

The Ascension (I)

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[0:00] Okay, this section. I want us to look at it for two weeks, mainly because I think it's one of the most neglected areas of the truth of the gospel.

If I'm going to explain the gospel, we might talk about the incarnation, although I suspect lots of us wouldn't. We'd simply talk about the life of Christ, the miracles of Christ. We would talk about the cross.

I suspect we don't talk about the burial of Christ, I don't want to explain the gospel very much. We do talk about the resurrection. And maybe we talk about his coming again, although I think we're a little bit nervous about that.

But I think it's very rare in our explanation of the gospel that we talk about the ascension. The truth of the Lord Jesus Christ ascending into heaven.

And what I've learned as I've kind of studied this in the last few weeks is when we neglect the truth of Christ's ascension, we're neglecting something of enormous significance, I'd really help you and I. It's a distortion of the gospel which makes us play down the truth of the ascension.

[1:10] We would, of course wouldn't we, we would recognise it's completely wrong to divorce the birth and life of our Lord Jesus from his death.

We wouldn't do that. Many people of Christ do that and they produce Jesus who's a good example to us of love and good works but nothing more.

Neither would we be content with divorcing the death of Jesus from his resurrection. We can't do that because the resurrection is the seal, it's the validation, it's the receipt of the price being paid by Christ and his death and his sufficient death.

But it's also a big mistake to divorce the birth, life and death and resurrection of Jesus from the ascension into glory. And it's an odd thing that many biblical Christians have done that.

And by doing that we've lost the fullness of the Christian gospel. It's significant I think that when Jesus tells Mary in John 20 verse 17 that she is to go to his brothers, he does not say, go and tell them that I am risen.

[2:26] He says, go and tell them that I ascend to my father and their father, to my God and their God. When the Apostle Paul in that wonderful chapter in Romans 8 is reassuring us of what the Lord Jesus has done, of what Christ has done for us, he includes in that sufficient work of Christ not only that he died, and more than that was raised to life, but also that he is now at the right hand of God and he intercedes for us.

In other words, the Apostle binds together the death, the resurrection and the ascension of the Lord Jesus. There's going to be three things over the next two weeks.

First of all, tonight I want us to look at the fact of the ascension, and then the meaning of the ascension, and then next week what I want to try and do is look at the implications of the ascension. I want to say that the implications of the ascension are infinitely greater than we normally realise, and in various ways where I think you have and I have great needs.

So first of all, the fact of the ascension. And I need to point out to you that Luke is a careful historian, isn't he? He wrote the book of Acts, as well as the third gospel, and he presents the ascension of the Lord Jesus to us as an historical fact.

[3:49] The same way that he presents the birth of Jesus as an historical fact. The death of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus. They were events which were witnessed and are historical, and he points out to us that there were those who before their very eyes, Jesus was taken up.

He ascended. Many people have problems with the whole idea of Jesus being taken up from earth into heaven. Jesus defying the law of gravity, as sometimes can be suggested.

I personally have got no problems with the God who created the law of gravity suspending it for this particular purpose. Nor do I have any problems with the God of the supernatural, who brought Jesus Christ from the dead to life.

Bringing him into heaven in the way that Luke describes here in Acts is, again, evidence of the supernatural. We can't prove it, can we? I get very tired of talks on the resurrection, which are all about the evidence for the resurrection.

How we have definitive proof of the resurrection. I would argue that we do, but we don't believe the resurrection on the basis of the kind of proofs, so to speak.

[5 : 21] Can you prove the incarnation? You can't, can you? We can't prove the ascension, and yet it is historical. I've got no problems with the God who created the law of gravity, suspending the law of gravity, as he does here.

And we need to say, don't we, that the problem is people have a problem with the supernatural. And that problem pursues them to whatever area of the gospel they're dealing with, because the God who we deal with is the God of the supernatural.

The ascension tells us that. Same Greek word for heaven. He was taken up into heaven. It's used in the Bible for three things.

It's one of the most commonest words in the whole of the New Testament. It's the word for heaven, or the heavens, or the sky, or the air. It's always the same word that's used in the New Testament. And there doesn't seem to be an alternative. It's used, firstly, for the air above us. So Jesus is the singer on the mount. He says to you, he directs us, consider the birds of the air.

[6 : 26] That is, the birds who fly in the air above us. It's the word for air. It's exactly the same word as for the heavens, all for heaven.

It's used, secondly, for the whole realm of space, of sun and moon and stars. And so in that sense, the heavens beyond us. That would include now thinking what we would call, wouldn't it, outer space, outer space, the whole galaxy.

But the third way that the word is used is for that sphere where God reigns and God acts. Where God is.

That is the sphere of his unlimited power and sovereignty. It's the very thing that Jesus teaches his disciples to pray. We pray this tonight, isn't it? Our Father in heaven.

This is precisely the word, the adjective that's used. Our heavenly Father. So that God is not to be thought of as earthly and bound and therefore by earthly standards and earthly possibilities and earthly ideas.

