

Vespers III
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Concordia Lutheran Mission
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“God Exalts Those of Low Degree through the Heights of Heaven, the Gospel.”

“He hath put down the mighty from *their* seats, and exalted them of low degree.”

St. Luke 1:52

Introduction

Who inhabits the Heights of Heaven? Only those of low degree or the lowly occupy the Heights of Heaven.

But how can this be? How can the low and the bottom of the barrel occupy the Heights of Heaven? Well, perhaps, we had first better understand where and what the Heights of Heaven are.

The Heights of Heaven is of course the place where the Holy Trinity, the True God of heaven and earth, resides. And where do we find the residence of the Holy Trinity in this world? We find the abode of the Holy Trinity in the Gospel. For Jesus says of the Gospel, “Wherever two or three are gathered in My Name, there I am in the midst of them.”¹

And for what do we gather in Christ’s Name? *Absolution of sin*. We are baptized in Christ’s Name, and, thereby, we are absolved of all sin. St. Peter says, “Be baptized every one of you in the Name of Jesus Christ *for the remission of sins*, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”² So, where the Holy Trinity is, there He dwells to forgive sins, removing what expelled us from the Heights of Heaven, our sin, and readmitting us to the Heights of Heaven.

And so we find the Heights of Heaven is the Gospel. For in the Gospel we have the Holy Trinity Himself present; and He is present to forgive our sins.

And this forgiveness raises up the lowly, i.e. sinners, back into relationship with God. Hence, God exalts, that is to say, makes high, those who are lowly and sorrow over their sin.

¹**St. Matthew 18:20**

²**Acts 2:38**

The mighty, however, stick up their noses and pass by the Heights of Heaven because they believe they have no such need for the forgiveness of the Heights of Heaven. They are justified in their own minds by their own righteousness and good works apart from the Gospel. This arrogance, however, does not justify, evidenced by the Lord casting them down from their seats. That ignominious end is suitable for the creature who must eat dust forever³.

So, the Heights of Heaven is found wherever the Gospel is. And the Gospel is God's gracious presence to restore the lowly to the Heights of Heaven forever.

I. Man Fell from the Heights of Heaven when He Lost the Image of God by His Sin

A. Man was created to occupy the Heights of Heaven in the beginning.

In the beginning man occupied the Heights of Heaven because man was created to dwell in the Heights of Heaven. Man was created to occupy the Heights of Heaven because man was created in the Image of God. Moses writes:

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his *own* image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.⁴

The Image of God is the personal, intimate communion man is to have with God. The Image of God is also what separates man from the rest of God's creatures on earth. Luther writes:

... Moses intends to indicate that God was not so delighted at the other creatures as man, whom He had created according to His own similitude. The rest of the animals are designated as footprints of God; but man alone is God's image... . In the remaining creatures God is recognized as by His footprints; but in the human being, especially in Adam, He is truly recognized, because in him there is such wisdom, justice, and knowledge of all things that he may rightly be called a world in miniature. ... He has an understanding of heaven, earth, and the entire creation. And so it gives God pleasure that He made so beautiful a creature.⁵

³**Genesis 3:14**

⁴**Genesis 1:26-27**

⁵*Luther's Works*, Vol. 1, p. 68

Unlike the other creatures of earth, man knew the Holy Trinity and had a happy or blessed knowledge of the Holy Trinity. St. Paul writes:

And have put on the new *man*, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him...⁶

In Catechism we learned:

What was the image of God? The image of God consisted in this – A. That man *knew God* and was *perfectly happy* in such knowledge.⁷

Now to keep personal and intimate company with the Holy Trinity is certainly to occupy the Heights of Heaven, for one cannot go any higher than God Himself – that is rarefied air indeed. Man, then, was created by God to occupy the Heights of Heaven and enjoy an intimate, personal relationship with the Holy Trinity.

B. Man fell from the Heights of Heaven when He lost the Image of God by his sin.

But man fell from the Heights of Heaven when he sinned. Moses writes:

And they heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God amongst the trees of the garden.⁸

Here we see the result of the calamitous fall into sin and man's plunge from the Heights of Heaven. *Adam flees God*. Adam was created for intimate fellowship with God. Now Adam flees God in fear and dread. *What greater catastrophe and carnage can there be than for a creature to depart from his created purpose, and this purpose so sublimely lofty?* Words fail.

