

The Ascension of Christ 5-24-20 FCC

Thursday the 21st was Ascension Day. Have you ever really given much thought to the ascension of Christ? We spend the month of Advent reflecting on his virgin birth, some Christians spend the season of lent reflecting on his suffering and death, and some even spend time talking about the significance of his resurrection for several weeks after Easter. Some celebrate Pentecost; in fact, entire movements within Christianity are inspired by the events of the Pentecost in Acts 2. Next Sunday the 31st is Pentecost. But what about the ascension of Christ? Maybe we don't do much with it because at first glance the Bible doesn't say as much about it. Maybe we don't do much with it because we don't understand what the Bible does say about it. But maybe, and this may be the most influential factor, we don't do much with it because it reminds us that we are the unfortunate ones. We didn't get to see Jesus in the flesh, and we envy those who did. We were born too late for that. And we don't know if we will get to witness his second coming and be raptured before our death. We hope and pray that we will get to have that experience. But we don't know. It may turn out that we were born too early for that. So here we are, plodding along, doing what we can, and waiting to see if his return will happen in our lifetimes. Is that what we are left with? Are we of all people most to be pitied? Or did we forget the significance of the ascension of Christ? There are numerous references in the NT to the ascension, but today we will look at those in the gospels and Acts.

Mark is the first gospel writer to record the ascension.

Mar 16:19 So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God.

Mark records the most important and immediate result of the resurrection- that Jesus sat down at the right hand of God. Seeing Jesus in the flesh would have been nice, and seeing his return in glory would be great too, but wouldn't his coronation as king be an awesome event to witness? Getting to see him receive exactly what he deserved, considering what he did for us, and what he did for his father- the throne of heaven, and the glory, honor, and authority that go with it. Jesus ascended so that he could reign with his father. We may wish him to be here with us, but how can we not rejoice in the fact that he not only deserves but also receives this highest position? He was humbled in four ways- by his incarnation, suffering, death, and burial. He was therefore exalted in four ways- by his resurrection, ascension, enthronement, and future coming in glory and power. If Jesus had not ascended to the right hand of the Father, we might have to wonder if he really was humbled, if he really succeeded at being the sacrifice

without blemish that could atone for our sins. In fact, if he had not ascended to God the Father, we might have to wonder if he came from God the Father in the first place. In fact, long before his ascension, Jesus said

Joh 3:13 No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

Jesus is saying ahead of time that his ascension will be proof of his origin, and he says it right before he states very plainly his purpose to provide salvation in John 3:16. The ascension of Christ is inseparable from the personal salvation he provides.

Let's jump ahead- right after his resurrection, when Mary Magdalene thought he was the gardener by the tomb and then recognized him,
Joh 20:17 Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

Here, Jesus is making his ascension a personal spiritual matter. The disciples were stricken with grief and confusion, they didn't know whether they were coming or going, and they didn't know whether Jesus was coming or going either. For so long they struggled to understand every event that happened since their Last Supper. The ascension will be no different, so Jesus gets ahead of that. At a time when they may be flooded with doubt, Jesus clarifies his divine destination. And his choice of words is so personal.

Luke also contains a record the ascension.

Luk 24:50 Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them.

Luk 24:51 While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven.

Now remember, Luke also wrote the book of Acts. So there is a bit of overlap here. He concludes his gospel with a brief account of the ascension, and then he begins Acts with a more detailed account of the ascension.

Act 1:1 In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach,

Act 1:2 until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.

Act 1:3 He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

Act 1:4 And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me;

Act 1:5 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

Act 1:6 So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"

Act 1:7 He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority.

Act 1:8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

Act 1:9 And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

Act 1:10 And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes,

Act 1:11 and said, "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."

Luke points us to the second purpose of the ascension- to send the HS. Now, maybe you've wondered why the resurrected Jesus couldn't have stuck around for a while, maybe a couple thousand years, so we could see him. But he could not send the HS to us until atonement is complete, and the whole package of atonement is not truly complete until he is in a position of victory and authority over sin, and for that he must be exalted as king, seated at the right hand of the father. If we don't feel the necessity of that, it may be because we don't see the necessity and significance of the HS.

Joh 16:7 Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.