[7 : 40] He is the one who is in heaven. And that does not refer primarily to a location somewhere in the universe, but to the character of God as the God whose kingdom is the kingdom of heaven.

That simply means that he is the God of unlimited, unbounded resources, unlimited sovereignty and unlimited power. And that is the realm of God's authority and presence.

Sometimes, the word is used in the New Testament actually is a kind of synonym for God himself. So do you remember in the parable of the prodigal son?

The son is sitting in the far country and he's planning what he's going to say to his dad, isn't he? And he's practicing this speech as he goes back to his dad and when he arrives into his dad's presence he says, I have sinned against heaven.

I don't know your sight. So he's using the word heaven as a synonym for God and it's an important thing for us to grasp. It's one of the ways in which the Bible uses this term and it's important for us to recognize that for mortal creatures up is definitively the direction in which we look for the glory in which God dwells.

[9 : 01] We're not primarily speaking about location or a certain part of the universe but we are speaking about a place heaven is a place that is far more real than this world.

And the book of Revelation the last book of the Bible is full of the word isn't it? It helps us in the measure that we fragile mortal human beings are able to understand it.

To grasp what heaven means to which Jesus now is God. So we're not locating God in the sky when we speak of heaven but we are affirming that heaven is more real a world than this one and that Jesus has gone to it.

Now of course Jesus could have left this world invisibly. He could have left the world invisibly. He came invisibly. Why didn't he leave this world invisibly?

Think about that. Why didn't Jesus just go like that in the middle of the night when no one saw? That's how he entered the room with the Virgin Mary.

[10:16] But there's obvious reasons now why he would go publicly and visibly before their very eyes. And Luke tells us in Acts chapter 1 verse 9.

And when he said these things as they were looking on he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight. And they were gazing into heaven as he went.

The reason Jesus went visibly was because the disciples would otherwise have been waiting for the next resurrection appearance of Jesus. And so Jesus again and again those 40 days after his resurrection he kind of appears and then disappears.

But what is happening now is Jesus is showing them visibly these 40 days have come to an end. And Jesus was no longer going to pursue his purposes through his flesh on this earth.

He was going to pursue in heaven his mighty plan. the saviour and the friend of sinners goes into heaven.

[11:32] Their friend he ascends on a cloud and so they're not waiting for the next appearance of Jesus and they wonder where it will be and where it will be. Because one of the reasons he goes to heaven is that he is everywhere to be known by his disciples.

So Jesus says to you and I just means he says to the disciples I will be with you always everywhere. And so how can he be with them always everywhere if his presence is like the resurrection appearances?

Well it can't be. The answer is he can't. But Jesus is able to be present with every Christian through the Holy Spirit wherever in the world they are.

and his words I will be with you always are fulfilled in the ascension. And that is why he is God. So you get these two statements in the Gospels and they appear to be in tension don't you?

And Jesus says the poor you will always have with you but me you will not always have with you. That's what he says.

[12:47] why is that? He says you will not always have me with you because I'm going to ascend to heaven. And yet he says I will never leave you nor forsake you.

How? For the very simple reason that he will be present with his people by the Holy Spirit. But the really important thing to grasp is that the bodily presence of Jesus that is the presence of Jesus in his body now glorified but still in human form is in heaven and not on earth.

On earth he is present spiritually by the Holy Spirit but he is not present bodily. There's a worship song isn't there?

Jesus standing in the midst of us. No he's not. And that takes us into the first thing that is important in connection with the ascension with the meaning of the ascension.

Let me just point out to you the importance of the fact that it was Jesus in our flesh who ascended into heaven. So the Heidenberg Cascism, we'll talk a little bit more about this next week, from the 16th century speaks of the ascension in this way.

[14:07] It says, when the question is asked, what is the benefit of the ascension of Jesus Christ from earth to heaven? And the answer is, our flesh is in heaven.

Let's see. Let me explain that to you. What I mean by it is this, that Jesus Christ, according to His flesh, when the Word, when God became flesh and dwelt amongst us, that He has now been taken up to heaven.

His human nature has entered into glory. And it is the glorified flesh of Jesus, which is now right there in the presence of God and glory.

And that means a whole range of things. It means that He has gone to prepare a place for us. So, there will be time to the Augustine court to be trotted out in a few weeks, isn't it?

He, without ceasing to be what He eternally was, He became what He eternally was not in the incarnation. God became man.

[15:18] He came to share our nature. He entered into our life. And we have the guarantee, because He is there, that if we are in Christ, if we are united to Him, we shall be there too.

And so Jesus says, I go away, and actually it's much better for you that I go away, because I go away to prepare a place for you in my Father's house, that is the home of glory.

Because you see, the glorified body of Jesus, this evening, is in heaven. He wears our human nature in glory, and that makes an enormous difference to two things.

difference. It makes an enormous difference to the way we think of the church as the body of Christ. And it makes an enormous difference when we do like we did this morning, when we say, this is my body broken for you at the communion table.