So, here we see the strange and awful image of Adam and Eve not warming to their Creator for whom they were intended to enjoy the most intimate fellowship but rather fleeing in fear and dread. Luther writes of this disaster:

⁶**Colossians 3:10**

⁷**Questions 113**, p. 96

⁸**Genesis 3:8**

Therefore the perfect natural endowments in man were the knowledge of God, faith, fear, etc. These Satan has corrupted through sin; just as leprosy poisons the flesh, so the will and reason have become depraved through sin, and man not only does not love God any longer but flees from Him, hates Him, and desires to be and live without Him.⁹

Another glimpse of the damage done by man's fall from the Heights of Heaven is this: With the loss of the Image of God, fallen man sinks below the level of the animals. The prophet Jeremiah writes:

Yea, the stork in the heaven knoweth her appointed times; and the turtle and the crane and the swallow observe the time of their coming; but my people know not the judgment of the LORD.¹⁰

Animals know and carry out God's will but God's people don't know God's will and don't carry it out. Luther writes of the contrast between man's original state and his state after the fall:

Let him have dominion over the fish of the seas Here the rule is assigned to the most beautiful creature, who knows God and is the image of God, in whom the similitude of the divine nature shines forth through his enlightened reason, through his justice and his wisdom. Adam and Eve have become the rulers of the earth, the sea, and the air. ... Adam and Eve heard the words with their ears when God said: "Have dominion." Therefore the naked human being – without weapons and walls, even without any clothing, solely in his bare flesh – was given the rule over all birds, wild beast, and fish.

Even this small part of the divine image we have lost, so much so that we do not even have insight into that fullness of joy and bliss which Adam derived from his contemplation of all the animal creatures. All our faculties today are leprous, indeed dull and utterly dead. Who can conceive of that part, as it were, of the divine nature, that Adam and Eve had insight into all the dispositions of all animals, into their character and all their powers? What kind of a reign would it have been if they had not had this knowledge? Among the saints there is evident in this life some knowledge of God. Its source is the Word and the Holy Spirit. But the knowledge of nature – that we should know all the qualities of trees and herbs, and the dispositions of all the beasts – is utterly beyond repair in this life.

If, then, we are looking for an outstanding philosopher, let us not overlook our first parents while they were still free from sin. They had a most perfect

⁹*Luther's Works*, Vol 1, p.165

¹⁰**Jeremiah 8:7**

knowledge of God, for how would they not know Him whose similitude they had and felt within themselves? Furthermore, they also had the most dependable knowledge of the stars and of the whole of astronomy.

Eve had these mental gifts in the same degree as Adam, as Eve's utterance shows when she answered the serpent concerning the tree in the middle of Paradise. There it becomes clear enough that she knew to what end she had been created and pointed to the source from which she had this knowledge; for she said (Gen. 3:3): "The Lord said." Thus she not only heard this from Adam, but her very nature was pure and full of the knowledge of God to such a degree that by herself she knew the Word of God and understood it.

Of this knowledge we have feeble and almost completely obliterated remnants. The other animals, however, completely lack this knowledge. They do not know their Creator, their origin, and their end; they do not know out of what and why they were created. Therefore they certainly lack that similitude of God. For this reason the psalm also urges (Ps. 32:9): "Do not become like the horse and the mule." ...

What we achieve in this life, however, is brought about, not by the dominion which Adam had but through industry and skill. ... Therefore even now, by the kindness of God, this leprous body has some appearance of the dominion over the other creatures. But it is extremely small and far inferior to that first dominion, when there was no need of skill or cunning, when the creature simply obeyed the divine voice because Adam and Eve were commanded to have dominion over them.¹¹

Unlike the animals, man must now learn much of how creation works by the crude method of trial and error in contrast to his former glory as the greatest philosopher and governor of God's creation.

