

The Ascension

By Dennis Cornish

"Faith has in its foundation four great cornerstones on which the building rests: the Divinity of Christ, the Incarnation, the Atonement on the Cross, and the Ascension to the Throne. The last is the most wonderful, the crown of all the rest; the perfect revelation of what God has made Christ for us. And so in the Christian life it is the most important, the glorious fruit of all that goes before.¹"

The Ascension of Christ is an event that the contemporary church has largely ignored. It should not be neglected for many reasons; one being that it reveals the nature by which Jesus will return. He was physically present with His Apostles when He ascended into heaven. Scripture tells us in Acts 1:9 that He was taken from earth and into heaven before their very eyes. His resurrected body was transported into heaven on a cloud, the same Shekinah cloud that went before the Israelites in the wilderness. But more to the point, we find in Acts 1:11 that two angels explicitly tell His Apostles that this is how He will return. *"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw Him go into heaven."*

Jesus ascended into heaven visibly, and when He returns in final judgment He will return visibly. 1 Thessalonians 4:16 tells us: *"For the Lord Himself will descend from*

¹ Andrew Murray, *The Holiest of All*

heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God."

In Ephesians 4:10 Paul wrote of Jesus' ascension saying that: *"the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things."*

This fulfilling of all things points to the fact that Jesus' earthly ministry culminated with His ascension into heaven for the purpose of the restoration and the exaltation of His glory, as well as His coronation as Lord over all things. Jesus had fulfilled all prophecies and had completed all His divinely ordained redemptive tasks. He, by His Divine power and authority, and through the Holy Spirit, has given gifts to the church. Not only did He give these gifts, but He gave the early church gifted men, the Apostles of Christ.

In the upper room, the night before His crucifixion, Jesus lifted His eyes towards heaven and prayed: *"Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed."*

When Jesus left this earth at the ascension He was returning to the realm of glory where He would again share in the Father's glory that He had previously enjoyed from all eternity.² Once the disciples had witnessed the ascension and heard from the

² paraphrase from R.C. Sproul, *The Work of Christ*

angels that Jesus would return for them, they went back to Jerusalem joyously and they were continuously praising God in the Temple. In Luke 24 we read that they worshipped Him, and they did so because Jesus had opened their understanding to such a degree that they finally perceived the full truth of His deity. What a contrast to their abandonment of Him prior to the cross, their hopeless disillusionment during their discussion on the road to Emmaus, and their sullen return to their former lives as fishermen. Once Jesus had been crucified, the pain of their loss and their feelings of abandonment at Jesus' death was the focus of the disciples. Their newfound joy and elation after His ascension was the fulfillment of what Jesus had told them in John 16 that after he departed that they would have sorrow, but that He would see them again and their hearts would rejoice. With the ascension they finally began to understand that the Master's humiliation was over and that He was returning to His glorified state, and that He would be coming back again, just as He had promised.

I mentioned earlier that another important factor about the ascension was that Jesus was being lifted up to His heavenly coronation. His ascension was directly to the throne, to the right hand of God the Father. He had returned to His glorified state, no longer the sacrificial Lamb, but as the Lion of Judah He was given dominion, power, and authority; He now reigns as the eternal ruler of the universe. The King has been enthroned, and once crowned, His Kingdom was established for all eternity. It is for this reason we as Christians need not anticipate a future fulfillment of His Kingdom; it is here already. He is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords that we read of in 1 Timothy 6:15 and Revelation 17:14. That being said, a complete consummation of prophecy will occur

when He ushers in the new heaven and the new earth, casting Satan and his followers into the lake of fire.

