

Ascension

Ephesians 4:7-16

May 9, 2024 at St. Matthew, Port Washington, WI

Life Is Looking Up!

A seismic shift has occurred in our culture. New surveys find that less than 50% of Americans claim to be Christian. A much, much smaller percentage of those who claim to be Christian actually attend worship regularly. Surveys reveal that Christians are often pictured as elitists who want to condemn others and ruin all your fun. False teachings are rampant. For true believers, life in a sin-infected world is tough. And yet, tonight we celebrate because Jesus ascended into heaven and life is looking up. Ephesians 4:7-16 has way too much good material to digest in detail. Tonight, I'm just going to pull three tasty morsels for us to chew on. We will see that life is looking up because:

1. Jesus captured our captors
2. Jesus established the ministry
3. Jesus grants us spiritual growth

Jesus captured our captives

One of the main points of the book of Ephesians is that all believers are spiritually equal. It does not matter if someone is a Jew or a non-Jew. Everyone is saved by grace alone, through faith. That does not mean, however, that believers are clones, all looking the same and having the same gifts and abilities. Here in Ephesians 4:7, the Apostle Paul explained, “**But to each one of us grace** [Here, the word “grace” refers to unique gifts that God gives believers.] **has been given as Christ apportioned it.** ⁸**This is why it says:** [Alluding to Psalm 68] “**When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people.**” Jesus is able to give us unique gifts and abilities to each believer because he captured our captors.

A literal translation of :8 says that Jesus “**took captivity captive.**” Bible translators struggle to make Paul's point clear. The idea is that Jesus' ascension proves that he won. He came into this world to save us from our captivity to sin, death and the devil. We were held captive to all three. We were sinful from

the moment of our conception. Our sins condemn us to death. By nature, we are powerless against the devil. But because Jesus lived the perfect life as our substitute and died to pay for our sins, our sins are forgiven and death is just a nap after which we wake up in heaven. The devil thought he had you in his clutches, but he lost his power when you were baptized and brought to faith. Jesus came into the world to save you from sin, death and the devil. The fact that he ascended into heaven is proof that his job is done. His ascension is proof that your sins are forgiven, that Jesus won life after death for you and that the devil can not drag you into hell. Life is looking up!

Jesus established the ministry

Life is also looking up because Jesus established the ministry. Paul continued in :9, “**(What does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions?** [Think of this as referring to his burial. Jesus descended to death in a grave.] ¹⁰**He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.)** ¹¹**So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers.**” When Jesus was on this earth, if you wanted to hear him speak, you needed to go to Galilee, or Bethany, or wherever Jesus was staying at that time. But now that Jesus has ascended, his Word is not confined to any specific location. His Word is proclaimed throughout the world, wherever there are ministers who share God's Word. Because Jesus knew that we still needed his Word after he ascended, he established the ministry.

I mentioned earlier that believers are not clones. Jesus gives all of us different gifts and abilities. Some of those gifts include being able to share God's Word in different ways. Paul explained that Christ made some men **apostles**, like Paul, Peter, John and others. They were the original 12 who were sent out to share the message of salvation with the world. They could also perform miracles. **Prophets** refer to those who have the special ability of being able to explain God's Word. **Evangelists** are those who are especially good at sharing the gospel with unbelievers. **Pastors and teachers** are those who can really connect God's Word with God's people. Jesus made sure to give certain people the gifts that were needed so

that the gates of hell would not prevail against his kingdom. Through centuries of persecution and apathy and false teaching, the Lord kept the gospel going from generation to generation so that you are hearing it again tonight. Jesus established the ministry so that you would hear God's Word and be saved. Life is looking up.

Jesus grants us spiritual growth

Life is also looking up because Jesus grants us spiritual growth. This is more than just head knowledge, like Bible trivia, although we certainly want to always be learning more about the Bible. This is trust in the heart as we fall back into God's arms and trust that he is going to get us through life on earth to eternal life in heaven. Through the proclamation of his Word, God wants to strengthen our faith more and more. When you spend time with God's Word, your faith is strengthened, even if you don't feel anything. As we spend more time with God's Word, our faith will keep getting stronger until (:13,14), **"we all reach unity in the faith and ... become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming."**

What a wonderful thing to know. Even though demons continue to assault us, and the world around us gets more immoral, and false prophets and churches are all over the place, and our bodies grow older and slower, your faith is going to keep getting stronger. You do not need to worry. Your ascended Savior is going to keep strengthening your faith. Life is looking up.

It is appropriate, I think, that Luke specifically told us that when Jesus ascended into heaven, the disciples kept looking up. Because Jesus ascended we have a reason to look up to heaven and praise and thank our God. You have a reason to celebrate. No matter what aches or pains you struggle with, no matter what fears haunt you, no matter what sins nag you, you can sing and rejoice because:

- Jesus captured our captors – sin, death and the devil can't bother you

- Jesus established the ministry – someone shares God's Word with you
- Jesus grants us spiritual growth – you keep getting stronger in the faith

Jesus ascended and so, life is looking up. Amen.