

Ascension Sunday

Sunday 24th May 2020

Readings: Psalm 47, Psalm 93. Ephesians 1:15-23, Luke 24:44-53, Acts 1:1-11

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There are some things in the Scripture and Christian life that, over time, simply get taken for granted. At Easter and afterwards we tend to focus on what Jesus has done for us, His substitutionary atonement, taking the penalty for our sin. We focus, rightly, on the significance of Jesus' resurrection. But other following events are also worth considering at some depth. Today, we come to one of those type of events, the Ascension of Jesus Christ. It is in fact, one of the strangest and more profound events in the Scriptures, so let's begin.

Imagine being on a beach somewhere, or at a picnic in the park, or out on a street in town or outside the mall, and suddenly you see someone who had been walking and talking to some others in front you simply begin to rise up into the air and keep going. How would you react? You'd likely look around to see if anyone else was watching as well. If not, you'd begin to doubt your own sanity. If others were watching, a crowd would inevitably quickly form. You'd begin to look for stage props and magician's tricks, wires and who knows what else. But if the person continued to rise right up into the clouds what would you, could you, make of it? This is just what Jesus did at a mount near Bethany. Jesus fare-welled His disciples and rose up, and up, and up, until He disappeared into the clouds. One can only imagine the confusion and fear on their faces. It was not expected. It was seen by many. It was a shock. The veracity of the event is attested to by its completely unexpected nature.

Interestingly, in the Greco-Roman world, the concept of ascension of an individual, the edification, the deification, of an Emperor or the like, was not unusual, however it was understood differently. While various emperor's seemingly appended divinity to their status during their lives, physical death was very real and definitive and often at the hand of enemies. Ascension after death was only considered spiritually at best.

In Hebrew culture there was significant debate about what sort of afterlife there was, if there was one at all. The thought of a contemporary, physical ascension was unthinkable, even abhorrent. The Pharisees recognised a spiritual resurrection, the Sadducees rejected any life after physical death and the Essenes at Qumran and Damascus vehemently denied the resurrection of the physical body. Not that the concept of ascension of some form was unknown. After all, in 2 Kings 2, Elijah had been taken by God to heaven in a chariot. But, all in all, Jesus' ascension completely counter cultural to any contemporary belief. The disciples, watching, would have been transfixed.

It is no wonder then that we have the equally bemusing annotation of the angels asking the disciples what they were doing still staring so intently at the clouds. The role of these messengers was to affirm that Jesus would return, the same way He had left. When Jesus returns to earth, it will be through the clouds. If nothing else, we are reminded that God does things His way, in His time, when He is ready, and God is not bound by any cultural or emotional sensitivities or intellectual expectations.

So, if that was what happened at the Ascension, what did it mean for the disciples? How was it a significant event for them? For the disciples the event was in many ways the culmination of their walk with Jesus on earth. It was a definitive point of transition, a milestone. One period had finished and another was to start. One might see it like having been trained by the boss to do a job and now the time has come when the boss has gone with the promise he or she will come back some day. Today starts a new

reality and a new responsibility. The disciples knew, because Jesus had told them so clearly, that Jesus was going to be with their heavenly Father, God. He was moving from one space-continuum to another.

Jesus' resurrection and now ascension were also the vindication of Jesus' earthly ministry and His words. All that He had said and taught, no matter how odd, how unusual, how in conflict with authority, were vindicated by what He had done – risen from the dead and now ascended to heaven. What He had said He would do, He had done. They could have confidence that all He said had yet to happen, would also come about. I bet they spent a fair bit of time together going over just what it was they remembered He had taught them and how Jesus had interpreted the Scriptures.

Now also, in this period before theological specification and articulation, the disciples recognised the truth that Jesus was indeed God amongst them. Luke 24:52 so briefly but profoundly sums up the disciples' response. They worshipped Him. As good Jews they could only worship the One True God and now they knew without doubt that they knew Him personally. This would be life changing.

