

How important an invitation the Gospel summons is. When Israel refuses it, and breaks the promise of attending the Wedding Feast of the Kingdom of God (Matthew 22:1-10), the Lord of the Kingdom sends out His servants to gather others! The Father is determined to fill His banqueting hall with guests.

With many new folks at our church completing membership classes, we seek this week to *expand* our appreciation of our invitation into God's Kingdom by remembering that this Gospel summons comes from the lips of our Ascended Lord Jesus. He is the victorious One who was dead but now lives, and He sovereignly sends out His messengers to gather subjects into His banqueting hall.

May our sense of awe before our Savior increase as we consider His ascended glory and hear His voice of invitation thunder from His throne (Revelation 3:20). May the LORD encourage a believing response from each one inquiring at this time into the claims of Christ as to His Divine Lordship and His redeeming work.

We begin this week's notes by tracing Christ's descent into the depths of suffering for our sins, and then we will follow Him in His ascent to glory at God's right hand.

Monday: Read Luke 24:50-53; Exodus 23:14-18, Psalm 121 & Luke 19:28

The Cost of Ascent

The Old Testament calendar focused on "going up" to worship at Jerusalem. In fact, one view of this phrase, "to go up to Jerusalem," is that it invokes the Psalms of Ascent (Psalms 120-134), which were written for pilgrims to sing on pilgrimage to God's House. All Jews were required to assemble three times a year in Jerusalem for the pilgrim feasts (Exodus 23:14-18).

For example, Psalm 121:1 introduces us to one such Song of Ascent in which the pilgrim "looked to the hills" (the hills of Mt. Zion) stating that their help came from the Lord enthroned in His temple. In this way, the pilgrim crowds who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday looked to their time in the Holy City as a time of joyful sacrificial worship in which they were to experience anew forgiveness and Divine favor through the sacrifices. For them "going up to Jerusalem" was a joyful event, accompanied by much feasting. But what a difference for Jesus! Feasting with God's people would have to wait, because He alone understood the cost of the sacrifice which He would offer in the Holy City.

How lonely was His ride to the Cross. No wonder that, even after His Ascension to God's right hand, His vow to abstain from the "cup of the Kingdom" still applies (Matthew 26:19). Christ's economic task of interceding as our Mediator means that He must put off the full joy of entering the final glories of His Kingdom until "all the ransomed church of God is saved to sin no more," as the hymn puts it. Then we will join Him in drinking the cup of His final victory over sin.

Meditate and Pray: Thank you, Jesus, that you show us how important the Wedding Supper of the Lamb is by refusing to eat and drink of it until all your invited elect, from every tribe and nation, can join you. Teach us to value the ordinances of your grace which prepare us for that Wedding Supper. Please seek us out when we neglect the means of grace and absent ourselves from our place in church where we hear that Gospel summons.

Sing about that day of being welcomed into Christ's kingdom with hymn # 253:

1 There is a fountain filled with blood,
drawn from Immanuel's veins;
and sinners, plunged beneath that flood,
lose all their guilty stains:
lose all their guilty stains,
lose all their guilty stains;
and sinners, plunged beneath that flood,
lose all their guilty stains.

3 E'er since by faith I saw the stream
your flowing wounds supply,
redeeming love has been my theme,
and shall be till I die:
and shall be till I die,
and shall be till I die;
redeeming love has been my theme,
and shall be till I die.

2 The dying thief rejoiced to see
that fountain in his day;
and there have I, as vile as he,
washed all my sins away:
washed all my sins away,
washed all my sins away;
and there have I, as vile as he,
washed all my sins away.

5 Dear dying Lamb, your precious blood
shall never lose its pow'r,
till all the ransomed church of God
be saved, to sin no more:
be saved, to sin no more,
be saved, to sin no more;
till all the ransomed church of God
be saved to sin no more.

Tues/Weds: Read Luke 19:28 & v. 45-48 & Hebrews 9:1-12

The Cost of Offering Up

“Going up” to Jerusalem was not the only ascent celebrated in Israel. In Luke 19:28, for example, Jesus is not simply “going up” to Jerusalem as one among many pilgrims to the Holy City. He is “going up” as the real High Priest to the place of His sacrifice – laying claim to God’s temple as His rightful place of service.

No wonder that Christ exercises such authority in cleansing the temple in Luke 19:45-48. He alone has both the authority and purity to offer sacrifices in place of the false worship of the greedy priests of His day. In this way, He comes boldly to Jerusalem to remove all altars except His own, committing Himself to offering up the perfect sacrifice in place of sinners.

How did Jesus expect to gain access into His Father’s presence as He offered up His life on the altar of the Cross, with the pleasing aroma of that sacrifice ascending to Heaven? The answer is two-fold. First, He brought His own blood and took that blood all the way up into the Heavenly Holy of Holies, as Hebrews 9:11-12 describes. Second, Christ covered all His saving, sacrificial work with prayer:

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death and was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.
Hebrews 5:7-9

In this way, Jesus covered His priestly work with the pleasing aroma arising from the incense of His prayers.

Meditate and Pray: Thank you, Jesus, that you live to intercede for us as your church on earth. Thank you that you have finished our redemption, entering the Holy of Holies in Heaven once for all with your blood for our sin. Thank you that from this high place of authority you rule our lives through your compassionate prayers for us. Pray for us, Jesus, in our time of trials! Amen.

