

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

21 What Is the Significance of Christ's Ascension?

Scripture: Hebrews 7:22-28

It is fitting for Christians to speak of things Jesus has done. He performed miracles, forgave sins, associated with undesirable people, prayed, went to Jerusalem, died, arose from the dead and ascended into heaven. It is the last of these acts of Jesus which concerns us this day, the fact that Jesus ascended into heaven.

It is on Thursday of the sixth week after Easter (forty days after Easter Sunday) that believers have long celebrated Ascension Day. The Bible tells us that forty days after Jesus arose from the dead he talked with his disciples on the Mount of Olives, and when he finished what he had to say to them a cloud took him out of their sight and he ascended up into heaven. As the disciples stood amazed at this departure, an angel asked about their bewilderment and informed them that Jesus would one day return the same way he had left.

I suppose we have to say that most people miss Ascension Day entirely. One of the reasons may be that Easter has past and any additional celebration would appear to be anticlimactic and unnecessary. Another reason is that many people do not believe in anything so far out as Christ's ascension. Oh, you may never get them to admit such a thing, but their real feeling is that this queer story in the Bible certainly has to be interpreted other than literally. People who think that way reduce their faith to zero if they mean by it that Christ is not alive today and in the glory preparing a place for those who have trusted him. Well, people have been saying it for centuries, "*The third day He rose from the dead; He ascended into heaven.*" People are saying it today, and some believe it. Last Thursday, May 19, was Ascension Day. In our reckoning and properly understood, this causes us to think of one of the most stupendous events which has ever happened on earth. This return of Jesus to heaven after some thirty three years of condescension signaled the completion of one part of God's plan for man's redemption and began yet another. Jesus lifted his arms, held them outstretched and invoked a blessing on his disciples. (Luke 24:50-51) This is what he had come to do and he did it to the end of his stay. He began to be lifted into the air, higher and higher he went, until he disappeared in a cloud of heavenly beings. He had

finished the work he had come to do. Let us think about his **bodily ascension**, his **exalted position**, and his **ministry of intercession**.

I. THE BODILY ASCENSION OF JESUS:

The May 26, 1967 issue of Christianity Today reported a parody of Christ's ascension which took place in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Seminary students distributed leaflets which read, "See Christ ascend before your very eyes." The article reported that at an appropriate time, amid chants of "Go, Jesus, Go," a gas filled dummy was released and floated away until out of sight.

I do not know what motivated the divinity students to stage such a display in downtown Cambridge. I do know and it is no secret that many seminary students and clergyman do not believe in the bodily ascension of Christ. Our teaching this morning will insist that the Bible states most categorically and unequivocally that this is what happened. If you want to be crass about it, the ascension of Jesus was very much like what happened at Cambridge. Jesus went up before the eyes of the disciples just as the seminarians' gas-filled balloon, minus the chant, of course.

The Christian teaching is that Jesus arose in a material body. We adhere to the principle of identity and diversity. Identity in the sense that this same Jesus was able to be recognized in body form, yet diversity in that such a body was not limited by all the conditions of matter as we know them. This is a mystery, for our present ideas are drawn from our present conditions. His body rose with powers of which we have no experience yet, and which participate in the qualities proper to spiritual beings. Paul predicts such a change in our own bodies after our resurrection. He wrote, "So also in the resurrection. It is sown in corruption, it shall rise in incorruption...it is sown a natural body, it shall rise a spiritual body." (I Corinthians 15:42-44)

It can also be said that this phenomenon was sufficient to impress on the disciples some higher state of being. We must remember he ascended only relative to those who were watching him. Our understanding of ascent and descent are determined by direction from the center of the earth. To the person on the other side of the earth the direction taken by Christ would have been one of descent. How far did Christ go? It would seem to me not important. He allowed his supernatural qualities to assert themselves and his body took upon itself a nature independent of all earthly conditions. He passed into another state of being in his resurrection from the dead much the same as the words on this

page pass into another state of being in your mind as you read them. This renders useless all calculations based on visible qualities as we know them. You might as well try to measure the beauty of a sunset by a wooden ruler as to discern Christ's body by our present perceptive abilities. How far did Christ go? Beyond the moon, or the stars? Perhaps not. He may be closer than we realize.

