

THE ASCENSION OF CHRIST

Acts 1:1-11

Turning Points

History is full of crises. We may think of these as ‘troubled times’, or as ‘turning points.’ Indeed, the two are often synonymous. Historians, when looking back at the apocalyptic events of the 1990's, may see a number of turning points, such as the destruction of the Berlin Wall, or the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Whatever may be their perspective on these events, they will certainly view our times as troubled times!

History is the record of not only the long train of human events, but also the crises or turning points that shape and give direction to those events. Similarly, every human life – your and mine - is shaped, defined, and propelled in part by the crises or turning points that become part of the fabric of our lives. As we live out our daily lives we need to ask ourselves, “What is the significance of the crises, the troubled times, through which we are now going?” How will we interact with the events and circumstances that intrude into our lives? How will we allow them to shape and define our lives?

What can we learn from these turning points in order to give meaning and purpose to life and so avoid being passively propelled from crisis to crisis? What is the permanent value of each crisis or turning point, and how can we use these to define appropriate priorities and set directions for our lives which have eternal significance? These are questions which every thinking person must ultimately deal!

Turning Points in the Life of Christ

The study of the life of Christ can be approached in several ways. One of these ways is to look at the turning points in the Master’s earthly life. For example, there are seven major crises or turning points in the life of Jesus:

Birth ... Baptism
Temptation ... Transfiguration
Crucifixion ... Resurrection ... Ascension.

At Christmas, we reflect upon the significance of His birth, the turning point at which God entered the mainstream of humanity. At Easter, the focus is on His death and resurrection, the crises or turning points whereby our Lord atoned for the Fall of Man and defeated Death. Acts chapter one presents the final turning point in the life of the Master, his ascension! The questions I put before you this morning are these:

1. What is the permanent value of the ascension story?
2. What did it mean to the apostles in terms of their future conduct and mission?
3. What does it mean to us in terms of our future and mission?”

Its Apostolic Value

First of all, what was the value and significance of the Ascension to the Apostles? Well, I would say that this climactic event had a readily intelligible purpose. As John Stott says, “Jesus had no need to take a journey in space, and it is silly of some critics to ridicule his ascension by representing him as the first cosmonaut.”

In the transition from his earthly to his heavenly state Jesus could simply have vanished. He could have gone to his Father secretly and invisibly. The reason for his public and visible ascension is surely that he wanted them to **know** that he had returned to the Father, and that he would not be seen physically among men again until the time of his Second Coming.

During the forty days of waiting in Jerusalem, the Lord kept appearing, disappearing, and reappearing. But now this interim period was over. This time his departure was final. So they were not to wait around for his next resurrection appearance. Instead, they were to wait for somebody else, the Holy Spirit (1:4). He would come only after Jesus was gone, and then they could get on with their mission in the power of the Spirit of God.

The Book of Acts proves that the Lord's manner of disappearance had its desired effect. The apostles returned to Jerusalem and waited for the Holy Spirit to make his descent. While they waited they were in constant prayer. And when the Holy Spirit came upon them, they were filled with Holy boldness to proclaim the Gospel. And their bold proclamation was validated with powerful miracles, healings, and deliverances!

Its Contemporary Value

We have seen what the visible ascension did for the Apostles. Now, what can it do for us? Well, in order to understand Luke's primary interest as he tells the ascension story we need to pay attention to the two men dressed in white (v. 10). Luke calls them ‘men’ because that is how they appeared, but their shining dress and authoritative tone indicate that they were angels. They asked the apostles a searching question: “**Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky?**”

The expression, “into the sky,” or “into heaven,” occurs four times in verses 10 and 11. Its repetition emphasizes that the apostles were not to be spiritual sky-scanners. For this there are two reasons:

1. **Jesus will come again...** "This same Jesus," the implication being that they will not bring him back by gazing up into the sky! He has gone and they must let him go; he will return in his own good time and in the same way! The Second Coming will not be like a film of the Ascension played backwards, but it will be just as real. In fact, the phrase, “This same Jesus” points to a personal return of Jesus in his glorified human body. Moreover his return will not be a private affair, but quite public, for in Revelation 1:7 we are told that every eye will see him!
2. **Until Christ returns the Apostles must get on with their mandate ... proclamation of the Gospel!** It was the earth, not the sky, which was to be their preoccupation. Their calling was to be witnesses, not stargazers. The vision they were to cultivate was not upwards in nostalgia to the heaven which had received Jesus, but outwards in compassion to a lost world.

How easy it would have been for them to look wistfully to the past - to the Lord's time with them, to his ascension. It must have been hard for them to accept his departure, hard to believe he was no longer there! We are so far removed from His earthly life and Ascension that we have the opposite problem - it is sometimes so hard for us to believe that he was actually here at all! But he was here, and we must avoid two critical errors:

a) Allowing the ascension story and promise of his return to seem surreal, like a dream - to mythologize or spiritualize it! Our God is the God of history. What we are dealing with here is history, not fable! He is also a God of prophecy, and no prophecy of scripture has ever failed to materialize in the fullness of time!

b) The other error is that of idle speculation. Curiosity about heaven and its occupants, speculation about prophecy and its fulfilment, and obsession with 'times and seasons' can distract us from our mission. **Christ will return** - of that we can be sure, we have been promised! Other details are interesting, and are worthy of study. But we have a mission to accomplish now!

Our Response

Now here's the exciting news that should propel us all onto a higher plane of Christian living; news that ought to enable us to soar on eagles' wings, live an ascended life, and change the world by completing our mission. By ascending bodily and promising to return bodily our Lord has "wedded himself to our humanity forever."¹ He ascended as a human being and he will return as a human being. He did not shed his body, renounce his physicality, or rid himself of his humanness. Not at all! He has taken our humanity with him into heaven. "Where he goes is where we are meant to go. What he becomes is what we will become ... Humanness has been taken into the life of God. Jesus did not drop us. He holds us in himself. We have a future. Who we are will not be lost - we will continue as Jesus does, as embodied beings, transformed but still continuous with who we are."² This is precisely what Paul was driving at when he wrote that:

"God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus ... For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph. 2:6-7, 10).

1. Gerrit Scott Dawson Interview: *The Ascension of Jesus*

2. Ibid

What could be more thrilling than to discover the glorious fact that Jesus not only forgives sinners and brings us from death to life, but he also elevates us with him so that we can now live an ascended life? Surely this is the meaning of our being God's workmanship. Can we doubt for one moment that this is what is implied in our being new creatures (2 Cor. 5:17)? God's new creatures don't live like the old creatures we used to be. We have been re-created in Christ in order to ascend to a higher plane of existence. We have become God's workmanship in order to live an ascended life.

Where is our Lord seated in the heavenly realms? On his throne, of course! So if we are seated with him in the heavenly realms, then it can only mean that we, too, are destined for thrones. Lesser thrones, to be sure, but nevertheless thrones! In other words, our Lord means us to rule with him, wield his authority, and be channels of his grace and power. He

wants to show the incomparable riches of his grace to all creation through us. He wants to display his holiness to all creation through us. He means to work his miraculous power before all creation through us. Do you doubt what I am saying? Then let the Master tell you himself! Listen to him as he speaks to the church at Laodicea: *“To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne”* (Rev. 3:21).

How do we overcome? How do we live an ascended life? As we yield more fully to the Master, as we open ourselves to him like the petals of a flower to the rays of the morning sun, as we more fully enter into union with him, he increasingly lives his ascended life in us. That is where the power for Christian living is sourced. It flows from the throne of Christ, the One who is God and yet still Man! So let us take our destiny in hand. Let’s move to a higher level and live the ascended life! Let’s approach his throne of grace in prayer right now.