

Ascension – Acts 1.6-9

But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this [Jesus as the bread of life], said to them, “Do you take offense at this? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?” (John 6.62). Then Jesus said, “I will be with you a little longer, and then I am going to him who sent me. You will seek me and you will not find me. Where I am you cannot come” (John 7.33).

As we continue our study of the post-resurrected Jesus and the doctrines that proceed from his mission as the Incarnate One, namely, the ascension, exaltation, and session, followed by a cursory examination of doctrines of the reign and high priesthood of Jesus, we will find that there is a natural interconnection between them. They are linked together by the transcendent effulgence of Christ’s glory. Less is revealed in the New Testament about the transcendent post-resurrected Christ than is recorded about his immanence, that is, his incarnational ministry. The earthly Jesus is much easier to identify with than the New Testament revelation of Jesus as the Transcendent One. Yet, such an understanding of Jesus is vital if one is to grasp the New Testament’s promise of a future kingdom. The presence of the kingdom (Matthew 6.10) is only possible because the exalted Jesus is interceding on behalf of his church. No Christology (a doctrinal study of Christ) is complete without an inclusion of an examination of the post-resurrected aspects of Christ. It is evident from the opening pages of the Synoptic Gospels, where John the Baptist and Jesus are calling people to repent for the kingdom of God is at hand, that there is something eschatological about Jesus’ ministry.

Paul, a very popular theologian of the New Testament, describes the cosmic role of Jesus. Not only is he the first born of all creation, but all things were created through him (Colossians 1.15-23). The epistle of Hebrews is even more expansive, telling us that Jesus *is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power* (Hebrews 1.3). The image of a cosmic Christ is clearly evident in the New Testament and the world’s future is inescapably linked to Christ’s rule in heaven (Revelation 21). All people will come face to face with Jesus the Judge who condemns the wicked and rewards the faithful (viz. those who trust the Son for their salvation). The more thoroughly the Christian grasps the biblical vision of the post-resurrection Christ, the more responsive he will be to the Spirit’s prompting to be a faithful servant in the present and future kingdom.

The importance of understanding the nature of the post-resurrection Christ can scarcely be overstated. The present reign and activity of the post-resurrected Christ is a necessary component in the believer’s salvation. It is the second part of a kingdom theology that permeates the New Testament. The inaugurated kingdom will be brought to its complete fruition with the triumphal return of the Lord Jesus Christ. While the kingdom is present in the life of every Spirit-filled believer, its final perfection is yet future (2 Corinthians 5.3; Titus 2.11-14; Revelation 6.10-11; 22.20 etc.). It is the work of the post-resurrected Christ ascended into heaven, exalted and seated at the right hand of the Father, reigning as our high priest and interceding on behalf of the

Christian that gives the believer power to live a godly life (Romans 6.22-23) and secures for him a hope that this heavenly kingdom will be his future home (Romans 8.31-39).

ASCENSION (Acts 1.6-11; 1 Timothy 3.16): *Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.*

The cross is central to the gospels but it is not the end of salvation history. At the Passover celebration Jesus told his disciples that he was going away in order to prepare a place for them so that at some future date they would be able to be with him permanently (John 14.2-3). Forty days subsequent to the resurrection and after many post-resurrection appearances Jesus led his disciples out as far as Bethany (Luke 24.50) where he informed them that they would receive the Holy Spirit and, being so equipped, they would become witnesses of his work of grace to people everywhere. Immediately after telling his disciples this, he was lifted up and vanished from their sight in a cloud (Acts 1.9). The cloud presumably that same Shekhinah (cloud) that represented God's presence with the Israelites in the desert (Exodus 13.21-22).

The ascension is an obvious progression of the incarnation, death and resurrection. The apostle John indicates that Jesus had it in his mind very early in his ministry. In his dialog with Nicodemus about the new birth he said *"No one has ascended into heaven except him who descended from heaven, the Son of Man"* (John 3.13). Some Critics who had been a part of the crowd that heard Jesus' discourse about the bread of life took offense at some of the things he said. In response to their unbelief Jesus says, *"Do you take offense at this? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?"* (John 6.62). Jesus expected his disciples' to understand that his ascension to the Father's right hand was an essential part of believing in him and his messianic mission.

