

STUDY FIFTEEN

The Work of Christ—4

THE ASCENSION AND SESSION

By *ascension* we mean Christ's ascent from earth to heaven, and by *session* we mean his being seated and reigning at the right hand of God.

The Former State of Christ's Glory

A number of Scriptures speak of the pre-incarnational place and glory of the Son or the Eternal *Logos*. They are: John 1:1ff.; 6:35–58; 17:5; 2 Corinthians 8:9; Romans 8:3; Galatians 4:4; Philippians 2:6ff.; Colossians 1:16–17; 2:2; Hebrews 1:3; 2:14. Many passages in John refer to the Son being sent by the Father from heaven, and so assume that he is of heaven. Certainly John 17:5 indicates a glory which was his 'before the world was made'. John 14:1–4, 28–29 and 16:16ff., all speak of him 'going away', plainly indicating that he is going to the Father.

The Events of the Ascension

The passages relating to the ascension are Mark 16:19–20, Luke 24:50–53, John 20:17, and Acts 1:9–12, 22.

If Mark's version of 16:9–20 is looked upon as being the lost ending and consequently not reliable, and if Luke 24:51 is looked upon as not containing, 'and was carried up into heaven', then Acts 1:9–11 is the only direct account. This account speaks of a cloud receiving him *out of their sight*, not necessarily by going upwards. Thus we say that the farewell appearance of our Lord was a theophany. He was enveloped with the cloud of glory, such as enveloped the glory of God so many times in the Old Testament. This cloud is quite significant, not only in the Old Testament but also in the New Testament. Such was at the transfiguration, and such Christ predicted in relation to his own return (see Luke 21:27; Mark 13:26; 14:62, the latter referring to Daniel 7:13f.). This may well account for the fact that the Lord will not so much return or come again as he will appear; hence the use of the word 'parousia'.

The Ascension in the New Testament

Jesus had said, 'I go to the Father, and you will see me no more' (John 14:28; 16:10). He had said to Mary, after the resurrection, 'I am ascending to my Father' (John 20:17). Acts 1:8–11 puts the ascension in the following context:

- (a) They first receive the commission of evangelism. This in itself is interesting, as it is couched in terms of Psalm 2:8b as Acts. 1:8b shows 'the end[s] of the earth', which is a Messianic phrase.
- (b) They witness the theophany, the fact that Christ is to 'enter into his glory' (cf. Luke 24:26; 1 Pet. 1:11).
- (c) The men in white, undoubtedly angels (cf. Luke 24:4, AV, 'shining garments'), are similar to Jesus at the transfiguration), and give a supernatural

confirmation that Jesus will appear, triumphantly, at the parousia, as the Messiah of Daniel 7:13–14.

In addition to these mentions, the fact of Christ's ascension is given great prominence in other places. Generally it is linked with Psalm 110:1f. So the following passages: Acts 2:33f.; 3:21; 5:31; 7:55f.; 22:6ff.; 26:13f.; Ephesians 1:21; 4:7–10; Philippians 2:9–10; 3:20; 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 4:16f.; Colossians 3:1–2; Hebrews 1:3; 4:14; 8:1; 9:24; 10:12f.; 12:2; 1 Peter 3:22. The book of the Revelation makes many similar references (e.g. 1:7; 3:21; 5:6). We can conclude then that the ascension was significant to the church in the New Testament.

The Doctrinal Significance of the Ascension and Session

- (a) It attested to the acceptance of Christ, and (so) his work by God, as also his (effective) Sonship by the Father (cf. John 16:10). This of course means that man (a man, the Son of man) reigns where hitherto no man had reigned: he had reigned as the Son.
- (b) Ephesians 4:7–10 makes the points: (i) it was victory—he had led *captivity* captive (AV); and (ii) he filled all things. His victory was over all alien forces—alien to his creation. He filled that which was futile or empty. So he conquered.
- (c) His ascension was over all enemies, and also to reign over them (Eph. 1:21f.). Hebrews 10:12–13 says that he expects all his enemies to be made his footstool (to conquer them). This is borne out by Hebrews 1:3 where he purifies sins and then (and

thus) is seated at the right hand of God, the place of glory. The session then relates to 1 Corinthians 15:24–28 (cf. Rev. 11:15) where he gains power and rules over his enemies to destroy them. Ephesians 1:22 says this is *for the church*, whilst God's plan is worked out *through the church* (Eph. 3:10–11). Being sealed (cf. Rev. 3:21; Heb. 1:3; 10:11–14; Col. 3:1; etc.) means that his work is finished, completed. Hebrews 10:11–14 speaks of a priest *standing* and *offering* the sacrifice, but in contrast Christ now *seated*, his *work* and *victory* completed.