II. THE EXALTED POSITION OF JESUS:

Wherever heaven is, Jesus is there and never again will cruel men grit their teeth at him, make fun of him, or lay a hand upon him. God's cross work has been accomplished and the demands of justice satisfied. Now Jesus is exalted. If he is to be approached today it will be done with reverence and Godly fear for no longer is he the lowly Nazarene.

This has a practical implication for our lives according to Hebrews 6:19 where we read, *"Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which entereth into that within the veil"* (Leviticus 16:2) where Jesus has entered in for us, a forerunner having become a High Priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. (Psalm 110:4) The imagery here is rich. Our present life is like a troubled sea. Our soul is like a ship on these troubled waters. But we have an anchor. This anchor is our faith in Christ. He is in Heaven. Strong faith makes him very real to us and it is as if we have cast an anchor to where the Lord is. Some people are able to remain settled, calm and in control of any situation. Christ is so real to them it is as if a great part of them was already with him where he is. This is an anchor of the soul yet on troubled waters.

The factuality of Christ's exalted position is assumed by Biblical writers. For this reason the only book in the New Testament which tells the story in any detail is the Book of Acts. (Acts 1:4-12) Luke records the event as taking place at the same time of the resurrection. In the early manuscripts of Luke's Gospel it is described in a single sentence, *"While he blessed them, he was parted from them."* Matthew does not mention the happening. The Apostle Paul mentions it in passing. In Romans, he refers to Jesus as *"the one who died, or rather, who was raised to life and is at the right side of God."* (Romans 8:34) The reason for the silence of Scripture is that the apostles were mindful of this final separation, that Christ was leaving the earth and that he would not suddenly appear out of nowhere again and again as he had been doing in the days following his resurrection. The significance lies in the fact that Jesus, once **rejected**, now **reigns**.

Are we mindful of that? Jesus reigns! He reigns everywhere, even in those places where his name has never been spoken. He reigns where there is no visible sign of his presence. He reigns where he is ill spoken of. He reigns in mental hospitals, and houses of ill fame. He reigns where there is crime and goodness is not heard of. It matters little that we understand or appreciate his reign. How is this so? Like the sun, he can be forbidden entrance and shut out. Also, as the sun, he sustains even those who shut him out. The truth of the ascension is that Christ reigns! People may pull the blinds on him, but the music on Ascension Day is glad music nonetheless. He sustains even those who shut him out of their lives. (Colossians 1:17-18, 2:8-10)

III. THE PRIESTLY MINISTRY OF JESUS:

In the sixth chapter of John Jesus used five barley loaves and two fish to feed five thousand people. Those who witnessed the event immediately determined to make him their king. They could only imagine what a strong king he would be. They were, doubtless, familiar with the fact that God had promised to raise up a leader like unto Moses one day. (Deuteronomy 18:18) The understanding of that caused the people to speak of Jesus as prophet. (John 6:14) The miracle of provision may have caused them to reflect upon Psalm 132:15. They looked at these promises, sifted them through their own prejudices, and concluded Jesus was their man. They made one mistake. Knowing the Messiah would be a great prophet and a great king, they failed to understand that in between he would be a great priest. He must interact between man and God. Jesus knew this and refused to accept the office of king. He knew that the offices of prophet, priest and king would not be held jointly, but be entered into successively. Theologians thus speak of the "office work" of Christ, as **prophet, priest and king**. His prophetic work extended from creation to his ascension, his priestly work from his ascension to the rapture of the church, and his kingly reign from the time his enemies are put down and God becomes all in all. (I Corinthians 15:28)

So the writer to the Hebrews tells us that we have a great high priest who is passed into the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God. (4:14) In Hebrews 8:1 we read, *"We have such a priest, who is set on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens."* Hebrews 9:24 says, *"For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, not to appear in the presence of God for us."* That is where Jesus is and that is what he is doing. He is making an appearance just now. His appearing is not earthly, but heavenly. Unseen by natural eye, He continues His ministry on high. (I Peter 1:8)

This leads us to a neglected area of Christian truth, i.e. the present ministry of Jesus on our behalf. We are not able to appreciate what we are not mindful of. What is the nature of the priestly ministry of Jesus at this time?

