

What the Ascension Accomplished

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

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Of course the pinnacle of our expression of gratitude and worship is to come to the Lord's table which we will do in just a few moments. But in preparation for that, I want to draw your attention to a couple of passages in the Scripture. One of them comes at the very end of the gospel of Mark, the very last little paragraph in Mark's gospel marks a very, very significant event in the life of our Lord. And I want to look at that event as a heart and mind preparation for partaking in the communion together.

It says in verse 50 of that final chapter, Luke 24, "He led them out as far as Bethany and He lifted up His hands and blessed them. While He was blessing them, He parted from them and was carried up into heaven. And they, after worshiping Him, returned to Jerusalem with great joy and they were continually in the temple praising God."

That describes the culminating event in the life of our Lord, His ascension into heaven. And the response of the disciples of Jesus to that ascension was worship, joy, and continual praise. In fact, the ascension became such a part of their praise and worship that we find Paul writing to Timothy in 1 Timothy and in chapter 3 of 1 Timothy, he closes the chapter by making reference to an early church hymn and that early church hymn noted the ascension. It goes like this, "By common confession, great is the mystery of Godliness, the incarnation itself. He who was revealed in the flesh, was vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up into glory." Again the final line in that early church hymn marks the ascension, the Lord was taken up into glory.

That greatest of all events, really, in the life of our Lord, the culminating event, the triumphant finale to His life on earth is probably the most neglected event in the life of Christ. We may have some hymns that make reference to it as that early church hymn, but even though it is a monumental moment in redemptive history, it is so very often neglected. But it's impossible to think about the crucifixion without the resurrection, and it really is unthinkable to look at the resurrection without moving immediately to the ascension. It deserves to be ranked among the great events in the life of our Lord.

Rarely do we consider, however, the greatness of His leaving. We have the biggest Christian holiday, celebrating His arrival. That's Christmas, and we're about to do that. We have another Christian holiday that is a dominating holiday in our culture and that is the celebration of His resurrection which we do in the Spring and we call that celebration Easter.

But what about His leaving? Obviously the disciples struggled with that. When He told them He was going to go, they didn't want to hear about that. They didn't want him to leave. They were grieved. They were afraid. They failed to grasp initially the significance of His leaving. However, Jesus said in John 16:7, "I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away." We could say it was to our advantage that He came, that He lived, that He died, that He rose again, but the disciples were reluctant to accept that night in the upper room that it would be to their advantage for Him to go away. Still it wasn't very long, as you well know, 40 days after the resurrection that He ascended into heaven and they saw Him disappear into the clouds, Acts 1, and some angels showed up to explain that the same one who had left would return.

The ascension really is an incredibly important event, the culminating reality of His entire life and ministry. His ascension. We don't want to under estimate its value, certainly the writers of the New Testament do not underestimate its value. He is the one and the only one who having accomplished our redemption was received back into heaven. This is the final divine affirmation, stamp of approval on His ministry.

So, for a little bit tonight, not long, but just a little bit, I want you to think about the meaning of the ascension and begin to turn your thanks toward our God for providing this final glorious tribute to His Son which affirms everything that His Son came to do. Let me just give you some things to think about. Number one, the ascension marked the completion of our Lord's earthly work. It marked the completion of His earthly work. He said in John 4:34, "My meat, or my food, is to do the will of Him who sent Me and finish His work." He said in John 17:4, "I glorified You on earth, having accomplished the work which You gave Me to do." On the cross, John 19:30, "It is finished." And in John 17:5, that great statement in the High Priestly prayer, "Now glorify Me together with the glory that I had with You before the world began."

Jesus knew He had finished the work and He was ready to go back to the glory He knew with the Father. The Father receives Him back into glory, signaling the work was done and the work satisfied God. That is so important for us to understand, that when God receives Jesus into heavenly glory in the ascension, it is the divine affirmation of everything that Jesus did.

Secondly, the ascension signals the end of our Lord's limitation. I just read you John 17:5, "Give back to Me the glory that I had with You before the world began." It is His restoration to full glory. Philippians 2 says, "He came, took on the form of a slave, all the way down to death." And we know that that was His humiliation. Then it switches in verse 9, God has highly exalted Him and given Him a name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow.

Not only does His ascension identify the completion of His earthly work, but it identifies the end of His earthly limitation. He goes back to the full glory He had before He humbled Himself and took on the

form of a slave, became man. Now He is back as the fully glorified man, restored to limitless perfection, restored to limitless intimacy with the Father and the Spirit in heavenly glory. He ends the time of condescension, He ends the time of humiliation and suffering. Consequently, thirdly, it does mark His full coronation, His exaltation as Lord to which every knee should bow.

There's a fourth thing to think about when you think of the ascension, it signals the Lord sending of the Holy Spirit...the Lord's sending of the Holy Spirit. John 16 verse 7, Jesus says, "If I don't go away, the Holy Spirit can't come." He says I will go away, I will send you the Holy Spirit. That was a promise He made in the Upper Room to His disciples and to all of us. And, of course, we know on the day of Pentecost that happened, the Holy Spirit came because Christ had ascended back to the Father and sent the Spirit in His place, to take His place. This is why He could say it is better for you if I go away because if I go not away, the Spirit will not come. I have been with you, He will be in you. The ascension of our Lord then signals the sending of the Holy Spirit, who then takes up residency in the life of every believer. The disciples had Christ with them, and now we have the Spirit of Christ in us.

We could say further that the ascension of Christ marked the beginning of His preparation for our arrival in heaven. Do you remember in John 14 Jesus said, "I go to prepare a place for you?" And when He arrived in heaven, the preparation for that place began. He began whatever was necessary to provide dwelling places for His people in heavenly glory. Another reason why it's better that He left, that He might prepare a dwelling place for us.

