

Victorious Living

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Rev. Peter Jonker

Hebrews 2:5-11

Ascension is like a cosmic VE-day. Have you all seen those old pictures of Times Square in New York City on VE - victory in Europe - day? That's the day when the Nazi's surrendered at the end of World War Two. Can you see those pictures in your mind? I know you older members have seen them. I'm not sure about you younger ones. I went on line this week and checked some of them out. They are pictures of unbridled joy. It was a party! Thousands and thousands of people in Times Square. Ticker tape flying. People hanging from lampposts. Total strangers embracing each other! Hitler was dead! Good had won! Evil was defeated. Those pictures capture something of the spirit and the theology of Ascension Day. On Ascension Day we celebrate the victory of Jesus over the powers of evil that threatened us. Jesus has faithfully finished his earthly mission! He went to the cross and endured its shame. He took the weight of sin on his shoulders. He put a stake in death's heart and God raised him up again. Now he has ascended into heaven. In the words of the creed, he is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. So today, he is seated on a throne ruling over creation. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him! Good has won! Evil is defeated! That's the theology and the spirit of Ascension Day. It's a good day to sing "All Hail the Power of Jesus Name". It's a Good day to bring forth the royal diadem and crown him Lord of all.

It's also a good day to turn to the book of Hebrews. There is no book in the Bible that emphasizes the ascension of Jesus more than this book. In some ways the book of Hebrews is an extended meditation on Jesus' heavenly reign. The book opens with the preacher telling us about the ascended majesty of the Son: "*[Jesus] is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the majesty in heaven.*" Sat down at the right hand of the majesty in heaven. He was seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty. The preacher starts out by showing you the ascended Lord on his throne. Then throughout the book, the preacher continues to riff on that ascended power. He does it by telling you all the things that Jesus is greater than. Jesus is greater than the angels. Jesus is greater than Moses. Jesus message is greater than the law. Jesus is greater than the High priest. He serves in a greater temple, a heavenly one, and in that temple he offers a greater sacrifice, one that cleanses us inside and out. From start to finish, the preacher of Hebrews turns our eyes to the power of the ascended Jesus.

Which brings us to our passage. Hebrews 2 also celebrates the ascension. The preacher tells us that Jesus is crowned with glory and Honor and the Father has put everything under his feet. But our passage adds something to that general picture. The preacher says, in so many words, "Did you know that that person sitting on the throne is not just the King of creation, he is your brother!" That's your brother sitting at the right hand of God the Father! Verse 11: *He is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters!* We have family in high places! Wow. There are benefits to such lofty connections. Verse 10 tells us that because Jesus reigns at God's right hand *we can be sure he will bring all us sons and daughters to glory.* So that's the good news of Ascension Day. Jesus, our king *and* our brother! It's definitely something worth celebrating. But that good news also raises a question. If Jesus is king over this world, and if this king is my brother, why is my life so hard? If Jesus my brother has conquered the powers of evil and sin and he is already

now reigning in glory, why do I feel so powerless in my everyday life? “Lord, I sang “All hail the Power of Jesus Name” this morning! I brought forth the royal diadem and crowned you Lord of all. But if you reign, why can’t I seem to fix my marriage? Why does depression keep smothering me in sadness? Why can’t I loosen addiction’s hold on my friend’s life? Lord, if you reign, why can’t I bring that child of mine, who’s wandered away from the faith, back to you? If we are sons and daughters of the cosmic king, why is it so hard?

Reasonable questions. In the world that we see, sons and daughters of kings usually do pretty well. Prince Harry is getting married to Megan Markel soon. Prince Harry is a son of the future king. Being a son of the king opens doors for him. If I go to dinner at Rose’s (the restaurant on the shores of Reed’s Lake in East Grand Rapids) at 6 pm on a Friday night, I’m probably going to wait an hour for a table, longer if I want the patio. If Prince Harry and Megan Markel showed up at Rose’s at 6 pm on a Friday night, do you think they would wait an hour for a patio table? Not likely. “Your majesty! Ms. Markel! So good to have you with us tonight! Of course we have a table for you! Right this way! If there’s anything, anything at all you need from us, anything at all, please don’t hesitate to ask!” If you are the son of a king, doors open for you. If you are a son of a king, you call the governor and say you want a meeting, the governor says how about this afternoon. If you are the daughter of a king and you say you want to be a part of that international conference on refugees, they give you a chair at the head table. Does any of that seem to match your experience as a son or daughter of the ascended king? Probably not.

Of course there are some Christians who would say, that’s your fault. You’re doing it wrong! You don’t feel like victorious sons and daughters of King Jesus, because you aren’t living victoriously. You aren’t claiming the victory that he has won! If you would just pray victoriously, with deeper faith, the Lord will zap that cancer. If you praise him a little better and trust in the victory he has won for you, he will give you the money for those bills! Pray victoriously, live victoriously and there is no power that can stand against you! Your church will grow, your family will thrive, and your business will flourish. Believe it and you will receive it! Name it and you will claim it!

