

## The High Triumph of Christ

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*And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight' (Acts 1:9).*

*'He ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead' (The Apostles' Creed).*

Not nearly so much is said in the New Testament about the ascension as about the resurrection. The resurrection is the great focus of New Testament teaching. His rising from the dead set the seal upon all he had done in obedience to the Father. Because he rose from the grave, we know that what he meant to do has in fact been accomplished. But the New Testament does speak very specifically of the Lord's ascension into heaven. We must try to understand a little of what the ascension may and must mean to us.

Moreover, it can be said that the resurrection and ascension belong together, that they are of a single piece of cloth, and one cannot easily separate them.

F. F. Bruce, in his commentary on Acts, can say this:

In the apostolic preaching the resurrection and ascension of Christ seem to represent one continuous movement and both together constitute his exaltation. But his exaltation to the right hand of God, which is what Ascension Day really commemorates, was not postponed to the fortieth day after his triumph over death.

The truth is that the Lord did not first enter into his Father's presence, was not first seated at his Father's right hand, on the day of the ascension itself. While he was often with his disciples during the forty days between the ascension and the resurrection, by far the greater part of that period was spent elsewhere. But how are we to understand that 'elsewhere'? Was the Lord closeted somewhere on earth perhaps — in a cave, a safe house, a tomb?

He was and surely must have been in his Father's presence and at his Father's right hand, already exalted to the highest degree.

You will notice at once from what Luke tells us in this passage that the ascension is the visible ascent — Christ's being taken up — into heaven in the presence of his disciples. In view here is a local transition. He was with his disciples; he did speak to them; he spent approximately thirty-three years on this earth; but now he is with us no longer in that literal, physical sense of the word. He has been taken up into heaven, received into the presence of his Father and ours. From the mount called Olivet where he and his disciples met together he was taken up, caught up into heaven. And a cloud received him out of their sight' (*Acts 1:9*).

Frequently in the Scriptures 'cloud' or 'clouds' may be mentioned in relation to God and to his majesty and glory. In the Old Testament when God showed himself to his people he often did this by means of a cloud. He led Israel through the wilderness in those long, weary years of their wandering by a pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night. When God showed himself as present upon the dedication of the tabernacle in the wilderness, the cloud, the glory, the Shekhinah (the manifestation of the presence of the divine Being) covered the place and thereafter dwelt above the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies.

Then we are told, too, that when the Lord Jesus Christ was transfigured, when something of his supernal glory shone through his human nature, he and his disciples with him came to be addressed out of a cloud. It was out of the cloud that God said, 'This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased' (*Mark 9:7; Matt. 17:5*). Then there is the second coming: 'Behold, he cometh with the clouds, and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him shall wail because of him. Even so, Amen' (*Rev. 1:7*).

We may understand from what the Scriptures tell us in these passages and many others, that 'cloud' in relation to God speaks of glory, grandeur, majesty. 'Cloud', in these circumstances, may be theophany. And when we are told that the Lord Jesus was received out of their sight by a cloud we are not to understand that he went up until he passed the barrier provided by the clouds and then kept on travelling upward until his disciples could no longer see him, but rather that he was received into heavenly glory. God the Father took to himself once again God the Son, and seated him at his own right hand with all the majesty and glory due him as Mediator and as King. The ascension is the festival of the enthronement of our Mediatorial King, of his exaltation to the place of honour and pre-eminence at the Father's right hand.

But now, *in the second place*, another issue has to be dealt with here in relation to the ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ because of a possible misunderstanding or misinterpretation. In this connection two problems may arise in our minds as we think of his being received up into glory.

The first of them is this. Why did the Lord need any such augmentation of majesty as the ascension gave him? Was he not from eternity the very Son of God? Who can add anything to his dignity and power? In the beginning was the

Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' (*John 1:1*). From eternity, by definition, in the nature of the case, he already has all power and all glory.

The other, the second, problem is simply this. Before his ascension he himself promised his disciples: 'Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world' (*Matt. 28:20*). But if that be true, if he is with us according to his own promise, even to the end of the world, then what are we to make of the ascension? The ascension in the nature of the case means that he has been taken away from us, that he is no longer with us, that we can no longer speak to him as his disciples were accustomed to doing. He has gone away.

But we need to understand very clearly and carefully in our own minds that the ascension does not speak of the augmentation of glory and majesty given to the Lord Jesus Christ as the second person in the Trinity or of any change in his being. We must understand equally clearly that the ascension does not mean that, as to his deity, the Lord Jesus Christ is, despite his own promise to the contrary, no longer with us.