Man, then, plunged calamitously from the Heights of Heaven when he lost the Image of God by his sin. And so great was the impact that he now returns to the dust of the earth.¹²

II. The Gospel Exalts those of Low Degree, i.e. the Penitent, to the Heights of Heaven and Preserves Them There Forever.

A. The Gospel exalts fallen man to the Heights of Heaven.

¹¹*Luther's Works*, Vol. 1, pp. 66, 67

¹²"In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it was thou taken: for dust thou *art*, and unto dust shalt thou return." **Genesis 3:19**

Man now lies prostrate on the ground, waiting only to return to the earth and dust he is. And here, at this point, the Lord intervenes and exalts fallen man to the Heights of Heaven. This God accomplishes by the Gospel. For the Gospel restores men to communion with the Holy Trinity. Jesus says:

For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.¹³

Again, Jesus says:

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, *even* unto the end of the world.¹⁴

Clearly, the Holy Trinity is present with us in the Gospel. For in Holy Baptism, for example, we learn again that God is Triune, i.e. One God in Three Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

And we also learn in Holy Baptism that God dwells amongst us in a way that restores that happy or blessed knowledge of God, which knowledge was lost in the Garden of Eden and restored only in the Gospel. For Holy Baptism removes that which causes us to flee in fear and dread from the Holy Trinity, our sin. St. Peter states in his Pentecost sermon:

Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.¹⁵

Here, in the Gospel, we see that the Image of God, lost in the Garden of Eden, is restored. For man now again knows who the True God is and has the happy knowledge of God.

And here also we have in the Gospel the Heights of Heaven, for the Heights of Heaven is nothing but the Image of God, i.e. to have intimate communion with God and to dwell with Him. Hence, Jesus says:

If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him.¹⁶

¹³**St. Matthew 18:20.**

¹⁴**St. Matthew 28:19-20.**

¹⁵**Acts 2:38**

¹⁶**St. John 14:23.**

Luther writes of the Gospel:

Now Christians see heaven opened, always hear God the heavenly Father conversing with them, and behold the dear angels continuously ascending and descending upon us. The Heavenly Father still addresses these words to us: “This is My beloved Son!” He will continue to do so until the Day of Judgment, nor will heaven ever be closed again. When you are baptized, partake of Holy Communion, receive the absolution, or listen to a sermon, heaven is open, and we hear the voice of the Heavenly Father; all these works descend upon us from the open heaven above us. God converses with us, governs us, provides for us; and Christ hovers over us.¹⁷

The Gospel, then, exalts man laid low and lowly by his sin to the Heights of Heaven because the Gospel restores the Image of God in fallen man.

B. Those of low-degree, the penitent, enter the Heights of Heaven by faith.

Why, then, does St. Mary sing in her Magnificat that God exalts only those of low degree and casts down the proud? St. Mary sings:

He hath put down the mighty from *their* seats, and exalted them of low degree.¹⁸

If all men be of low-degree because all have lost the Image of God, why does St. Mary distinguish between the mighty and those of low degree?

While indeed all men are of low degree because by the fall all men are bereft of the Image of God, not all men appreciate the fact that they are bereft of the Image of God. Rather, they think that they in and of themselves are mighty and worthy of pride. Arrogance of this kind the Greeks called hubris, i.e. overweening pride that leads to a calamitous fall.

For the unbelievers, they see no need for the forgiveness of sins and indeed are offended by it and, therefore, despise the Gospel, which is the Heights of Heaven. The Lutheran Church, for example, writes of Jesus bringing to us in the Sacrament of Holy Communion all the gifts He has for us from heaven and yet many despising it.

¹⁷*Luther's Works*, American Edition, Vol. 22, **Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 1-4: Sermon Fifteen**, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, tr. Martin H. Bertram, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, p. 202.

¹⁸**St. Luke 1:52.**

In the second place, there is besides this command also a promise, as we heard above, which ought most strongly to incite and encourage us. For here stand the kind and precious words: *This is My body, given for you. This is My blood, shed for you, for the remission of sins.* These words, I have said, are not preached to wood and stone, but to me and you; else He might just as well be silent and not institute a Sacrament. Therefore consider, and put yourself into this YOU, that He may not speak to you in vain.

