

There are many things that happen in our lives that we simply don't understand. Some difficult trial that we're going through, some hard time that we have to put up with. And we are often tempted in those times to say: "God works in mysterious ways." That saying, of course, comes from the hymn which we just sang, even though it's been changed a little bit from the original. And that hymn begins: "God moves in a mysterious way, / His wonders to perform. / He plans his footsteps in the sea, / And rides upon the storm." And William Cowper wrote that hymn in 1773 while he was going through a very difficult period in his life. And what he meant by it was that we should trust in God even in those difficult times in our lives, because God intends all things for our good, even if we can't always understand why or how.

But that's not usually what we mean when we say "God works in mysterious ways." More often when we say that, we mean it as a kind of resignation, a kind of grin and bear it kind of attitude. Like saying, "I don't know why I'm going through this, but God works in mysterious ways." "I don't know why this terrible thing has happened to me, but God works in mysterious ways." "I don't know what's going to happen in the days ahead, but God works in mysterious ways." "God brought this into my life, but there's nothing that I can do about it." And along with this often comes the feeling that if I had my way, this isn't what I would want to happen. If I had my way, I wouldn't go through this. If I had my way, I would do things completely differently. But God works in mysterious ways!

The disciples in our Gospel reading for today were certainly struggling with this. Jesus has just told them that he is about to leave them to go back to the Father, to ascend up into heaven. But the very thought of Jesus leaving them fills the disciples with sorrow. It's like they're asking: "Well, why does he have to go away? Why can't he stay here with us? Because think of how much better it would be if Jesus was still here. We wouldn't have to worry about what was going to happen to us. Jesus would take care of all of our problems. We wouldn't have to fear what the Jews might do to us. Jesus would lead us through everything. But he's going away. Why does he have to go away? God works in mysterious ways, I guess. We'll just do the best that we can to carry on."

And Christians, I wonder if we don't feel the same way about Jesus going up into heaven. Why did he have to go? Why didn't he stay here with us? Wouldn't it be better for us if Jesus was still here on earth? Evangelism would be super easy then, right? All you'd have to do if you wanted somebody to know Jesus would be to send them to him. He could tell them about himself! And honestly, it would fix all of the problems in the world. Jesus would give us the perfect solution to everything that we were going through. We wouldn't have to worry about a thing in this life if Jesus had not gone away. But God works in mysterious ways, I guess. He must've had a reason to go away. I guess I'll just do the best that I can, given the situation, even though I don't think that it's the best thing that could've happened.

But Jesus tells his disciples and he tells us in verse 7 of our reading: "Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away." It is to your advantage that Jesus goes away. It is for your good that Jesus went up into heaven. This is the very best thing that could've happened to us. Jesus going up into heaven is not the worst thing, as if Jesus was just abandoning us and leaving us alone. Jesus going up into heaven is not a neutral thing, as if it's the best we could do in a bad situation. Jesus going up into heaven isn't even the second best thing, as if it's good but

it's got a lot of bad mixed into it. No, Jesus ascending into heaven is the very best thing to happen to us, Christians. It is good that he went away. It is good that he has gone to the Father.

Why? Two reasons. First of all, because Jesus now reigns as King forever. As long as Jesus was still here on earth, his work was not yet completed. His kingdom had not yet fully come. Yes, he had to do all of these things, like be born. He had to suffer. He had to die. He had to rise again. Those things were important. But as long as he was still here, his work was not yet finished. Only when he went up into heaven and sat down on the right hand of the Father would his work be complete. We're told in Hebrews chapter 10: "But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God." So once he finished his work, once he made that sacrifice for our sins, he could then sit down and finish his work forever. And seated at the right hand of God, Jesus is now the King of Kings. He is now the Lord of Lords. Every knee will bow to him. Every mouth will call him Lord. Kings will fall down before him. His enemies will become his footstool. Jesus sitting at God's right hand is the completion of his work, and he is now highly exalted above all things.

For that reason, Christians, we can have confidence in the face of everything in this world. Jesus tells us, John chapter 16: "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart: I have overcome the world." So yes, it is a good thing that Jesus went away into heaven. We don't have to fear anything in this world, because Jesus sits at God's right hand as King forever.

The second reason why it is good that Jesus went away is because now the Spirit has been given to us. Jesus says again in verse 7 of our reading: "For if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you, but if I go, I will send him to you." As long as Jesus was still on earth, the Spirit could not come to us. Not because they couldn't be here at the same time or anything like that. But rather because as long as Jesus' work was not yet finished, the Spirit could not be sent. But now that it has been finished, he sends the Spirit to us. Peter says in Acts chapter 2: "Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing." Jesus gives us the Holy Spirit now that he has ascended on high. And he does not give us the Spirit as a consolation prize, something to tide us over while we wait, the way we might give a toy to a child in order to keep them quiet while they wait for something. No, the gift of the Holy Spirit is the beginning of a new and a far greater time, far greater than anything that came before, because the coming of the Holy Spirit is the fulfillment of many prophecies of the Old Testament.

One of these prophecies comes in Joel chapter 2, where it says: "And it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh. Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions." The coming of the Holy Spirit brings many great signs, just as it did at Pentecost when he came down like fire and caused the apostles to speak in tongues. But the coming of the Holy Spirit also means that everyone who calls on the name of Jesus will be saved. We would not be here today, Christians, as heirs of eternal life, if Jesus had not gone up into heaven and gave us the Spirit. That shows us that Jesus going away into heaven is certainly a good thing!

Another prophecy comes from Isaiah chapter 32, which says: "For the palace is forsaken, the populous city deserted; the hill and the watchtower will become dens forever, a joy of wild

donkeys, a pasture of flocks; until the Spirit is poured upon us from on high, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is deemed a forest." So the coming of the Spirit means, then, that what was deserted will be made fruitful, like a desert turning into a forest. God's people would become as numerous as the stars of heaven with the coming of the Holy Spirit, because now the Spirit gathers in the nations, including you and me. The Church would not be what it is today, Christians, if Jesus had not gone up into heaven and sent us the Holy Spirit. That also shows us that it is certainly a good thing that Jesus went away!

One more prophecy comes from Ezekiel chapter 11, which says: "And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God." The gift of the Holy Spirit means that now we can follow after God. We have a new heart, one that can and one that wants to do God's will, not just outwardly, like Israel in the Old Testament, but also inwardly, from the heart. We would still be in the darkness of sin, Christians, if Jesus had not gone up into heaven and given us the Spirit. That certainly shows us that Jesus going away is a good thing!

We are God's people, we are heirs of eternal life, because Jesus ascended into heaven. We can face all things in this world, no matter how terrible they might be, because Jesus is seated at the right hand of God. What better thing could he have done for us? He has done the very best thing of all by going away to the Father.

So yes, Christians, we may not always understand why God does what he does. But if Jesus brought such great good to us by going away into heaven, if Jesus has made us heirs of eternal life by going back to the Father, then why should we fret and worry about all the other things in our life? God indeed works all things for good, even when we can't see how. So if Jesus has brought you the greatest blessing of all through his ascension, trust in him. God works in mysterious ways, yes, but they are always good.

Let us pray. Almighty and eternal God, who caused your Son, Jesus Christ, to sit at your right hand and who has crowned him with glory and honor, comfort us in all our trials and give us hope through all our troubles, knowing that you hold all things in your hand and work all things for our good; through Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.