

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (27-2-1994 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

The Ascension

Acts 1:9

Additional Bible Reading: Ephesians 1:15-23; 4:7-13; Hebrews 4:14-16

Introduction

After the Lord's Commission to the disciples to be His witnesses after the Holy Spirit had come on them, the Lord was taken up from them into heaven. Luke's narrative tells us that a cloud took Him from their sight. **They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them** (Acts 1:10). They could not bring Him back by staring, but the men in white promised that He would come back again in the same way as they had seen Him go.

He was going to return personally, the Eternal Son with His glorified body, and just as His ascent was visible and glorious, so would His return be. Jesus had said, **At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory** (Luke 21:27). The cloud which is a symbol of God's glory in the Old Testament, and which appeared on the Mount of Transfiguration, will be the chariot of His coming, as it was of His going.

The subject of the Ascension of Jesus Christ is a neglected subject, and not many have heard a sermon about it. We will consider the importance of it in three ways, and our response to it.

Some preliminary remarks

The Ascension is presented to us as a marvellous and miraculous event. Just as Jesus' entry into the world was miraculous, so was His exit. He was a unique person; therefore it is entirely fitting that He should have a unique entrance and exit from the world.

It is common nowadays to deny the historicity of this event. Luke lived in a pre-scientific age, when people imagined heaven to be "up there". Therefore, some would argue, Luke is just using a symbolic and poetic word picture to explain that Jesus went to His Father. They deny that any "lift off" could have taken place.

Our reply to this must be that there are mysteries here, and a spiritual dimension, which is beyond us. But it is clear that Luke wanted to convey that the Ascension was a literal fact – and it was assumed to have been so everywhere else in the New Testament. Luke relates the events with sobriety and simplicity. There is no evidence of symbolism. It reads like history, and points out that it was seen by eyewitnesses. And no alternative explanation is available as to why the Resurrection appearances ceased and Jesus finally disappeared.

This event marks the transition from earthly to heavenly state. When He ascended, Jesus entered heaven. The many reappearances of the forty days had come to an end, He had finally gone. Instead, they would receive the Holy Spirit. And once He came,

the Apostles were to get on with the task of evangelism and teaching. The ending of Jesus' earthly ministry was in fact a gain, and not a loss.

We must insist that heaven is a place and a locality, not just a spiritual state which is everywhere and yet nowhere. Jesus spoke of "whither" and "where", designating an actual place. We cannot fully understand this because it is a spiritual dimension and because of difficulties in relating our ideas of time and space and locality in relation to the Godhead. God is everywhere, but there is a place where He particularly manifests Himself. He dwells there in the sense that He dwells nowhere else. Christ is at the Father's right hand in that place. One day our resurrection bodies shall live there. Yet there are difficulties in talking of something beyond our experience. We cannot describe it adequately, even with the aid of symbols such as we find in the Book of Revelation.

A final point – the Ascension is at the heart of the Gospel. Redemption rests on four pillars – the incarnation, the crucifixion, the resurrection and the ascension. The Son of God came into the world, He became flesh, He died on the Cross, He rose, and He ascended into heaven where He pleads our cause before the Father and is preparing a place for us.

*"If the Christ who died had stopped at the Cross,
His work had been incomplete.
If the Christ that was buried had stayed in the tomb,
He had only known defeat.
But the way of the Cross never stops at the Cross.
And the way of the tomb leads on
To victorious grace in the heavenly place
Where the risen Lord has gone"*

Now we will look at three reasons why the Ascension is so important to us.

The Ascension sets forth the present exaltation of the Lord Jesus Christ

Though Luke is the main source of our knowledge of the actual facts of the Resurrection, New Testament writers assume it and exult in it constantly. Ten days after the Ascension, Peter's great sermon on the day of Pentecost demonstrated the stress of all early preaching on the fact that Jesus had been raised and was now **exalted to the right hand of God** (Acts 2:33), **God exalted Him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour** (Acts 5:31). When Stephen was dying, stones raining down on him, **"Look" he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God"** (Acts 7:56).

Paul uses the exaltation of Christ to enforce how secure our position is in Christ. **Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us** (Romans 8:33,34). The privilege of every Christian is to know that power **which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms** (Ephesians 1:20). **God exalted him to the highest place, and gave him the name that is above every name** (Philippians 2:9).

The epistle to the Hebrews is also full of the ascended Lord. **He sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high** (Hebrews 1:3). **We see Jesus crowned with glory and honour** (Hebrews 2:9). Peter's epistle also speaks of **Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand – with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him** (1 Peter 3:22). And the Book of Revelations is also full of the glory of the ascended Lord. John speaks of **The Lamb at the centre of the throne** (Revelation 7:17). From His throne go mighty spiritual influences which change things on earth. The picture we get of the present position of Christ, enjoying again the glory which He had with the Father before the world began, stirs us up to worship, adoration and loyalty. He temporarily laid it aside at the incarnation, and now has taken it up again. So the ascension means that the cycle is complete – the cycle of the Lord's movement from heaven to earth, and from earth to heaven.