While teaching in the Temple courts during the feast of the Booths, Jesus said: *"You know me, and you know where I come from? But I have not come of my own accord. He who sent me is true, and him you do not know. I know him, for I come from him, and he sent me"* (John 7.28-29). Jesus is clearly identifying his origin and implies that he will return to his Father (John 7.33; 16.5; 17.11-13). This becomes ever more clear in his confrontation with the chief priests and Pharisees who had sought to have Jesus arrested because of what he was teaching (e.g. *"I will be with you a little longer, and then I am going to him who sent me. You will seek me and you will not find me. Where I am you cannot come"* (John 7.33-34). Jesus publicly insisted that he pre-existed with God the Father. This claim was a point of contention with the Pharisees (John 8.13-19). Moreover, they questioned his claim to be the *light of the world* (John 8.12). Essentially Jesus says his claim is true because he knows where he comes from and where he is going, *"My testimony is true, because I know where I came from and where I am going"* (John 8.14^b). Later Jesus says to those present *"You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world"* (John 8.24).

The doctrine of the ascension was part of the early church's confession about the mystery of godliness in Christ: *He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory* (1 Timothy 3.16). That the ascension is an essential part of New Testament Christology is evident for several reasons. First, Jesus came from heaven and the sinfulness of earth is ill suited to a glorified post-resurrected Christ; as the exalted Lord, heaven is his proper home. Second, it is vital for the believer that Jesus assume the role of High Priest to intercede for the people he redeemed through the priestly sacrifice of his life. He died for our sins, was raised for our justification, and as ascended Lord and reigning high priest intercedes on behalf of his church. Third, if Jesus did not go away he could not have sent the Holy Spirit: *"I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. ... You heard me say to you, I am going away, and I will come to you."* (John 14.18-20, 28; cp. 15.26). Also, *"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"* (John 16.7; cp. 16.13, 28). The coming of the Holy Spirit fulfills the prophecy of Jeremiah 31.31-34, so that every believer may enjoy intimate fellowship with the Father through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit seals the believer's heart and guarantees him of his heavenly inheritance (Ephesians 1.13-14). Finally, Jesus' ascension is necessary so that he might prepare an eternal dwelling place for all those who put their trust in him for their salvation (cp. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, p. 634).

ASCENSION AND THE SECOND ADVENT

The bodily ascension of Jesus anticipates his second coming. After the disciples observed Jesus being taken into heaven, or at least ascending into the cloud, they were confronted by two men (presumably angels) who 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"* (Acts 1.11). From this we may make several observations. First, it was not merely the soul, or some immaterial part of Jesus that ascended, but his whole person. Jesus, born of a virgin in the flesh, God incarnate, departed the world in the flesh; he did not discard the body of flesh as though it were no longer necessary or important. Second, his departure was visible to everyone standing by. Precisely "where" Jesus is physically the Bible does not say. Scripture speaks metaphorically of Jesus being seated at the Father's right hand. However, Scripture does indicate that Jesus is in whatever part of creation God manifests his glory in the presence of his heavenly hosts. Millard Erickson's comment may be helpful.

In premodern times the ascension was usually thought of as a transition from one place (earth) to another (heavenly). We now know, however, that space is such that heaven is not merely upward from the earth, and it also seems likely that the difference between earth and heaven is not merely geographical. One cannot get to God simply by traveling sufficiently far and fast in a rocket ship of some kind. God is in a different dimension of reality, and the transition from here to there requires not merely a change of place, but of state. So, at some point, Jesus'

ascension was not merely a physical and spatial change, but spiritual as well. At that time Jesus underwent the remainder of the metamorphosis begun with the resurrection of his body. (Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 778).

The comment of the angels regarding Jesus' return is in keeping with Jesus' own promise to return for his disciples: *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* (John 14.3). The manner of his return is similar to his departure in that it will be visible, bodily, and in the clouds (possibly another reference to the glory of God). Of course, there are many differences; they will be discussed in the coming weeks. Mark's description of the second advent, like the angel's comments, excites the imaginations of all who long for his appearing: *And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven* (Mark 13.26-27). It is Jesus' ascension, exaltation and session (cp. Mark 14.62) that gives the believer reason to hope that one day Jesus will return to receive to himself everyone who is awaiting his glorious return.