Thursday: Read Leviticus 9:22-24 and Luke 24:50-53**Blessing and Ascending**

Every priest who preceded the coming of our Great High Priest, Jesus, had to come down from making atonement on the altar, just as Aaron does in Leviticus 9:22. Having first ascended the altar -- which was always built on a place of eminence, higher than the dwellings of the Israelites-- and having finished blessing the people of God, he came down again to the level of his fellow sinners, only to perform the daily sacrifice for sin again on the next day, and repeatedly every year on the Day of Atonement. For Aaron and his descendants, their work of repeated sacrifice for sin was never finished. Their work was characterized by weakness and repeated, vain sacrifices.

But how gloriously different is Jesus' work as our priest! When *He* had raised His hands in blessing in Luke 24:50, He went up (not down) to permanently open our way of access into God's presence in Heaven. Now when Jesus invites us to join Him at the Wedding Supper, we may be sure that the way has indeed been opened for us, and it is a way "up" into permanent blessing.

Meditate and Pray: Lord Jesus, we know it is your desire that each one of your people behold your glory in Heaven (John 17:24). But we are beset with so many obstacles – all of which threaten our progress up the mountain of God. Help us! Raise our sight to Heaven, where you are actively engaged in intercession for us. Please pray for us that our faith won't fail. Amen.

Friday: Read Luke 24:50-53 and Leviticus 16:29-34**Ascended Forever**

According to tradition, the high point of the celebration of the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16) was the ascending of the High Priest up the steps to the temple of God. Think about this for a moment. Every year, at the Day of Atonement, all Israel would observe the High Priest as he ascended the steps up to the Temple and into the Holy Place with sacrificial blood in hand.

Tradition has it that there were approximately 15 steps on which Levite choirs would stand and sing as the High Priest ascended up to the Holy of Holies. This picture finds fulfillment in Jesus our High Priest, who 40 days after His resurrection ascended to God's right hand, there to offer up His blood in the true, Heavenly temple. Moreover, the praises which accompanied Him up to the Heavenly temple were that of the angelic choirs, not mere Levites! Having provided this Heavenly purification for sins, "He sat down," His work complete (Hebrews 1:1-3).

Meditate and Pray: Let us thank God that His Son's ascent was not merely up to the earthly Jerusalem, but to Heaven itself. Sing about His "once-for-all" completed, priestly work with the help of hymn # 242:

*Not all the blood of beasts
On Jewish altars slain
Could give the guilty conscience peace
Or wash away the stain.*

*But Christ, the heav'nly Lamb,
Takes all our sins away;
A sacrifice of nobler name
And richer blood than they.*

*My faith would lay her hand
On that dear head of Thine,
While, like a penitent, I stand,
And there confess my sin.*

*Believing, we rejoice
To see the curse remove;
We bless the Lamb with cheerful voice,
And sing His bleeding love.*

Sat/Sun: Read Luke 22:39-46; John 17:1-9 & Hebrews 5:7-9**Ascending Incense**

The altar of incense sat before the veil into the Holy of Holies and was a holy symbol of the prayers of the priesthood continually rising to God's throne. It continually smoked with the burning coals from the altar of burnt offering. It was associated with the Holy of Holies even though it sat just outside it. Only the High Priest, once a year, could take incense from that altar and enter directly into God's presence and throne on top of the Ark of the Covenant. This most holy access into God's direct presence is described in Leviticus 16:11-14. The incense, as a symbol of prayer, was meant to cover and protect the priest while he ministered in the LORD's direct presence in the Most Holy Place, behind the veil. Only once a year was that High Priest permitted into God's most holy presence like this.

Our Lord Jesus' prayers in His priestly work are meant to remind us of this sacred altar. Our Savior, as High Priest, was able by His holy, sinless, meritorious life to access God's direct presence on our behalf *at all times*. At the darkest of times, we find Him crying out and even sweating blood – *even before He officially took His blood from the Cross up into the Holy of Holies in Heaven*.

This is what we read of in Luke 22:39-46. The Puritan John Owen says that in Gethsemane, Christ begins to descend into hell with our sins weighing Him down. In Gethsemane, Christ covers up our sins and His bearing of our guilt under the holy incense cloud of His prayers. And He does not dare approach His Father without blood. The very pores of His humanity pour forth His sacrificial blood (Luke 22:44).

But the most moving proof that Christ was able to access the Most Holy Place and boldly take His prayers for us right into the Father's presence on His throne was that one of the angels from God's throne in heaven appeared there in the garden to strengthen Him.

What access! What grace from the Father to comfort His Son in the Son's agony for our sins on the night He was betrayed: a messenger comes from home to the Son to reassure Christ that He will be carried through this great ordeal on the Cross.

Meditate and Pray: Oh Our God in Heaven, thank you that you and your Son are one in essence as very God. Along with the Holy Spirit, there is no division into three gods. There is no lower place that the Son inhabits as part god and part man. Thank you, Christ, that you are fully equal with the Father. Only thus could you bear the infinite weight of our sin to be burned up on the altar of your Father's just wrath. Thank you that you were willing to condescend in our nature as low as this: sweating blood on our behalf – in a garden – the very place where Adam first lost his place as your royal son.

Thank you most of all, Jesus, that as infinitely equal with your Father (John 10:30) you have exhausted the wrath due us for sin. You have restored the infinite honor of your Father by an infinite sacrifice. Praise be to your Name. Amen.