

A Song of Ascents

To You I lift up my eyes,
 O You who are enthroned in the heavens!
 Behold, as the eyes of servants
 look to the hand of their master,
 as the eyes of a maidservant
 to the hand of her mistress,
 so our eyes look to the LORD our God,
 till He has mercy upon us.
 Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us,
 for we have had more than enough of contempt.
 Our soul has had more than enough of the scorn of those who are at ease,
 of the contempt of the proud.

The psalmist lifts his eyes from Jerusalem, the city and its temple, to the Lord who dwells there. Our Lord came into our time and space, He entered into Jerusalem to be betrayed, suffer, and die bearing the sins of the world, in accordance with the good and gracious will of His Father. We heard two weeks ago in Gethsemane, as the hour of His deepest humiliation drew near, Jesus cried out to His Father. The great hymnwriter Paul Gerhardt, in one of the greatest Lenten hymns ever written, sets forth the dialogue between the Father and the Son; the plan of our redemption:

*“Go forth, My Son,” the Father said,
 And free My children from their dread
 Of guilt and condemnation.
 The wrath and stripes are hard to bear,
 But by Your passion they will share
 The fruit of Your salvation.”*

*“Yes, Father, yes, most willingly
 I’ll bear what You command Me.
 My will conforms to Your decree,
 I’ll do what You have asked Me.”*

LSB 438:2, 3

Throughout His ministry and throughout His Passion, Jesus lifted His voice to His Father. Even as He faces the sentence of death from earthly authorities, Jesus keeps the First and Second Commandments. He fears, loves, and trusts in His Father above all things. He calls upon His Father in prayer. In the Passion reading for this week, Jesus stands for judgment before the Roman Governor and King Herod Antipas. He who will judge the living and the dead stands on trial before earthly judges. As Roman Governor, Pilate has the power to deliver or to condemn. He states this very fact to Jesus in exasperation over Jesus’ silence. But Jesus tells Pilate that the authority he has is given to him from above. Pilate’s authority comes not simply from being a loyal servant of Caesar, but from God.

Jesus subjects Himself to Pilate’s authority, even though it is used unjustly. Again and again we hear how Pilate finds nothing in Jesus that is worthy of death. Yet Pilate eventually gave the sentence the crowd demanded because he wished to satisfy them. Jesus goes willingly. In this subjugation to the sentence of unjust men, Jesus is obedient to His Father. It is through Jesus’ willing obedience, His suffering the wrath and stripes of men, the mockery, scorn, and contempt, the setting aside of all sense of justice, is how mercy and deliverance is accomplished for us.

Jesus does not depend upon Pilate’s sense of mercy. He does not care to please Herod’s whims and curiosity for some spectacle. He answers Herod not a word. He will not satisfy mere earthly desires for impressive signs. He only speaks to Pilate to confess the truth, to confess His Father, to call all who will hear Him to listen to His voice. He depends only on His Father. Not in the simple obedience of a servant to his master, out of fear of punishment, but in the love of a son for his father. And the Father who loves the Son, who accepts His perfect sacrifice for sins, raises Him up from the dead. The scorn and contempt which our Lord suffered cannot harm Him. The hatred for Christ that still remains to this day cannot drag Him back into the tomb.

By Christ's loving obedience unto death, heaven is opened to you. The just and well-deserved judgment for your sins has been placed on Jesus. You have no answer to give for your sins because they have been set out of the Father's sight, answered for by Jesus' blood, and His blood is upon you. You find an open heaven. Its doors are not closed to you. Mercy is not withheld from you. So in the Book of Acts we hear of Stephen, who is hauled before the Sanhedrin, the same body of Jewish leaders who condemned Jesus to death, who suffers yet another unjust trial and is cast out to be stoned to death. He lifts his eyes to the Lord and beholds Him standing at the right hand of God. He yields his spirit to the Lord Jesus in confidence and prays for his murderers.

There is the lifting of eyes to God in faith. The eyes of the heart look upon Him seeking the mercy that He has promised to give because of Christ's sacrifice. Here we see not just the obedience of a servant to a master, but the trust of a child. This is what God is always calling us to do. To put our trust in Him. It is what He does particularly in times such as these recent days. The Son, raised and vindicated over His enemies, reigns for the good of His people. The sufferings of this present age drive us to cry to Him for mercy, trusting in His goodness and His gracious will.

If this plague is lifted soon, and the trials of various drugs are shown to prevent the deaths of thousands, God be praised for His earthly mercy. If He blesses our nation and world with a swift return to smooth commerce and abundant employment, again, God be praised. If we never again in our lifetimes have to suffer want of pasta, frozen pizza, and cleaning products, again, God be praised.

But if not, if this illness lingers and spreads, if there is no cure for this or whatever other diseases afflict us, if the economy plummets us into a Great Depression and rampant poverty, if even frozen brussels sprouts and canned lima beans become scarce because that is all that is finally left in the stores, if, despite all our hopes and prayers for the Lord's return in glory we all must close our eyes in bodily death, lift up your eyes to the Lord who is enthroned in heaven, who is master not just over life but over death, and who has used and continues to use that power for His church, for you.

We draw near to the most sobering days of the church year – Passiontide – where we contemplate the sufferings and pain of our Lord Jesus. In a week we will hear of the Lord's crucifixion, death, and burial. In whatever way we are able, and God only knows what that will be, on Good Friday we will commemorate His death. But in the midst of all this, the stripped down altars, the veiled crosses, and our own colorless lives in the world at this time, we do not forget the end of the story. We know how it ends. It ends with the empty tomb. Mercy is given. Not just to the spotless Lamb and beloved Son, but to you. It is not only Jesus' tomb that is empty. Yours shall be as well.