

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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

“In the ascension Jesus visibly – even liturgically – marked the end of his earthly descent and announced his future return. Upon his resurrection, he began this ascending trajectory of his divinely vindicated mission -- what we often mean by his exaltation. The Triune God was so committed to the incarnation that by the Spirit the Father restored the Son to embodied, albeit glorified, human life. Since the Son is eternally glorious, the new element of exaltation involved his identity as the God-man. For *Jesus* to share in the name above every name (Phil. 2:9) exalted a human life to initiate our promised participation in God’s reign. Now the Son of Man anticipated in Daniel 7 has received authority in God the Father’s presence, inaugurating everlasting dominion in which the church will participate. The ascension began Christ’s heavenly session, ruling over his regathered form of Israel called *church*, thereby advancing his earthly reign. As a royal priesthood, the church experiences his presence and absence dialectically. Remaining incarnate, the Son is physically absent from earth; indeed, the church does not know where *heaven* is. God apparently has delayed Christ’s return in order to magnify opportunities for unbelievers’ repentance and believers’ sanctification (2 Pet. 3:9-15). When the church fails to acknowledge Jesus’s absence adequately, it becomes too triumphant about being an earthly mediator. God has poured out a new form of Christ’s presence through the Holy Spirit, who offers a guarantee of our salvation yet thereby teaches us to wait for its fullness (Eph. 1:13-14). This new form of God’s presence is less tangible – apart from the Lord’s Supper – but more universally immediate and intimate. The Spirit can make the risen Christ present to anyone, whereas if the Son remained on earth, that form of presence would be locally limited. The ascension actively reiterated God’s approval of the Son’s reconciling mission. A new phase can unfold: a heavenly presentation of Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice, a ministry of intercession on behalf of his people. Now they draw near boldly, confident of God’s welcome, in Jesus’s name. When the church fails to acknowledge adequately Jesus’s human presence with God the Father, it fears the Son as if he were too divine to be of earthly, saving good. Then the church threatens to displace the one Mediator between God and humanity with additional intermediaries – Mary, the saints, and the like. Since Christ already presents a faithful covenant response in heaven, though, believers can confidently approach God in him.”¹ The New Testament makes a number of direct references to Christ’s ascension. Here are some of them: “And the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God” (Mark 16:19). “And he led them out as far as to Bethania: and lifting up his hands, he blessed them. And it came to pass, whilst he blessed them, that he departed from them, and was carried up to heaven” (Luke 24:50, 51). “And no man hath ascended into heaven, but he that descended from heaven, the Son of man, who is in heaven” (John 3:13). “And when he had said these things, while they looked on, he was raised up: and a cloud received him out of their sight. And whilst they were beholding him going up to heaven, behold, two men stood by them, in white garments” (Acts 1:9, 10). “Wherefore he saith: Ascending on high, he led captivity captive: he gave gifts to men” (Ephesians 4:8). “Having, therefore, a great high priest who hath penetrated the heavens, Jesus the Son of God; let us hold fast our confession” (Hebrews 4:14, cf. also 1:3; 6:20; 8:1; 9:12, 24; 10:12; 12:2; 13:20). The Apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 3:16 declares, “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.”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 Eyewitness.** 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
- 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.⁵ “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.”⁶

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).⁷
- 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.”⁸

CONCLUSION: “Remember,” said Warfield, “that you serve a living, not a dead Christ. You are to trust in His blood. In it alone have you 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.”⁹

ENDNOTES

¹D. J. Treier, *Introducing Evangelical Theology* (Baker, 2019), p. 217.

²In 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. 3:16.” Cf. *Systematic Theology II* (Mentor Books, 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.

⁵“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.

⁶William Milligan, *The Ascension and Heavenly Priesthood of Our Lord* (rpt. Attic Press, 1977), p. 9.

⁷The 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.

⁸Ibid.

⁹B. B. Warfield, *The Saviour of the World* (rpt. Mack, 1972), p. 125.