Another thing to think about, the ascension of our Lord marks the passing of the responsibility of evangelism into the hands of His followers. Jesus was the primary teacher the whole time He was on earth. There were some brief forays, you remember, into evangelism done by the 70 followers of Christ, and done by the disciples who were sent out to preach and came back. And there was some training there. But even after the resurrection, for 40 days it was Jesus still teaching things concerning the Kingdom. He was the teacher. But when He went into heaven, and sent the Holy Spirit, the reality of evangelism's responsibility passed from Him to His followers. You remember in Acts 1:8 it says, "You shall receive power after the Holy Spirit has come upon you and be witnesses of Me in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost part of the earth." So the ascension of our Lord inaugurates the responsibility of the people of God to proclaim the gospel to the ends of the world.

Further, the ascension signals our Lord's headship over the church. And this is the wonderful truth that is declared and certainly celebrated in Ephesians chapter 1 verse 20. "God raised Him from the dead, seated Him at His right hand in the heavenlies, far above all rule and authority and power, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come." That is the coronation of Jesus and He put all things in subjection under His feet, all things. He becomes King of Kings, and Lord of Lords. He is ruler over all and then as ruler over all, God gave Him as head over all things to the church. It's not saying He gave Him to be head of the church, although that's true, He gave Him to be head over all things. And the one who is head over all things He gave to the

church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all. So the ascension then establishes Christ as the ruler of all things and as the ruler of all things, He takes His place as the head of His church. And His church is defined by its relationship to its head. We draw our life from Him. We draw our knowledge from Him who is the head. We are His body. He literally lives in His church as its head.

The ascension also marked the defeat of Satan and all the demons. In fact, verse 21, I just read it, "He was set on high far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and every name that is named. That is every person whether human or supernatural, divine in the sense of holy angels, and demons as well. He is above all beings, every name that is named, He is superior to. Which means that He takes His place over demons. He is the one who signals the final defeat of Satan, the final crushing of Satan's head. That is set in place by the ascension of Christ.

Furthermore, the ascension signals His sending gifts to men...sending gifts to men. In Ephesians chapter 4, we read that when He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives and He gave gifts to men. He enters into heaven, He brings the redeemed with Him and then He gifts His people. This signals the Lord giving the work of ministry to His people. When He ascends, He gives gifts. What are the gifts? Apostles, prophets, evangelists, teaching pastors for the equipping of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ. The essential reality of life in the church as we know it, led by gifted men from the Apostles and the prophets, to the evangelists and teaching pastors and all other gifted people who serve the church, that all is launched by the ascension of Jesus Christ.

There's another thing to add to the list. The ascension marks the start of our Lord's High Priestly ministry...His High Priestly Ministry. He is set on high that He might be a faithful and merciful High Priest on behalf of His people. Hebrews 4:14, "Therefore since we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, that's the ascension. He passes through the heavens to become our great High Priest, Jesus the Son of God. We have not a High Priest who is unsympathetic with our weakness, but one who has been tempted in all things as we are yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

All of this comes from the ascension. He becomes our intercessory, faithful High Priest, defending us against which no accusation can be brought for if God is for us and Christ intercedes on our behalf, who can lay any charge to God's elect, says Paul in Romans 8.

And finally, the ascension ends with a declaration in Acts 1:11 by angels that the same Jesus who was taken up from you shall come in like manner as you have seen Him go. This is really an astonishing event that gets overlooked, as I said. What an amazing event.

Our Lord is exalted. He sends the Holy Spirit. He begins to prepare our eternal home. He takes the headship of the church. He defeats Satan and all His enemies. He passes evangelism in ministry to His followers. He begins the blessed work of intercession. And He stands ready to return one day to gather His people.

As we come to this table of the Lord, I want you to think past the cross and past the resurrection to what those accomplished that unfolds when you come 40 days later to the wonder of His ascension. Bow with me in prayer.

Father, we are so grateful that You have accomplished Your purpose in Christ, that the One who came down from heaven was received back into heaven. The one who came as a humble babe was received back as King of kings. The one who came as a slave was received as the ruler of the universe, the Master of all. We thank You for all that Christ accomplished. We thank You for the indescribable gift as we read earlier. We thank You for all that His ascension affirms. We celebrate that. We rejoice in that. And understanding it, may we be like those disciples who were there. May we be filled with great joy and praise and thanksgiving for what our Savior accomplished. And even as we look at the table and remember the blood that was shed and the body that was given for us, may we see it all the way through to the divine affirmation that came in His ascension. Prepare our hearts, Lord, even now. And we know that You have told us how to do that, we are to examine ourselves to see if there's any sin in us, if we're entertaining any sin, any habits, any secret habits, any patterns of life that bring dishonor to You, Lord, would You reveal those to us in clear terms and may we forsake those consciously, openly. Lord, may we willingly confess our sin, turn from our sin. May we express to You the desire to walk in holiness, to walk in righteousness in every aspect of our lives. This is suitable for us as we come to partake in this remembrance.

Lord, as we celebrate the death of Christ, we have to understand that this is the time when we acknowledge our fallenness and our sinfulness. Yes we celebrate grace and forgiveness, but we also confess our sin. We know that we've failed, we know that we fall short of Your glory. Lord, may it not be premeditated, may it not be cultivated sin in us. Would You cleanse us now that we might be acceptable to you and able to receive these things and not bring judgment down on our heads because we have eaten in an unworthy way? And remind us that this is for those who truly know Christ and truly desire to walk obediently to Him.

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