

He is the one who tells us very clearly that Jesus' ascension into heaven happened 40 days after His resurrection, in the book of Acts.

But here in his Gospel, he wants us to focus on the climax of the Gospel, Jesus' resurrection, and prepare the reader for his next book which begins with the Ascension & Pentecost.

And yet, there are important things to meditate on in Luke's brief conclusion.

So let us hear this portion of the Word of the Lord with open minds.

*Our text for meditation today is...*

*We read as follows in Jesus' name:*

Then [Jesus] said to them, "These are My words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of My Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high."

And He led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up His hands He blessed them. While He blessed them, He parted from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped Him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God.<sup>(ESV)</sup>

*These are Your Words, heavenly Father; sanctify us in the truth, Your Word is Truth. Amen.* <sup>(John 17:17)</sup>

The first part of our text was part of Jesus' discourse with His Apostles on Easter evening.

This is when He opened their minds to understand Scripture (for them being the OT),

to show them the necessity for Jesus' death and resurrection in God's plan of salvation.

If this was important for God to tell His people before Jesus died,

it follows that it is important for God's people to know after Jesus rose from the dead, too.

And that's because God's goal isn't just to tell people the gruesome story of what humans did to His Son and how He counteracted their foolishness through the resurrection.

It's to proclaim what that story means for you, namely forgiveness of sins:

How Jesus' death was the atoning sacrifice you needed for God to forgive you.

And how Jesus' resurrection is living proof that God accepted His sacrifice.

So since this message is important for people to know, Jesus chose men to tell it, to proclaim it. Originally, these were the Apostles, the men who had followed Him and heard Him preach, and witnessed the many miracles He performed, as well as His death and resurrection. To strengthen them for their work, He promised them a special impartation of the Holy Spirit. This was an important promise, not just because it was prophesied about in the book of Joel, as we will hear about at next week's celebration of Pentecost, but because Jesus would no longer walk visibly among them and lead them. He was to return to His rightful seat of authority, the right hand of the Father in heaven, to *live and reign* over all creation, now also with His human nature.

But all this took some time to sink in for the Apostles, as it does for us. If you will recall, on Easter evening, they were behind locked doors. They were scared of the Jews, who had so recently orchestrated Jesus' crucifixion. Though they probably could have quoted all the passages that pointed to Jesus' death and resurrection, they still yet did not understand completely what they meant for them. And so, Jesus did not leave them immediately after His resurrection. He appeared to them numerous times over the next 40 days, using His visits to prove, assure, strengthen and to teach them what this all meant for them and all people.

We see that His work was accomplished by the end of Luke's Gospel, because the apostles were no longer scared of the Jews, or what they might do to them. They weren't hiding up behind locked doors or staying away from them in Galilee. Instead, after Jesus' blessed them and ascended, they went to the temple, the epicenter of Jewish life and **were continually in the temple blessing God**. And what is more, we hear no mention of sadness that Jesus had ascended and left them. Instead, we see evidence that they realized that He had not left them at all, but was, in fact, still with them, as He said, **to the end of the age.** Matthew 28:20

May it be, dear fellow redeemed, that you live with such certainty as well. But this certainty doesn't come about by the power of your will, choosing to believe. Nor does it remain, let alone grow, in you without God's Word and work. It comes about by the power of the Holy Spirit, working through Word and Sacrament. This is why Christians gather together every Sunday for the Divine Service. While your Old Adam, your sinful human nature, finds this a drudgery and inconvenience, the New Man realizes its necessity, having Scripture opened to you once again, hearing the proclamation of Jesus crucified and risen for the forgiveness of your sins, and receiving His body and blood, for that same forgiveness and strength. To the Old Adam, this means death. But to the New Man, life and vitality.

In the OT, it was commanded that the people go to the Tabernacle, then the Temple, to make the appointed sacrifices for their sins. But after Jesus' crucifixion, such sacrifices were not necessary. And yet, where do we find the Apostles' going? They returned to the Temple to bless God.

How different a plan do we often have. Even we who have had Scripture opened to us.  
When we hear that we don't "have to" go to church, we take advantage.

We say things like: "I can read my Bible at home." (though this rarely happens) or  
"I can worship God out in nature, just as well as in an old building."

Or we plan activities or join groups that regularly meet during the Divine Service.  
And so we treat these gatherings as if they were more of an optional Bible lecture,  
than an opportunity to be visited by God.

Now perhaps I am preaching to the choir here, but sometimes it's choir membership  
or some other churchly duty or activity that leads us to attend the Divine Service.  
And so we would treat the Divine Service as more of a social club,  
than an opportunity to be blessed by your Savior.

Perhaps it's a sense of guilt or mandatory sermon reviews, or parents that often drag you here,  
or fear of an irregularity in your weekly routine.  
And so the Service becomes more of a temporal anchor,  
weighing you down and keeping your internal clock grounded,  
than a refreshing and enlivening encounter with the gracious Triune God.

And obviously our reasons and motivations can change on a weekly, monthly, & annual basis,  
But there is a better reason and motivation to attend the Divine Service:  
that is to receive the blessing of the Lord.

St. Luke reports that as Jesus was blessing the Apostles, He departed from them.  
We don't know what specific words Jesus used for that blessing,  
but when God blesses, we want to be there and be the recipients of that blessing.

And that is the primary reason we gather each week: to receive God's blessings,  
His blessings of forgiveness, mercy, strength, life, and salvation.

To put it briefly, we come to be in God's presence and receive Jesus.

Here He promises to be in the Word and in the flesh, as the Word-made-flesh,  
in the Lord's Supper.

You come to be blessed by the proclamation of Jesus' life of perfect reception of God's gifts,  
a life not only lived for you but also given to you in Baptism.

You come to be blessed by the proclamation of Jesus' death, as He was crucified  
to atone for the sinful selfish reasons you have attended to His services.

You come to be blessed by the proclamation of the forgiveness of all of your sins.

You come to be blessed by the impartation of God's presence in the Holy Communion.

And being blessed by God, you desire to respond to His presence and blessings.

The disciples did too, as we're told, they "**blessed God.**"

Have you noticed one of the closing lines of the Communion, Matins, and Vespers services?

The Pastor says: *Let us bless the Lord.*

And the congregation responds: *Thanks be to God.* It always seemed odd to me.

Obviously, we, creatures, cannot bestow a blessing upon God, our Creator,  
as if He could gain anything from us.

Rather, our blessing of God is to be understood in the original Hebrew word: "barak",  
meaning to 'thank,' 'praise,' or 'extol.'

And so, we properly respond to God's presence by returning to it week after week  
and blessing Him regularly with praise and thanks,

And just when we think that we have the last Word, through His ministers He leaves us go  
on our way with one last blessing and benediction: The Lord bless you and keep you...

*Soli Deo Gloria*