What is at stake here is our grasp of the exaltation of the person of the Mediator who is not only God but also man. He is the God-man. He is Immanuel. And Immanuel means: 'God with us', or 'God who is with us'. He has taken our nature to himself. He is the eternal Son of God, and it is entirely appropriate that we should address him as the Deity. 'My Lord and my God', said Thomas to him (*John 20:28*). But he is also one of us. He is a man. He has assumed our nature. He has a body. That body is now glorified indeed; but it is no less a body on that account. And the local transition which took place, the rising from earth to heaven of the person of the Mediator, speaks, therefore, of the exaltation of that person in the sense that our nature has been glorified and raised to the position of honour at God's right hand. But the Lord Jesus Christ as to his deity, because he is God and for that reason omnipresent, is still always with us as he promised he would be.

Now let us for a little while reflect on what this means. The ascension is not merely a doctrine which may interest specialists in the field of systematic theology but which leaves the rest of us untouched and unmoved. On the contrary, the ascension of our Lord relates to my experience and yours.

1. We must understand at once that the ascension speaks of the acceptableness in the Father's sight of the work his Son has done. The Saviour has completed his mediatorial assignment, and the Father has raised him to supreme dignity and honour.

Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue

should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (*Phil. 2:9-11*).

I say that the ascension is an attestation of the acceptableness of his redemptive work. That he ascended and that he rules from his position of dignity at the Father's right hand must mean to us that God was pleased with what he did. What he tells us in the gospel, in the New Testament, in the word that comes to us of the redemption which is ours in and through his blood is true. We can depend upon it.

2. Christ's ascension means that we have a spokesman in the presence of God the Father. It is a great thing to have a friend at court, one who can speak for us. Left to ourselves in the throne-room of God, having to answer for all we have done and all we have failed to do, we should be speechless and defenceless in the end. We must be very careful about praying for justice. Do you demand justice? God forbid that justice should be done to me, for in that case I must perish utterly and be forever covered with shame and confusion of face. Justice is not done to me except in the sense that God's own holy justice has been satisfied through the death, burial and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Hence, I do not have to be afraid in the courtroom, the throne-room, of God. It is a wonderful thing that I know of the presence of Christ beside me there. When I stumble and fall into sin, when I make mistakes, when I fail to do as I ought, and when I do as I ought not, I have One there who makes intercession for me, One who speaks in my behalf and whose influence is infinite because he himself is the Son of God.

The Lord is at his Father's side to represent us and to intercede for us: 'Lo, I am with you always'. He meant us to know that, even though he is at the right hand of our heavenly Father and not physically with us, he is there as our Mediator and our King. On that account we can sleep at night, we can rise up day by day and begin our work afresh with consciences washed clean and with hearts filled with good cheer. No matter how dark the skies, no matter how problematic life may sometimes appear to us to be, no matter how replete with difficulties and with problems apparently insoluble, there is victory because the Lord Jesus Christ reigns at the Father's right hand.

3. The ascension of Christ means that the resurrection, which is now still in prospect for us, is already a reality for us also in principle, because our Saviour is even now as we shall one day be. When he rose from the dead, he did so, not as a disembodied spirit, but as flesh and bone (*Luke 24:39*). Moreover, he proved that he had a body still, though a glorified body, by eating fish and honey (*Luke 24:41-43*). Now he has ascended to heaven and he is at the right hand of our heavenly Father. He is there as the testimony, the attestation, the evidence that we shall be there one day as well.

Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also (*John 14:1-3*).

Do you hear what he is saying to you? He is assuring you — you who believe in him and whose life has been transformed by his power — that because he is there as the ascended, living, reigning One, you too will be there one day.

4. Christ's ascension means that he has sent us his Holy Spirit. Ten days after the ascension Pentecost occurred, the feast which became the great Christian event of Pentecost. The church received the gift of the Holy Spirit in power. The Lord himself said in so many words that his ascension meant at the same time the gift of the Holy Spirit:

Nevertheless I tell you the truth; it is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you (*John 16:7*).

So the Lord, by his ascension, has given us a guarantee that we shall have the enabling we need. We shall be given the empowering we must have, if we are to do his work. The Holy Spirit gives new life; he is the author of regeneration; he is the enabler of God's people; he is the One who takes the gospel message and drives it home. You see the connection, the ineluctable connection, between the ascension, on the one hand, and the gift of the Holy Spirit, on the other.

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