The preacher of Hebrews has a different view of things. The preacher of Hebrews has a different idea about what victorious living looks like. Look at the end of verse 8 and the beginning of verse 9. The Preacher has just finished talking about how God the Father has placed everything under Jesus and crowned him with glory and honor. Then he makes this admission: “Yet at present, we do not see everything subject to him.” The preacher knows our Ascension Day questions. “Lord if everything is under his feet, why do I feel like I’m being trampled?” “Yes,” says the preacher. “We all have those questions. We all have those feelings. But even though we don’t see everything under his feet. We do see Jesus. We do see Jesus who was made lower than the angels for a little while, but who is now crowned with glory and honor!” “We do see Jesus.” If you want to understand why it’s hard, look carefully at King Jesus! Look carefully at your brother up there on his throne.

If we want to understand victorious living, it’s not enough for us to know that Jesus is on the throne and that we are sons and daughters of the king. We need to understand how our brother got to that throne. Verse 9 tells us that before Jesus was crowned with glory and honor, He was made lower than the angels for a little while. That’s the incarnation. Before Jesus got to the throne, he had to endure the manger in Bethlehem, the persecution of Herod, and the opposition on ridicule of sinful men. Before Jesus rose to the throne and had everything under his feet, Jesus’ feet had to walk this earth with us. Before Jesus rose to the throne and had everything under his feet, his feet had to be pierced with nails. As the end of verse 9 has it, “Jesus is crowned with glory and honor *because* he tasted death for everyone.” As verse 10 has

it, “he was made perfect through what he suffered.” For Jesus victorious living meant walking a long hard road that led to a cross. If that’s what victorious living looked like for Jesus, why would it look any different for the other sons and daughters of the king?

When I was just starting out in ministry I visited Henry Stob when he was dying of cancer. Do you know that name, Henry Stob? He was a teacher of Philosophy and Ethics at Calvin College and Calvin Seminary. He is on the Mount Rushmore of old Calvin teaching legends, along with Jellema and Plantinga and Wolterstorff. Calvin College still has a lecture series named after him, the Stob lectures. I visited him in the winter of 1996, he was sick, but still communicative. He lived in one of those small one-room apartments at Raybrook Manor. When I visited Henry and I sat in one corner of the room while Henry’s wife Hilda lay on the bed on the other side of the room. She did not join the conversation. Hilda had advanced stage dementia, and Henry had been her caregiver for a number of years already. Dr. Stob was a gracious man. I was only 29 and yet he honored my visits and ministrations with patience and courtesy. We spoke together of the hope of heaven in the face of death. He talked about his worry of leaving Hilda behind. We prayed together. At the end of one of my last visits, out of the blue, Dr. Stob wanted to tell me a story from his childhood. It was from a time when he lived on the south side of Chicago in the Dutch ghetto. All his extended family lived and worked in that area. It was winter and young Henry was out on an errand with his uncle. I forget what they were doing...but I remember it involved carrying things back and forth in their horse drawn wagon. It was one of those fierce Chicago winter days. The wind was blowing and as the day wore on the snow kept coming down. It was one of those hard, sideways snows. Henry and his uncle decided to call it a day. The weather was awful and the streets were thick with snow and hardly anyone was even on the roads anymore. As they made their way home, they saw a man coming towards them on the road, far off in the distance. The man was walking into the wind, into the teeth of the storm. He was all bundled up and he was leaning forward with his head slightly tilted to the side, the way people do when they are walking into a snowstorm. There was no one else around. In the immensity of all that wind and all that snow, the man looked impossibly small. He looked desolate and alone. He and his uncle grew closer to the man, and as they rode past young Henry was able to catch a glimpse of the man’s face. It was his father. His father was out in the snow on some nameless errand for his family, doing his fatherly duty for the people he loved. His uncle turned to him after they passed and said, “There goes a Son of the King.”

I didn’t understand what Henry Stob was trying to tell me with that story at the time, but I think I do now. He knew that his earthly days were coming to an end. Soon he would pass from this life to the next. When he did, people would gather for his funeral and they would say glowing things about what a great teacher he was, and what a great scholar he was, what a victorious life he’d led. But sitting there in that room, fighting cancer and caring for his ailing wife, that’s not how he felt about himself; that was not what counted as victorious living for him. He knew how small he was. He knew how hard it could be. He knew that the only reason he had hope was because he was the son of the King, the King who had won his victory by walking alone down a solitary road carrying an unimaginable burden so that all us sons and daughters could be brought to glory. That’s what victorious living looks like. It looks like Jesus on the road to Calvary. It looks like Henry Stob’s dad out there in the storm. It looks like Henry Stob caring for his wife in that small beige room. It looks like you and me doing the small acts of love that the Lord sets in our path every day...walking down our road...our heads turned against from the wind ...our legs tired...but the eyes of our heart lifted high to our brother Jesus, the ascended king.