For here He offers to us the entire treasure which He has brought for us from heaven, and to which He invites us also in other places with the greatest kindness, as when He says in St. Matthew 11, 28: *Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.* Now it is surely a sin and a shame that He so cordially and faithfully summons and exhorts us to our highest and greatest good, and we act so distantly with regard to it, and permit so long a time to pass [without partaking of the Sacrament] that we grow quite cold and hardened, so that we have no inclination or love for it. We must never regard the Sacrament as something injurious from which we had better flee, but as a pure, wholesome, comforting remedy imparting salvation and comfort, which will cure you and give you life both in soul and body. For where the soul has recovered, the body also is relieved.¹⁹

The penitent, i.e. those who through God's Word of repentance²⁰ acknowledge their sins and sorrow over their sins, gladly receive the forgiveness of the Gospel²¹ and are transported to the Heights of Heaven. In Psalm 91 we read:

He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.²²

¹⁹*The Large Catechism, The Sacrament of the Altar*.64-67, Triglotta, p. 769, underscore added.

²⁰“Therefore the Spirit of Christ must not only comfort, but also through the office of the Law *reprove the world of sin*, John 16, 8, and thus must do in the New Testament, as the prophet says, Is. 28, 21, ... He must do *the work of another* [reprove], in order that He may [afterward] do His own work, which is to comfort and preach of grace.” *The Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration, Article V. The Law and the Gospel*.11.

²¹“**272. Who are penitent sinners?** Penitent sinners are sinners who *feel sorry for their sins* (contrition) and *believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior* (faith).” *The Small Catechism*, p. 183.

²²**Psalm 91:1.**

What is the “secret place of the Most High”? The Secret Place of the Most High is the Gospel.²³ St. Paul writes:

But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, *even* the hidden *wisdom*, which God ordained before the world unto our glory...²⁴

The Gospel is God’s Secret Place because it is not the natural knowledge of God, but rather the revealed knowledge of God. And as can be plainly seen from Psalm 91, this Wisdom of God takes those who are lowly and exalts to the abode of the Most High. Luther writes:

This is “hidden wisdom” (1 Cor. 2:7), learned only from the Word, which transfers us from present and apparent things to absent and invisible things. The present facts are that the world is insane and rages when we confess Christ and believe in Him. But these things must not move you, nor should your conscience be saddened on this account. Abandon this feeling and this unpleasant spectacle, and enter with Moses into the clouds and shadows, that is, embrace the invisible things. Ascend to the Lord and the Word of His promise, Learn that God laughs at this incredible folly, when the world with Satan tries to harm the kingdom of God and overturn it. The miserable men do not see that all their power is only earthly, but this King dwells in heaven, to which they cannot ascend.²⁵

Hence, we see that only those of low-degree occupy the Heights of Heaven because only the lowly are on the same level as the Heights of Heaven. St. Mary, therefore, sings:

He hath ... exalted them of low degree.²⁶

Conclusion

²³Luther writes: “Note, however, what was said about Zalmon above (which is called shade or shady bower of strength).²² This contains a mystery. For shade consists of light and a body. The light is the divinity, the sun burning by day. Because there is enmity between us and God, He added the body of humanity, and there was made for us a cloud and shade and cooling. Thus ‘we abide under the protection of the God of heaven’ (Ps. 91:1). And Is. 4:6: ‘There shall be a shady bower in the daytime from the heat, and a hiding place from the whirlwind and the rain.’ Ezek. 32:7: ‘I will cover the sun with a cloud.’ This is faith about which we read in Luke 1:35: ‘The Holy Spirit will overshadow you.’” *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 10, p. 338.

²⁴**I Corinthians 2:7.**

²⁵*Luther’s Works*, Vol 12: 25, 26.

²⁶**St. Luke 1:52.**

Who, then, occupies the Heights of Heaven? Only the lowly, penitent sinners, men of low degree, occupy the Heights of Heaven, for only they see its usefulness, receive it, and enter it to abide there.

The proud and haughty, on the other hand, view the Heights of Heaven, i.e. the Gospel, as useless and offensive because they do not view themselves as lowly, fallen creatures. They, therefore, thumb their noses at the Heights of Heaven and plunge into the bottomless abyss and eventually the lake of fire forever.

But the lowly occupy the Heights of Heaven because they recognize the Heights of Heaven is there for them, the lowly. So, the Heights of Heaven will find company only with the lowly because only the lowly, i.e. the penitent, are on its level. And never shall the twain be separated again, for the Lord sent the Gospel in order to exalt those of low degree to the Heights of Heaven now and forever.

Amen.