Christ's position is now at God's right hand. Based on ancient practice, where the person especially favoured by the king is seated next to him on his right hand side. The right hand signifies honour and glory and power. Now Christ has everything under His feet. **All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me** (Matthew 28:18). **Far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given** (Ephesians 1:21). He is supreme over all angelic and demonic powers. None are exempt from His authority.

These assertions and affirmations should be much in our minds when manifestations of evil are so abundant and run riot. The situation is not out of His control. The Devil will not have the last word. Life and death are subject to Him. Kings and princes, and politicians and powers are subject to and answerable to Him. All that concerns and worries us is under His dominion. This truth puts courage, confidence and assurance into us. Away with fear and uncertainty and cowardice. **Why are you downcast, O my soul? Put your hope in God** (Psalm 43:5).

It is said that wounded men who were crushed among heaps of bleeding bodies on the battlefield, roused all the life that remained in them when Napoleon rode by. Even those who had their legs shot off raised themselves on their arms to salute the man who had shed their blood like water. How much do we salute Him who shed His blood for us and is now at the Father's right hand?

So the Ascension points us to our Lord's present sovereignty, crowned with many crowns. All human destiny is in His hands. He is directing the course of the world affairs to bring everything into subordination to Himself.

The Ascension marked the inauguration of His High Priestly ministry

What is Christ doing for us at this present moment? He is in the presence of God where He acts as our great High Priest. We do not believe in earthly priesthood, but we do believe in having a priest, someone who offers a sacrifice for us and makes intercession for us. We have, in Christ, the perfect priest. Earthly priests are impostors.

Hebrew describes Jesus as our great High Priest. **A merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people**

(Hebrews 2:17). **This high priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins** (Hebrews 10:12). Now on the basis of that sacrifice He prays for us and intercedes for us as the ascended Lord. **He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them** (Hebrews 7:25). **If anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defence, Jesus Christ, the Righteous One** (1 John 2:1). When we fail, there is one who pleads for us. He asks His Father, on the basis of His atonement, to forgive us.

When the devil attacks us or we have sorrow or discouragement, there is our High Priest who prays for us and asks the Father to help us and send us His support. Then when we pray He presents our prayers to the Father and asks the Father to answer them for His sake. How else can our prayers be acceptable to a Holy God? The Father answers, not as we deserve, but for the Son's sake. (E.g. being allowed free access into a visitor sight because we are with someone with a special pass – for that person's sake, we are allowed in free.)

So we can have boldness to enter the Holy Place by the blood of Jesus. Prayer must always consciously rest on Christ's sacrifice and mediation. We end our prayers "... through Jesus Christ our Lord." Christ's high priesthood is meant to be a source of help and comfort. He sympathizes and succours us. **We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need** (Hebrews 4:15,16).

So this is a prominent theme in the New Testament, and a source of encouragement. It is surprising how little it appears in our hymnology. Christ's high priesthood is the grounds for our present acceptance and God's willingness to hear and answer us when we pray.

Christ's Ascension was the occasion of His pouring His gifts on us

Before His death, Jesus surprised His disciples in telling them that it was to their advantage that He was going to leave them, because He would send the Holy Spirit to them. It was a far greater advantage to have the Holy Spirit, who would be in them and with them wherever they went, than the localized presence of the person of Jesus.

When He ascended on high he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men (Ephesians 4:8). And of these gifts, the greatest was the Holy Spirit. And through the Holy Spirit he gives His other gifts to men. He gives gifts to His church – the gifts of Apostles (now no longer given), prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers – for equipping the saints for the work of ministry for the edifying of the body of Christ.

We are all given gifts but some are given gifts to be leaders and teachers in the church, for the upbuilding of believers. Down through the centuries these gifts have been given, not for personal advantage, but for the benefit of the whole church. They are desperately needed today, for there is a lack of pastors, evangelists and missionaries. Spurgeon said, "We have plenty of useless muffs in pulpits, busy emptying pews, but we need men to stir the heart, rouse the conscience and build up churches. We have enough who scatter the flock, but where are the gatherers?"

The answer to the situation is to pray that the ascended head of the church will give gifts to men. How true today are the words in Matthew 9:36-38, **When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest field.** We can never have too many preachers, teachers, pastors, evangelists and missionaries. Pray for them.

Conclusion

The Ascension gives the answer to where Jesus is now and what He is doing. He is enthroned in glory, at His Father's right hand, far above all principalities and powers. He is our High Priest. On the basis of His once for all sacrifice, He is praying for us, bringing our prayers to God, helping us to obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need. In His ascended position, He gives gifts to men. It is our privilege to pray that He will give more gifts to men to meet the very needy situation of the church and the world at this time.

How do we view the Lord? How do we see Him? What comes into our mind when we hear His name? One of the ways we can measure our own spiritual maturity is by the dominant image we have of Christ. Is He the baby in the manger? The wandering prophet of 2000 years ago? The Christ on the Cross? All these are true, but do we stop there? He is no longer a baby, a prophet, or a dead figure. We need to see Him risen, ascended and glorified.

The way to derive courage and strength is to see Him risen and ascended. **Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ (Philippians 3:20). Since then you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God (Colossians 3:1).**