So, if this profound truth of the divinity of Jesus was understood by the disciples – that the man Jesus was also God – what considerations might come from that? There are a multitude but we might just mention a few here. Firstly, Jesus has a human body. Yes, Jesus *still* has a human body. Profoundly changed, transformed, glorious but still human. Philippians 3:21 tells us that one day we will have a body like His. But consider this, Jesus in heaven has a human body. It's worth pondering the implications. The early church Father Chrysostom, reflecting on this in the light of the creation of humanity, put it this way, "*dust now sits on heaven's throne*". Theologians such as the German Karl Barth stated that "*Jesus' human body is the Temple He never leaves. The form he never loses.*" That's an incredible thought. Theologian T F Torrence observes that the Incarnation in Jesus is God coming to us. In the Ascension Jesus, the perfected man, is returning to God.

Secondly, we can observe that this transformed, perfect man in heaven, has taken His place as the true King and Ruler of all of humanity. His reign is and will be without parallel. The apostle Peter, writing to the church observed, "**Now that He has gone into heaven, He is at God's right hand with angels, authorities, and powers subject to Him**" (1 Pet. 3:22). In Ephesians 1:22-23, the apostle Paul said, "**[God the Father] put everything under His feet and appointed Him as head over everything for the church, which is His body, the fullness of the One who fills all things in every way.**" The battle is over, Satan is defeated, only skirmishes remain.

In 1974 Hiroo Onoda, the last Japanese soldier came forward from the jungles of the Philippines. This Japanese military intelligence officer had not heard of Japan's surrender at the end of the Second World War in 1945 and had remained hidden in the jungle, loyal to the Emperor. Thirty years of his life were wasted because he did not realize the end had already come and, in that time since war ended, he had continued to do damage. Satan is the same, a defeated enemy who doesn't seem to realize it yet and is still doing damage until the final battle.

Jesus now has full authority over all the earth and everything in it but God's plan, His timing, His economy, still is to be worked out in human history.

So, what is Jesus up to now? If Jesus has Ascended what does that mean for us today as He is installed as King and Great High Priest?

Firstly, we know that Jesus' promises that God will accept and receive us if we turn from our sin and give our lives to Him will be honoured. He will forgive us and love us as His own. Jesus will fully restore our relationship with God when we humble ourselves before Him.

Secondly, there is one aspect of Jesus' Kingship we have to appreciate. His great and abiding love for us. Good kings love their people, care for them and look after them. The first thing Jesus does as King is to send the Holy Spirit and all the gifts therein entailed to His people, to the church. How cool is that! The first act of Jesus' Kingship is to give us gifts. Encompassed in this first gift is the reality that Jesus is available to each and every one of us. As a man on earth that would be impossible but no longer. John tells us that Jesus said, **"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. But if I go, I will send him to you". (John 16: 7).** By the Spirit, each one of us has personal, direct access to Jesus on a daily basis. Hebrews 4:15-16 puts it this way: **"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."**

Thirdly, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews makes it clear that Jesus, one of us, now receives our prayers and intercedes on our behalf before the Father. We need no intermediary on earth, we have direct access to Jesus. Hebrews 7:25 states, **"because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore He is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. Such a high priest truly meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens."**

Finally, because of Jesus' Ascension our future is secure. Jesus told the disciples He was leaving so two things could happen, the sending of the Holy Spirit as discussed, and so that He could prepare a place for us in eternity. In John 14 Jesus told the disciples He was preparing a place to take them to. This place is something more than a spiritual realm, it is a place in continuity what has already happened, in which our newly transformed glorious bodies spoken about by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 will abide. Jesus is preparing our place. Something to look forward to beyond this life. Our destiny is not in this world as it is but in the presence of Jesus in the place He has prepared.

So, what can we conclude today? Yes, the Ascension is a vital cog in the machinery of God's plan for the world and human history. Jesus rose, moving from one state to another, with work to do in preparation for what comes next, His work here on earth complete. As King and High Priest, He continues to love and care for us, receiving our prayers and interceding with the Father. The absolute reality of His ascension shocked the disciples but helped cement a faith in His divinity and teaching that would change their lives and the world. We do not serve a Lord who is distant from us but one that walks with us through all of life, fully understanding what it is to be a person living on earth. Not a god at a distance but The One and Only True God who walks with us and calls us to walk in His footsteps. Jesus continues to love us and guide us, bears with us, challenges and encourages us because He is now in that place of all power and authority and ... He loves us. He will return to call us to Himself so a new chapter can begin. And yes, He will return as He went, unexpectedly, through the clouds. AMEN