An interesting set of verses starts in Ephesians 4:8, which on the surface seem somewhat cryptic and hard to follow, but once you break down the analogies that Paul uses you can see the depth of meaning behind these verses. Paul goes back to the Old Testament verses in Psalm 68 which is considered "a victory hymn composed by David and is being used as an analogy to show how Christ received the right to bestow spiritual gifts. After being triumphant in battle, the king would bring home the spoils and prisoners. Paul is using this as a parallel example of Christ returning from His victory at Calvary and His subsequent resurrection when He conquered Satan and death. In His triumphal return to His glory in heaven He distributed the spoils throughout His Kingdom. After His ascension He gave gifts to men, and those were all the Spiritual gifts empowered by the Holy Spirit whom He and the Father sent to be with all of Christ's followers.³"

Another primary reason for Jesus to leave His disciples behind was the fact that He was preparing to send another Helper. In John 16 He even tells them that it would be to their advantage that He went away. They didn't understand what He was telling them, but this is only one of many things that they didn't comprehend. A little further into John 16 Jesus even tells them that He had many other things to say but that they wouldn't be able to bear them.

³ a paraphrase of John MacArthur's commentary on Ephesians

The Greek for helper is Parakletos from which we get the English word Paraclete.

Paraclete is often used as a synonym for the Holy Spirit. In John 14:16-17 we read:

"And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you."

We see that the Father will be sending 'another' Helper, and the use of the word 'another' is because Christ was the first Paraclete. There are other translations for Parakletos which include Comforter which in today's vernacular has come to mean a person who consoles someone who is in pain or otherwise suffering. However, in the original Old English usage it meant "with strength", therefore shouldn't be viewed by us as merely consolation but as power and strength. It is the qualities of power and strength that Jesus wanted to permeate His followers with so that they would remain steadfast in their faith. The word Parakletos can also be defined as "one called alongside." In Biblical times it had the meaning of a person, and especially a family attorney, who would come along side someone to help them with their problem.

It is interesting that Jesus told His disciples that the Holy Spirit would not be speaking on His own authority, but that whatever He heard He would pass along to them and tell them of things that were to come. Jesus told them that the Holy Spirit would glorify Him and would take what were Jesus' words and declare His words to them.

How often have we read in Scripture where Jesus or one of the Apostles told His followers that they would have problems and face all kinds of persecution? In fact, at the beginning of John 16 Jesus really drove home what they might be facing when He

said: *"I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God."*

We as His disciples will be facing persecution ourselves, and our consolation is that the Holy Spirit is still with us to be our Strength and our Comforter.

It is for this reason that Jesus told them to wait in Jerusalem, and they were to wait until He and the Father poured out the Holy Spirit upon them. It is this empowering that comes through the Holy Spirit that continues to strengthen the church, enabling the church to persevere in its earthly mission. John Calvin said that the most important task of the church is to be the visible witness to the invisible kingdom, and for that we need the Holy Spirit.

The blood offering that Jesus gave on the cross to God the Father for our expiation was the final sacrifice required. His blood was shed, once for all, and marked the completion of Christ's atoning work and earthly ministry as our High Priest. His priestly ministry, His work on our behalf continues as functions of our High Priest and King. He has entered the Heavenly Holy of Holies and intercedes for us before our Heavenly Father. We, because of Christ's imputation of Righteousness, can now come before the throne of our Father and with confidence petition Him for mercy and grace. Jesus stands between God the Father, our sin, and Satan's accusations because we have been pardoned by His blood. On the night before He died, He prayed a prayer of intercession for us. We can take hope when we read it as it was recorded in John 17: *"I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they*

were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them. And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one."

Christians commemorate His birth, His life of earthly ministry, His sacrifice on the cross for our sins, and His conquering of death with His resurrection. We can be sure that the heavenly hosts welcomed Him home at His ascension with a level of celebration that was, and is, incomprehensible and without measure. One must wonder why we the church don't set aside a special time of worship to praise His coming into His glory and His being crowned King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Sources (not in order, and probably not complete):

Ephesians 4:8-10; Luke 22:31-32, 24:49-83; Acts 1:6-11; John 14:16; John 16:2,7-20; John 17:1-5 & 6-12; 1 Timothy 6:15; Revelation 17:14, 19:16; Hebrews 4:14, 7:25, 9:11-12 & 24; Matthew 24:1-31; Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 46; R.C. Sproul, The Person and Work of Christ. Others as found in the footnotes.