

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Special Messages		Pastor/Teacher
Text:	Acts 1:1-11		Gary L. W. Johnson
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THE ASCENSION

The New Testament refers to Christ's ascension in many places. In the Gospel of John it is twice referred to in an anticipatory manner. Jesus asked those disciples who were offended by him, *What if you were to see the Son of man ascending where he was before?* (Jn. 6:62). To Mary Magdalene he said, *Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God* (Jn. 20:17). In Acts, his ascension is recounted with circumstantial details: *And when he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight* (Acts 1:9). The same account is found in the longer ending of Mark (16:19) and in Luke 24:51. Later, in the Epistles, the ascension is referred to in speaking of the fullness of Christ's work. *Who is to condemn? Is it Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us?* (Rom. 8:34). *If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God* (Col. 3:1). The letter to the Hebrews makes repeated references to Christ's ascension and present position in heaven (Heb. 1:3; 6:20; 8:1; 9:12, 24; 10:12; 12:2; 13:20). In 1 Timothy the ascension is placed within the full perspective of Christ's work: *Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of our religion: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory* (1 Tim. 3:16).¹ The language the writers of the New Testament use is of particular interest. In Acts 1:9, the phrase "he was taken up" is from the Greek verb *epairō*, meaning to lift up. In Luke 24:51 "he was taken up" is a different word; *anapherō* means to carry or bear away. In Acts 1:2, 11 and 1 Timothy 3:16, "was received up" is from *analambanō*, which means to lift up on high. The same verb is used in the Septuagint of Elijah's translation to heaven (2 Kings 2:11). Doug Kelly helpfully explains that the "Two Greek verbs are generally used in these and other New Testament texts to express the ascension: (1) *anaphēro*, which indicates going up by one's own power (thus, in the active voice), and (2) *analambanō*, meaning to be taken up (thus, in the passive voice, *analambanomai*).

"(1) *anabainō*, according to T. F. Torrance, is the Greek rendering of the Hebrew *alah*, and has cultic significance: 'It is used regularly in the Pentateuch of Moses' ascent of Mount Sinai, with the sense of going up to or ascending to the Lord. It came to be a regular term for going up to the Temple, while within the Temple it was used for ascension into the Holy of Holies. At the same time the word was used for the offering of sacrifice, while the noun, *olah*, may be used as a technical term for the whole burnt offering. It is in this way, apparently, that the term *anabainō* is applied to the ascension of Jesus Christ with distinct theological import – cf. Acts 2:34; John 3:13; 6:62; 20:17; Eph. 4:8-10 . . . Used in these ways the term *ascension* is essentially concerned with the Royal Priesthood of the crucified, risen and ascended Christ, exercised from the right hand of divine power.'

"(2) *analambanomai* usually bears the sense of 'to be lifted up.' It is used in Mark 16:19; Acts 1:2; 1:22; 1 Tim."²

It seems fairly obvious to the unbiased reader that the New Testament strongly affirms the historical reality of Christ's ascension. It is, therefore, nothing short of astounding to read these words of a well-known seminary professor: "The Apostolic Witness . . . in its earliest form does not proclaim an Ascension into heaven . . . this event was not underlined as of special importance during the first Christian century."³ Did the ascension really happen? Is the language of the New Testament to be understood as merely symbolic and poetic? Was this simply a way of expressing the word picture of the day? What is the real significance of ascension?

I. **THE ASCENSION: ITS TRUE CHARACTER.** There are a number of responses that can be given to those who would seek to discredit the reality of a physical ascension.

A. **The Eyewitnesses.** Luke repeatedly underscores the fact that eyewitnesses were present. "He was taken up *before their very eyes*, and a cloud hid him *from their sight*. They were *looking intently* up into the sky as he was going . . .' The two angels then said to them, 'Why do you stand here *looking* into the sky? This same Jesus . . . will come back in the same way you have *seen him go* into heaven.' Five times in this extremely brief account it is stressed that the ascension took place visibly. Luke has not piled up these phrases for nothing. He has much to say in his two-volume work about the importance for the verification of the gospel of the apostolic eyewitnesses. And here he plainly includes the ascension of Jesus within the range of historical truths to which the eyewitnesses could (and did) testify."⁴ Berkouwer points out that the scriptural witness to Christ's ascension is by no means limited to Luke. "Everywhere in Scripture we find direct or indirect references to this fact. Christ himself speaks not only of his resurrection on the third day but also, in a special sense, of his *going away*. He knows when his hour has come that he must go to the Father (John 13:3; 14:28; 14:2). He says to the disciples: *Whither I go, ye cannot come* (John 13:33) and to the Jews: *Ye shall seek me, and shall not find me; and where I am, ye cannot come* (John 7:34, 36; 8:21f.). His going away is of the greatest import to the disciples (John 16:7 – *It is expedient for you that I go away*). It means the preparation of a place for them (John 14:2) and the sending of the Comforter (John 16:7-10). Hence his references to his going away contain more than simply an indication of his approaching death, even though he does not explicitly mention his ascension into heaven. His separation from them is closely related to his exaltation and glorification. When the Greeks desire to see Christ, he says: *The hour is come, that the Son of man should be glorified* (John 12:23). When the multitude reminds him of the fact that the Christ *abideth for ever* (John 12:34), Jesus answers by referring to his departure: *Yet a little while is the light among you. Walk while ye have the light, that darkness overtake you not* (v. 35). All these statements indicate an approaching great event, that itself will also mean separation (cf. John 12:8 – *For the poor ye have always with you; but me ye have not always*) but a separation that is filled with God's mercy and goodness. His going away means glorification, and is a blessing and beneficial reality. True, Christ's references to his going away are too vague and general to say that they clearly indicate the ascension of which Luke writes, but they do point to a soteriological historical progress which finds its realization in this event. His going away to the Father becomes a fact when he ascends."⁵