- (d) The Holy Spirit is poured forth by Messiah from the throne. In John 14, 15 and 16, Jesus says he will ask the Father who will send the Spirit; he says, in fact, that he will send the Spirit, and Acts 2:33 says he sends the Spirit, having received him from the Father. When it is seen that the *gift* (Gk *dorea*) of the Son brings the *gifts* (Gk *charismata*) of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:4f.) then the purpose of the Spirit is seen—that is, to empower and engift the church for the spreading of the gospel, and for the actual work of the kingdom, as the church is built up, through them. This is the proof that he is Messiah, ushering in the new age (cf. Acts 2:14ff.; Joel 2:28f.; Heb. 6:4).
- (e) We must see that his reigning in heaven does not mean he is not with his church, but rather that he creates the church and is with it. John 14:18 and Ephesians 3:16–17 show that Christ, through the Spirit, dwells in the heart of his people by faith. He gives the church his fullness (Eph. 1:22–23),

but not apart from himself. He works with and through his church (see Matt. 28:20; Mark 16:20; Acts 22:17f.; cf. 19:11, 20).

- (f) His place of reigning, being over his enemies, in fact protects his people (see Rom. 8:34f.) Accusation against his people is answered by this advocate (1 John 2:1–2).
- (g) His session is the place of intercession (see Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25; 1 John 2:1–2). Hebrews shows him as the perfect High Priest in the heavenly sanctuary, but at the one and same time being Messiah–Priest–Son as in Hebrews 5:1–5. We must see that his intercession is not simply to commend his people to God, but to pray for them, aid them in their daily living and spiritual progress and maturity, and increase their faith and confidence.
- (h) His reigning at the right hand of God is also of ethical value, as it is to him his people look as they realise they are raised above the grip and sway of evil, and are destined to live in a manner commensurate with being his (hence Col. 3:1–17; cf. 1 John 3:1–3). Both 2 Corinthians 3:18 and Hebrews 12:2 show that his reigning is not only an incentive to ‘go on’, but also that as we fully regard him so we are transformed into his likeness. His coming is also an ethical incentive.
- (i) The throne is the place from whence he will return. By this we mean his reigning ensures his past victory, his present continuing victory, and his ultimate victory when all evil shall have been

vanquished for ever, and he is seen as Lord. Thus his parousia can be said to be contingent upon his session. Thus in Acts 3:20–21, a *period* of time and action has to pass until he returns, but it does not just *elapse* so much as it is a dynamic period of purposeful action. Then he may, indeed must, return. Hebrews 9:28 makes it clear that he ultimately appears to save those who are eagerly awaiting his appearance, that is, save them from the pressing evil.

- (j) His statement of John 14:2, ‘I go to prepare a place for you’, means that every believer will have things made ready for him when he is received into heaven. What this means is beyond our comprehension. T. D. Bernard says, ‘We understand how men are prepared for the place; but not how the place is prepared for men’.¹ ‘The place’ refers to a dwelling situation and suggests all being together in fellowship and comfort. It conveys the thought that man, who had not been a creature of heaven, now finds the situation not only congenial and acceptable but also his real place, his natural habitat. See also Hebrews 6:20.

Conclusion

The ten points above add up to this:

- (a) Christ is triumphant over death and all evil, and is seated as man in heaven, so that man is now in

¹ T. D. Bernard, *The Central Teaching of Jesus Christ* (MacMillan, London, 1906), p. 134, quoted in Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1981), p. 639, n. 10.

eternal habitations, and this is his right place. It is being prepared as such.

- (b) In time, the Spirit has been poured forth to reveal Jesus as Messiah–Lord, and to complete the work, through the church, which the Son directs from heaven and in which he participates. This means the ending of all evil in history, and the establishing of the eternal, irreversible kingdom of God. Meanwhile, whilst the conflict rages, God’s children are being protected as well as being enabled to share in the battle.
- (c) The time being completed, Christ, now reigning, will appear to end the struggle, bringing it to a successful conclusion. The children of God will then be enabled to take their rightful places in the heaven prepared for them. This will signify God’s ultimate triumph and the completion of His plan.

Note: *The term ‘heavens’ is debated as though it were a place and not simply a state, or a state and not a place. Our knowledge of time and space, and of ‘non-time’ and ‘non-space’, is such that we cannot be dogmatic in saying there is no place. Whilst much of the language used is symbolical, it is symbolical of a reality. We conclude then that heaven is a reality, but the form it takes, spatial or otherwise, cannot be dogmatically stated. The terms used help us to visualise the eternal reality, and should be recognised as helpful. This being so, we can speak of the bodily absence of our Lord from the earth, seeing he was received out of sight of men. He is not present in the way in which we know a body to be present. Beyond that, we may only speculate.*

THE PERSON AND WORK OF CHRIST