

49. His Ascension

At the beginning of this series of studies, we saw that Jesus came into this world from above. He was already in heaven with God at the beginning of all things. He existed well before taking the form of a human and entering into the world by a miraculous birth. He has always existed, but for a period of about 33 years he lived among the people on earth like one of us, in order to accomplish a divine mission for our salvation.

This mission, foretold by God's prophets, included life as a man without sin, miracles to create faith in him, the training of twelve men as messengers of salvation, his death on the cross to carry the weight of our crimes, and his resurrection from the dead to assure us eternal victory. After having accomplished his earthly mission, Jesus ascended to heaven to sit at the right hand of God the Father.

Here is the narrative, taken from Luke 24 and Acts 1, of the way in which the Lord went back:

“And He led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up His hands and blessed them. Now it came to pass, while He blessed them, that He was parted from them and carried up into heaven.” (Luke 24:50,51)

“...While they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.’ Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day’s journey.” (Acts 1:9-12)

“...and [they] were continually in the temple praising and blessing God.” (Luke 24:53)

A HISTORIC ACT

We should point out that Jesus' going up into heaven, called the ascension, is a biblical teaching and not a myth which was added to the gospel centuries later. The doctrine of the Assumption of Mary, in contrast, the doctrine according to which Mary, the mother of Jesus, was lifted body and soul into heaven without her body undergoing decay in the grave, is mentioned nowhere in the Bible. Not only does the

Bible not mention this ascent into heaven, but none of the Christian authors in the first four centuries of Christianity speak of the way that Mary died, much less an “assumption” or ascension to heaven.

The Feast of the Assumption was celebrated for the first time in Rome near the end of the seventh century. The Roman Catholic Church officially proclaimed its faith in the doctrine of Mary's Assumption in 1950. Instead of being an invention of the imagination of men, the ascension of Jesus is an historic fact attested to by eyewitnesses.

But what is the importance of this event, which marked in such a suitable way the end of Jesus' ministry on earth? It is a question of the transition from the earthly ministry of Jesus to his heavenly ministry. Three important things are, in fact, closely connected to the ascension. These are: the coming of the Holy Spirit, the reign of Christ as King of Kings, and his role as mediator or chief priest.

THE COMING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Shortly before his arrest, Jesus spoke to his disciples about the coming of the Comforter, that is, the Holy Spirit, who would help them in their task. He told them in John 16:7,8, “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 depart, I will send Him to you. And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment.” After his death and resurrection, he told them just before leaving, “And behold, I am sending forth the promise of My Father upon you; but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24.49). “For John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now” (Acts 1:5).

Ten days after his ascension, that is, on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit did indeed descend on the twelve apostles. Tongues, like tongues of fire, settled on each of them and they were made to speak miraculously in foreign languages they had never learned. When a curious and astonished crowd gathered, the apostle Peter stood up and preached the gospel to the multitude. He spoke to them of the death of Jesus, of his resurrection, and, yes, of his ascension. A proof of the ascension cited by Peter was the coming of the Holy Spirit. Peter said: “This Jesus

God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses. Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear.” (Acts 2:32,33).

THE BEGINNING OF THE REIGN OF CHRIST

Peter followed his remarks by highlighting the second idea which is so often associated with the ascension: the beginning of the reign of Christ. Peter quotes the psalm of David which predicts the ascension: “For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he says himself, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool.”’ Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:34-36).

The fact that Jesus, immediately after his ascension, “sat down” is mentioned in several passages. Mark 16:19 says, “So then, after the Lord had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God.” In Hebrews 1:3, we read, “When He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.” The same idea returns in Ephesians 1:20-22, where Paul says that God displayed his power “in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And He put all things under His feet.”

The idea of being seated does not indicate inactivity. On the contrary, a king is seated, on his royal throne, obviously, to judge... to make a decree... to receive ambassadors... in short, to exercise his authority. The reign of Jesus is not for some future time. He already reigns, ever since he ascended into heaven and was seated at the right hand of the heavenly Father. Regardless of how things may look to human eyes, he is now, according to Revelation 1:5, “the ruler over the kings of the earth.” The manifestation of his kingdom on earth is not waiting for the end of the world. It has been manifested since the day of Pentecost, ten days after his ascension. His throne is not located in the physical city of Jerusalem in Palestine. The New Testament repeatedly reminds us that he “has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him” (1 Peter 3:22).

When Jesus was beginning his public ministry, he would tell his disciples, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). From the ascension of Christ when he sat on his throne, and the day of Pentecost when he established the church and invited people to become citizens of heaven, his kingdom is no longer just near—it has come. It is here. And Jesus rules, with his Father, over the entire universe.

HIS ROLE AS HIGH PRIEST

But since his ascension, in addition to his role as head of the kingdom of God, Jesus plays another important role: he is our high priest, our only mediator. A large part of the epistle Hebrews is dedicated to explaining this role. It makes a comparison between the work of the Jewish priests in the tabernacle or the temple and that of Christ in heaven. The chief priest, under the Law of Moses, had to enter the most holy place with the blood of an animal one time each year to ask forgiveness for the sins of the people. Hebrews 9:11,12 tells us:

“But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption.”

The service that Christ renders to us is superior, not only because he renders it in heaven by offering his own blood instead of the blood of animals, but also for another reason. Hebrews 7:23-25 says:

“Also there were many priests, because they were prevented by death from continuing. But He, because He continues forever, has an unchangeable priesthood. Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.”

This continual intervention of Christ before the divine court of justice on behalf of those who are his is also represented by the image of a lawyer who defends the accused. 1 John 2:1 says, “My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” Jesus doesn’t plead our case by minimizing the seriousness of our faults, but by recalling that he himself paid the price

for our sins on the cross. Not only does Jesus plead for us, but he himself is the way by which we can approach God with our needs. Hebrews 4:14-16 exhorts us in this way:

“Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

Jesus is the only one who can serve us in this way: “For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus who gave Himself a ransom for all” (1 Timothy 2:5,6).

CONCLUSION: HIS RETURN

In considering the ascension of Jesus, we see the transition from his early ministry to his heavenly ministry. But in the narratives about his ascension, we also have a reminder of his return. Didn't the angels say to the amazed apostles, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11).

The day of his return—a day that will come like a thief in the night when no one is expecting it—that day will be a disaster for those who have not obeyed the gospel. They will be banished from the presence of God forever and left to eternal punishment. But it will be a day of inexpressible joy for those who have put their trust in Jesus and obeyed the good news. What will it be for you—a day of tears or a day of joy? It is your choice. By faith in Christ, repentance of sins, confession of faith, and baptism in Christ for the remission of your sins, you can become a citizen of the kingdom of heaven today. So seize eternal life in Jesus while you still have the time.

If you have not already done so, we recommend you read the series of articles entitled, “[Jesus' Death](#).”