

The Feast of Christ's Descent into Hell, April 16, 2023

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He's Got Nothin' on Us

Matthew 12:22–32

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

How can someone enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house (v 29).

Christ's descent into hell puts the devil in the crosshairs. What a great turnabout, isn't it? After all the times he's lined up his crosshairs over our souls and let the arrows fly—*THWANG! THWANG! THWANG!* Now it's his turn. Now he gets to experience what it's like to be hunted, instead of hunter. That roaring lion, ready to devour—why, he looks like nothing but a measly old stray next to *the* Lion of the tribe of Judah. A scaredy cat, that's what he is, as he comes face-to-face with our Lord standing *in the flesh* again after dying on the cross.

The foe was triumphant when on Calvary

The Lord of creation was nailed to the tree.

In Satan's domain did the hosts shout and jeer,

For Jesus was slain, whom the evil ones fear.

BUT Short was their triumph; the Savior arose. . . (LSB 480:2–3)

And yet when it looks like just me and the devil, that's another story. Who's the scaredy cat then? I am, that's who. What, you too? I shudder to think about what the devil's got on me. More intel and damning personal information than I even remember. While he probably can't read my thoughts—and I don't believe he can—he can certainly read my body language, he can follow the flicker of my eyes, he can watch my facial reactions, he can detect my subconscious twitches. So he's got access to plenty of words and deeds of which I'm ashamed. An entire dossier, no doubt.

And it's not just the things I've done and said that he can use against me. It's the ways I've gotten so coiled and made myself the center, so that everything revolves around me and what pleases me. It's the time I've wasted. It's the way I try to reframe things and get in the last word. It's those things I should've said but then chickened out. It's the good I could've done but didn't—the missed opportunities to love my wife and children and serve you, my congregation.

And what if the devil decided to leak all that information to someone—to my family, to my friends? What if he tried to use it against me? Could he destroy my life with such things? Could he blackmail me into deeper sins, into other great shame and vice? Could he push me towards a despair that would drag me down to death and hell? He would sure love to try. That's his schtick. It's what he does.

The worst of it is that the devil doesn't even need to make anything up about me. He's got enough damaging material that false charges aren't necessary. Why, he's even able to appeal to what God says in the law. The law says, "Love the Lord your God above all things." The law says, "Love your neighbor as yourself." The law says this, the law says that. And, y'know, it nails me. My failure sticks in my own mind. I know it sticks in the minds of those whom I've hurt, too. I know; they know; he knows. What the devil could write above my head—the damning evidence he could produce, the pile of broken laws, the pieces of shattered commandments.

And what am I going to say? What kind of defense do I have to mount? "I didn't mean to." That's pretty lame. "You should've heard what she said/did first." That's even lamer. "If you'd have been there . . . it wasn't like that . . . what else could I have done?" Weak. Weak. Weak. It wouldn't stand up in heaven's court.

So it looks like the devil's got us. That's what he tells us anyway: You're mine. You'll never get away. Who's gonna rescue you—why, you've even offended God!

That's how he did it with Adam and Eve. He had them cornered. He had the intel. But he didn't even need to use it—they sunk themselves. Before the serpent even gets in another word, Adam mounts his defense. He blames Eve, "**the woman whom You, Lord, gave me**" (Gen 3:12). Eve counters by pointing to the serpent. How lost can you be?

But notice this—a little hint of what's to come: the Lord God doesn't ask the serpent anything—not for a statement or an explanation or a defense. The serpent never gets another word in Genesis 3. He doesn't get to tell his side of the story, to lay blame on man and woman, to relish and revel in his victory. The Lord gets the final word, a word that shuts the serpent's mouth in a foretaste of what's to come. He says, "**I'll put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel**" (Gen 3:15).

That's the promise. The promise of your salvation, of your Savior, of a little Seed that will be the undoing of the devil and his kingdom.

For our Lord Jesus Christ came, the woman's Seed. *After* He was born of the virgin Mary, you know what happened to Him—the arrows fired into His soul, the deep grooves cut into His back and shoulders, the charges nailed above His head. It didn't matter whether they were right or wrong, whether they were His or ours—they stuck. And so He **has utterly wiped out the damning evidence of broken laws and commandments hanging over our heads. And has completely annulled it by nailing it over His own head on the cross** (Col 2:14). He was crucified, died, and was buried. *After* all that, but *before* He rose again and showed Himself here on the third day, He descended into hell. He went there alive, as a man. After His rest in the tomb but with the scars still visible, without any warning He marched into hell.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Alleluia! Christ descended into hell!

Alleluia! Christ triumphed over the devil!

He came into the enemy's camp. Why? Not to suffer! Oh, that was over, finished. **For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God** (1 Pet 3:18). No, now it was to proclaim His victory. To show exactly what He had done. To demonstrate His power. Our Lord isn't in league with the devil. He isn't a slave of the devil. He slays serpents. That what He does. He puts a cross through their heads and their hearts. Every time He healed the demon oppressed, He put a cross through their head and heart. Every time He cast out unclean spirits, He put a cross through their head and heart. Every time He silenced the devil with His own faithfulness to the Father, He put a cross through their head and heart. **He exposed them shattered, empty, defeated** (Col 2:15).

The descent into hell is His victory parade. Your champion has come. The devil's kingdom is perishing. The gates of hell cannot stand against Christ or His Church. Satan falls from heaven like lightning. Jesus actually says that after sending the disciples out with His authority. When does Satan fall? When the disciples proclaim King Jesus and His kingdom. When they forgive sins, declare death defeated, and proclaim the devil an outlaw.

Jesus said, **“Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven”** (Matt 12:31). It's no surprise that Jesus says this in connection with the devil and his kingdom, because it's exactly what the devil does. He blasphemes. He blasphemes Jesus, which is bad enough, but He also blasphemes the Holy Spirit, which is even worse. For the Holy Spirit is the One who makes known to us Christ and His forgiveness. He's the One working through the words of Christ—the

word with the water of Holy Baptism and the word with the bread and wine of Holy Communion. And the devil hates that.

The devil sits there and says, “Did God really say . . . ?” He tries to question, create doubt, and deny the truth. “Did God really say, ‘Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved and that baptism now saves?’ But He doesn’t mean that.” Blasphemy! “Did God really say, ‘Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.’ But is it really for you?” Blasphemy! “Did God really say, ‘Whoever’s sins you forgive are forgiven,’ but that doesn’t include the things you said and did.” Blasphemy! “Did God really say, ‘Peace be with you,’ but that peace is a joke.” Blasphemy! Our Lord Jesus said all these things, and He brought peace to the disciples in His own resurrected body. He appeared to them in the Upper Room on Easter Sunday, and again on the Sunday after Easter when Thomas was with them. **“Peace be with you,”** He said. And to Thomas, **“Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Don’t disbelieve, but believe”** (Jn 20:26–27). That’ll shut up the devil in a hurry. His arrows bounce right off.

Whatever the devil thought he knew about you, he can forget. There’s new intel written in the blood of Jesus. That old dossier has been dismissed, tossed out, refuted, buried—all of it. Empty. That’s what his words are. Empty. There’s not a shred of evidence against you. It all points to Jesus. Plead His blood. Whenever the devil attacks, whenever he lies, whenever he deceives and tempts to sin and despair, plead the blood of Jesus.

The very idea that he could blackmail us, cause us to despair, lead us into other great shame and vice. Christ laughs him to scorn! “These?” He says, pointing to you with scarred hands. “These? Why, you old lying fool, shut your mouth. You’ve got nothing on them. They belong to Me.” And the gates of hell shake!

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7