Once Jesus was exalted to his heavenly throne, he had the authority to send the HS to us in the fullest sense, without limit, to fill us completely, which allows us to receive all of the benefits of having a relationship with God. You have a relationship with God through the HS- there is no other way. And Jesus could not send the HS to dwell in us until atonement for our sins was complete because the HS cannot dwell in impure people. Atonement was only complete when Jesus finished his work, got home, and sat down.

The disciples ask this nagging question about restoring national Israel, and Jesus says it's none of your business when I'm gonna do that, but the HS is coming and you will be my witnesses. At this time his kingdom is a spiritual kingdom that has physical expression through his church, and one day when he returns it will become a physical kingdom as well. The disciples are finally understanding this. Once the HS came, they worked to grow that spiritual kingdom while looking forward to its complete physical manifestation. Jesus can't bring that about unless he ascends to the right hand of the Father.

Now let's look at Luke's account of the ascension itself- it says Jesus was lifted up. Jesus ascended not into some kind of ethereal realm, some kind of cyberspace, or thin air, but that he was a real person who ascended to a real place. The fact that his resurrected body was subject to spatial limitations, in other words, he could only be one place at a time, means that Jesus went somewhere when he ascended. Jesus is a placed person you could say. What that means is: his human body was incarnated to a place and a time, his resurrected body was resurrected to a place and a time, and he ascended to a real place and really dwells there in real time. He is not a ghost, he is a person. Some Christian authors have argued that the advancements of the past century have eroded our sense of place. We can drive or fly almost anywhere in a time period measured in hours. We can be virtually anywhere with anyone through zoom or skype or facetime. But Jesus was not virtually present on earth, he was really present on earth. He was not virtually resurrected from the dead, he was really resurrected from the dead. He is not virtually on the throne of heaven, he is really on the throne of heaven. Heaven is not virtually real, it is real, and I don't want to be virtually there, I want to be really there. Imagine the disappointment you would feel if you die and the next moment you see a computer screen and Saint Peter pops up in a zoom window and says "welcome to heaven- you're virtually here." So the ascension of Jesus assures us that Jesus is a real person and that heaven is a real place.

This ties us back to what Jesus said in John 14.

Joh 14:2 In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?

Joh 14:3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.

Jesus went to prepare a place for us- think about his choice of words here. That word prepare indicates that he is putting time and attention into making an eternal home that is fit for us. So the ascension of Jesus points us to the

hospitality of Jesus. Have you ever thought about Jesus as a hospitable person or as your host? That's not very often a term we use when we talk about the character and role of Christ, is it? Now I'm sure that each of you can think of someone who is really good at hospitality, and not only are they good at it but they make it look easy. Charity's mother is like that. Staying with her parents is always enjoyable and refreshing. Think about your best experience of receiving hospitality, your best host, and your favorite place. And then think about Jesus himself being your host and companion in your perfect favorite place. Let yourself dream a little, and let the cares of this world melt away in light of the real, tangible future that awaits us.

Finally, the ascension of Christ provides our example and our assurance that we will receive a new, real body that is fit for his eternal kingdom. Think again about John 14. In verse 2 Jesus is making a reference that we may not catch on to since we didn't live in that theological climate. One of the largest debates at the time was about whether or not there is a resurrection of the dead. By saying that his Father's house has many rooms, he is saying that there is a resurrection, a future life after death. And then he says he will return and bring us into that life in paradise. One day we will be given new bodies, in the same way that Christ received a resurrected body. They are real bodies. He ascended to heaven physically and one day he will return physically. The ascension of Christ both displays and guarantees that hope for us. The total package of our salvation is not complete without the ascension of Christ because our salvation includes our glorification, and his ascension guarantees that we will receive the same glorification to a new world with a new body.

In a nutshell, the ascension of Christ points to his divine origin, his eternal reign, to the completion of our atonement, to the sending of the HS, to his real body, to a real heaven, and to the real resurrection bodies we will one day possess. This deep and broad significance of the ascension reminds us that we are not in a position of misfortune, but in a position of blessing and strength by the HS.

Let us pray:

Benediction:

Rev 5:13 And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!"

Go with the joy of knowing that Christ reigns today.