It should be emphasized that Heaven, not earth is the place of Jesus' **priestly** ministry. He never appeared as a priest in the temple. He went there to proclaim and to teach, never to offer sacrifice or burn incense. The priestly work of Christ can be understood in the following ways:

1. He Carries Within the Veil Offering His Own Blood:

In the Book of Exodus we read about the tabernacle, that moveable sanctuary in the form of a tent God commanded Moses to make that God might dwell among His people. (Exodus 34:26) It was dedicated on the first day of the second year after leaving Egypt. It was part of a great sacrificial system to temporarily appease the wrath of God against sin. One important day was the Day of Atonement. On that day the High Priest divested himself of his garments of beauty, washed himself, clothed himself in linen, filled a Censer with burning coals from the incense altar and entered through the Veil, the Most Holy Place. He covered the "*Mercy Seat*" on the "*Ark of the Covenant*" with smoke and went on to slay a bullock and a goat. The sacrifice was not complete with the slaying of the animals, but only as the blood was brought once a year and presented to God in the Most Holy Place. (Hebrews 9:24-26) If the ancient priest's stay was prolonged the people would fear lest the offering was not accepted and the High Priest had been smitten. They listened for the tinkling of the bells upon the bottom of the robe. Christ, in his priestly work, now carries before God presenting his finished work on Calvary. We can say that we are living in a GREAT DAY OF ATONEMENT as Jesus engages in this work. One day he will lay aside his priestly robes and come forth in Kingly dress.

2. He Answers the Charges of Satan:

In Revelation 12:10 Satan is called the accuser of the brethren. In Romans 8:33 we read that Christ is our intercessor. The picture there is a judicial one. Christ rises to speak on our behalf. In I Timothy 2:3-6 Jesus is spoken of as our mediator. In his humanity Jesus gained the right to mediate for man before God. When He ascended into heaven Jesus carried his manhood with him so that now he is our man in the glory interacting on our behalf before God. (I Timothy 2:5)

3. He Makes Our Spiritual Sacrifices Acceptable to God:

In I Peter 1:5 as priests of God we are to offer up spiritual sacrifices. My understanding of these spiritual sacrifices is that there are three mentioned in the New Testament. There is the sacrifice of our person (body) as in Romans 12:1, there is the sacrifice of our praise as in Hebrews 13:15, and there is the sacrifice of our possessions as mentioned in Hebrews 13:10. Human nature being what it is the blight of sin is upon even the best of our efforts for God and these sacrifices are made acceptable to God through the priestly efforts of Christ.

4. He Prays for Our Oneness and Ultimate Victory:

Scholars have suggested that the prayer offered by Jesus recorded in John 17 is a pattern of the prayer he now offers. He prayed for our being kept from evil (17:15), our being set apart unto God (17:17) and that we should be one with one another. (17:21) In Hebrews 4:15-16 we have the language of human experience. Three very real aspects of the Christian life are mentioned in these verses.

There is the **Immediacy** of **Human Distress** in the words, "the feeling of our infirmities." An examination here pictures a man facing insurmountable odds. There is the **Activity** of **Divine Deliverance** in the words "obtain mercy" and "find grace." This has been the testimony of people for centuries. There is the **Sufficiency** in Time of **Dependency** in the words, "to help in time of need." This is the significance of Christ's ascension. We are invited at this very moment to know there is a living Savior in heaven. He has not left us alone to perish or to groan our way through life. What the Bible says is true. Jesus Christ is alive today and acts to help us if we will let Him.

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