And unless you understand the ascension, you'll go wrong in both these areas. the church of Jesus Christ, as a visible, organised community of different denominations, is not the body of Christ.

[16:39] The body of Christ is not the physical church. So you don't join the body of Christ or become a member of it by adding your name to the members list.

You become a member of the body of Christ by saving faith in the Lord Jesus, whom you are united to spiritually, not physically, but spiritually.

And the body of Jesus Christ is therefore the company of people, the spiritual body, who are both on earth and in heaven. And that's a very important thing.

We will not make the visible church of Jesus Christ into the body of Christ if we understand the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. The second thing is it must make a lot of different for the Lord's Supper.

So when people think that they break the bread and say this is the body of Christ broken for you, that they are actually physically feeding on the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

[17:44] They are ignoring the truth of the ascension. Because the ascension tells you that his flesh is in heaven and not you.

It is in heaven. And our communion with him as our saviour by the breaking of his body and the shadow of his blood is by spiritual union with him.

By faith, not by physical union. That's very important for us to grasp. Calvin insists of this body imagery in the church and the body imagery in the Lord's Supper.

They point to a spiritual reality, not a physical one. But the general meaning of the ascension is captured in what the creed says. Remember that earlier on in the service?

What did it say? It said he was crucified, died and was buried, he descended to the day, on the third day he rose again, he ascended into heaven.

[18:52] The creed goes on to tell us why. He ascended into heaven and he's seated at the right hand of the father. Why did Jesus ascend?

Jesus ascended to sit down. So Jesus is the ascended Lord. is this evening seated in heaven.

And there are multitudes standing around him and there are multitudes behind him before him, but he is seated. Why is he seated? Let's go to Hebrews 10.

Hebrews chapter 10. Hebrews chapter 10. I've got a page number there. Let's find it yourself.

Hebrews 10. Hebrews 10 verses 11 and 12.

Here we go. Hebrews 10 verse 11 and 12. Every priest stands daily at his service offering repeatedly the same sacrifices which can never take away sins.

[20:01] sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins he sat down at the right hand of God.

Why does he do that? Why does he sit? He ascends to sit. Why does he sit? For three important reasons. The very fact that he sits is of enormous significance isn't it?

And it's a kind of posture of rest. You sit down after you've finished your work. After the completion of your work that someone has set out to do. And Christ is seated in heaven because of his finished work of atonement.

all his work is ended. Joyfully we sing Jesus has ascended.

All his work is ended. Joyfully we sing Jesus has ascended. He's ascended because his work is finished. There's nothing more for Jesus to achieve.

[21:06] The atonement process, there's nothing left to add to it. It accomplished without atonement. The price has been paid. Jesus' ascension and his sitting down at the right hand of God proclaims that this is a finished work, a completed work.

There's nothing that I have to add tonight. There's nothing you have to add. There's nothing that you have to achieve. Nothing I made you to achieve. I simply humbly come in faith to receive it.

There's of course huge significance there, not just in the fact that he sits, but where he sits.

Because he sits on a throne. And there on that throne he is worshipped as the king of kings.

And the lord of lords. And he is in the place of absolute authority and sovereign power. But he sits on that throne waiting. Verse 13 when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins he sat down at the right hand of God waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool

for his feet.

Waiting. The angelic figures do you remember what George read to us in Acts chapter 1. They're with him at the ascension and they remind the disciples don't they?

[22 : 31] They're standing there open mouth and gorg that Jesus has just ascended into heaven. And they say this man of Galilee why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.

One day he'll return. And the return of Jesus that is the final act of what Jesus came to earth to do. And now Jesus the reigning Lord the sovereign king of kings this evening is waiting.

And what's he waiting for tonight? He's waiting for that day which has not yet come. Because not every knee has bowed to Jesus Christ and not every tongue has confessed him as Lord.

And not everyone has acknowledged that he is the only saviour but one day all his people will do. And every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

And the ascension is the signal to all earth and heaven that Jesus the enthroned saviour is waiting for that day and come it well. And it's something that no opinion pole is ever going to alter.

[23 : 51] It's the ultimate certainty. There's importance to the fact that he sits, there's importance to the fact that where he sits and last of all there's importance about who he sits beside.

Because he's seated at the right hand of the majesty on high. Or the way Hebrews said he's seated at the right hand of God. Where is he sitting tonight?

He's sitting as it were at the year of the eternal God. He's there beside him. And he's there not only as our king but he's there supremely as our priest, our intercessor, our mediator.

And he sits on the throne beside his father. And he's there to intercede for us. Do you see now why it's so important? that our flesh is in heaven because he wore our nature.

He entered into every anguish of human experience. He knew what it was to be despised and rejected of men. And that same Jesus wears our nature and glory this evening.

[25 : 04] you know don't you son of you what it is to say to someone who's in great pain and hurt to be able to say to them I just want you to know that I've been there.

I've been there. And Jesus says my child I've been there. And I know what to ask of the father for you.

And so tonight we thank God that our flesh is in heaven and we need to explore it more.

May God give us a thirst to do so. Let's pray.