B. **The Narrative.** Luke's account is told with simplicity and sobriety. There are none of the extravagances that are so often associated with the apocryphal gospels and legend literature. There is no evidence of poetry or symbolism in Luke's language. On the contrary, the narrative reads like history.

C. **The Transition.** If Jesus did not ascend into heaven, what happened to Him? Why the cessation of the post-resurrection appearances? A great deal must be

read into the New Testament documents in order to dismiss the ascension.⁶ “At present it is enough to say that, so far as the direct evidence of the men of our Lord’s generation on any point can satisfy us, the witnesses to His Ascension could have had no better opportunities than they enjoyed, could not have been more capable of profiting by them, could not have spoken more clearly than they have done, and could, by neither word nor deed, have given more conclusive evidence as to their own convictions. So far as evidence handed down from a remote past can carry conviction with it, that evidence is here.”⁷

II. THE ASCENSION: ITS IMPORTANCE. The doctrine of Christ’s ascension cannot be separated from His incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. These are all essential to His work as redeemer.

- A. *The Culmination of Christ’s Work.* Our Lord’s death and resurrection would not have their full effect until Jesus ascended to the Father as the great High Priest of His people (Hebrews 4:14-16).
- B. *The Glorification of Christ’s Person.* The ascension speaks of Jesus’s glorified humanity. The physical body of Christ is now enthroned in heaven. This has a significant bearing on the New Testament understanding of the “Body of Christ” imagery as used to describe the church (Ephesians 1:22, 23) and the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 11:23-29).⁸
- C. *The Heavenly Session of Christ the King.* The Lord Jesus Christ *does* now reign. His work on behalf of His Church continues. “His victorious triumph assures us of the efficacy of his work of mediation, and is particularly important for our understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit. When the doctrine of heavenly session is eclipsed, the work of the Spirit can be detached from that of Christ, either by too high a doctrine of the visible church, or by a spirituality which virtually ignores the work of Christ altogether, or regards it as only the beginning of the church’s life.”⁹

CONCLUSION: “Remember,” said Warfield, “that you serve a living, not a dead Christ. You are to trust in His blood. In it alone you have life. But you are to remember that He was not broken by death, but broke death; and having purchased you to Himself by His blood, now rules over your souls from His heavenly throne. He is your master whom you are to obey. He has given you commandment to bring all peoples to the knowledge of Him. And He has promised to be with you, even to the end of the world. Live with Him. Keep fast hold upon Him; be in complete touch with Him. Let your hearts dwell with Him in the heavenly places, that the arm of His strength may be with you in your earthly toil. Let this be that by which all men know you: that in good report and in bad, in life and in death, in the great and in the small affairs of life – in everything you do down to the minutest acts of your everyday affairs – you are the servants of the Lord Christ. So will you be truly His disciples, and so will He be your Saviour – unto the uttermost.”¹⁰

ENDNOTES

¹J. M. Boice, *God The Redeemer: Foundations of The Christian Faith II* (IVP, 1978), p. 250.

²As cited by Douglas Kelley, *Systematic Theology II* (Mentor, 2014), p. 502.

³O. Sydney Barr, *From the Apostles' Faith to the Apostles' Creed* (Oxford, 1964), pp. 142-143.

⁴J. R. W. Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World: The Message of Acts* (IVP, 1990), p. 48.

⁵G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies In Dogmatics: The Work of Christ* (Eerdmans, 1965), p. 203.

⁶"Only severe Bible criticism can lead on to a denial of the ascension and even to its complete elimination from the original apostolic Kerygma." G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: The Work of Christ* (Eerdmans, 1965), p. 206.

⁷William Milligan, *The Ascension and Heavenly Priesthood of Our Lord* (rpt. Attic Press, 1977), p. 9.

⁸The Protestant Reformers were insistent that the phrase "Body of Christ," when used in reference to the Lord's Supper, could not be understood in a physical sense (as taught by the doctrine of transubstantiation) but only in a spiritual sense. Cf. G. L. Bray, *The New Dictionary of Theology*, eds. S. B. Ferguson and D. F. Wright (IVP, 1988), p. 47.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰B. B. Warfield, *The Saviour of the World* (rpt. Mack, 1972), p. 125.