

Faith Matters: I Believe He Sits on the Right Hand of God the Father

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Wednesday @ First

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Bible Text: Hebrews 9:24-28
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Well, we're enjoying, I hope, our little pilgrimage through the Apostles' Creed under this general heading of "Faith Matters." I don't know quite how many of these talks we've had, but we're in the main central section, and today we come to think about Jesus Christ as the one who was ascended to the right hand of the Father and sits there in power and majesty. And our reading is a very interesting little passage from the ninth chapter of the letter to the Hebrews, Hebrews 9 verses 24 through 28, and you'll find it on page three of the little bulletin for today.

"For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself." Now, that may not make much sense unless you understand the context here in the letter to the Hebrews is the way in which the liturgy of the Old Testament church, particularly the liturgy of the temple, was like a picture of what Christ would come and do. I quite often say that the liturgy of the temple in the Old Testament was like one of those children's pop-up picture books. Remember before, I don't know whether they still make them, but before you got the book that just had words and pictures, you would get these books and as you opened the page, the thing would kind of pop out the middle of the page, so that you were able to see in a kind of three-dimensional way the pictures that the words were trying to paint. And in many ways, it seems that one of the things the Bible says about what God did throughout history was to give his revelation to his people when they were, as it were, still spiritual children in the form of a kind of pop-up picture book, so that particularly if you lived in Jerusalem, you just couldn't escape bumping into the pictures.

An example that we very rarely think about is at Passover time, Jerusalem, the odor in Jerusalem from the blood of the sacrificed Passover lambs must have been almost overpowering. I remember when I first came to the United States in the height of summer, I was near Miami, I was preaching in a church, the Sunday morning I said to the couple I was spending the weekend with, "I think I'll just pop out for a little walk before we go to church." They kind of looked at me and said nothing, but well, we know these people are strange, but this is really strange. I stepped outside, I took two paces outside, I turned around and I came back and the lady was still standing there and I said, "Maybe I'll not bother." Despite having watched Miami on television since my teenage years, the

one thing I had never seen on television was humidity. I should have been intelligent enough to make the connection.

And you see, in the Old Testament days, in a sense, God was teaching his people by surrounding them by these things, you know, things that go bump in the night, that they just couldn't move in Jerusalem without being given physical clues to the way in which God would eventually bring salvation to his people. And the great thing Hebrews is saying here is that you need to understand that the first thing God planned was not how he would build Jerusalem or how he would build the temple or the liturgy that he would write for the temple, the first thing in his mind was what he would do in the Lord Jesus for our salvation and then, in a way, he worked backwards and said, "Since that's what I'm going to do, first of all, I'm going to give them what you might call working models," little models, little illustrations of the way in which eventually Jesus would come to bring salvation. And that's the way we need to understand the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament is a kind of pop-up picture book. The New Testament is the book itself, when Jesus himself arrives.

So that's what he's talking about when he says Christ has entered not into holy places made with hands. He's not like the high priest who enters a holy place that has actually been manufactured by human hands. The temple didn't just kind of fall down from heaven. It was made with human hands but it was just a picture. Christ has entered not into holy places made with hands, "which are copies of the true things." Now you see the point? It's the temple and the liturgy and the temple that's the copy of the true and the real. Jesus is the true and the real.

Now we'll need to read on or we won't get to the talk today. "Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own," on the great day of atonement, "for then Jesus would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world." You get the point. The high priest went into the temple on the day of atonement, into the holy place. The next year came round the day of atonement, he went into the holy place. And in fact every day there were sacrifices. So a right thinking Old Testament believer would be able to look at these sacrifices and say, "Aha, I know none of these sacrifices is the sacrifice that fully takes away my sin." How could he work that out? Simple. If you need to come back with another sacrifice on Tuesday after you've had a sacrifice on Monday, the sacrifice you made on Monday sure didn't take away your sins permanently. So an Old Testament believer who thought about this could see, "God is teaching me something here. But Jesus," says the author of Hebrews, "is different. He's not like that high priest because then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it's appointed for man to die once and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him."

Now we've come to the point in the Apostles' Creed as we've noticed a hundred words in the Latin original edition and not much more, even in our English, wonderful survey and summary of the essentials of the Christian faith. We've been thinking about the great

moments in Jesus' life. His incarnation. His crucifixion. His resurrection. And now we believe that he ascended to the right hand of God the Father and that he's seated there today. So if people say to you where is Jesus now, the answer is from the New Testament. Jesus has ascended and he is at the right hand of the Father. And I've chosen this particular passage because of one verb that's used in it. I've had to explain the passage and so in some senses it may seem just a little obscure, but there's a verb that's used three times in this passage and in a fascinating way it summarizes the central section of the Apostles' Creed. I wonder if you notice what that verb is? It's the verb "to appear," and this passage speaks to us about the three appearances of Jesus. It says he, first of all, appeared in his incarnation in order to deal with our sin. It says thirdly, I can skip over the middle one to which I'll return, and it says thirdly, at the end of time Jesus will appear again in what Christians tend to call his return or his Second Coming. But you notice that this little section also tells us not only about Christ's first appearance and Christ's last appearance, it tells us where Jesus is appearing today, where Jesus is here and now. At the end of verse 24, now he is appearing in the presence of God on our behalf.

It's so valuable, I think, that the Apostles' Creed mentions this because I think it's probably true even as Christians that we're either looking back or some Christians are constantly looking forward but, you know, if we're Christians, here is a great secret of living the Christian life: the Christian lives simultaneously in three time zones. The Christian lives on the basis of what Jesus did at Calvary. The Christian lives in anticipation of the new time zone that's going to arrive when Christ appears and winds up history. But the Christian is also living in the now as they say on television, you know you've got to live in the now, in the present. And that ought to make us ask, "Well what is Jesus doing now?" We know from the gospels and from the Acts of the Apostles that when Jesus had spent some six weeks in a kind of prolonged seminar with his disciples after the resurrection, that there came a day when Jesus ascended, a cloud came and clouds come fairly regularly in the Bible, don't they? There seems to be a particular kind of cloud that's the expression of the presence of the glory of God and Jesus disappeared before their sight and angels came to explain, "He has ascended to the right hand of the Father and he will not appear again until he comes again in glory." But the author of Hebrews is wanting to say to us it is tremendously important for us to know what he is doing in the now, in the present, because this can make all the difference to our Christian lives in the present.

And the importance of this, I think, is that sometimes Christians have a tendency, as it were, simply to think of the story of Jesus in the past, "I believe the story of Jesus." Or to look forward to the future and say, "I really don't understand it but I believe that Jesus is going to come again and wind up history. But what's the relevance of what Jesus is doing now because it's now that I'm seeking to live for Jesus? What does Jesus mean to me now?" And the New Testament tells us that he is appearing in the presence of God on our behalf, and to understand that I think we can put it pretty simply in this way: that Jesus has ascended, first of all, in order to be king, in order to reign.

One of my earliest memories of being a Christian is being in churches in Scotland where particularly interestingly at communion time the Psalm that would be given out would be verses 7 through 10 of the 24th Psalm, and if you were Scottish and knew the Psalms, this

particular announcement, "We will now sing Psalm 24:7 through 10, the tune St. George's Edinburgh," you felt the tingles go up your spine because you knew that there was something almost anthem-like about the way Scottish Christians would sing Psalm 24:7 through 10 to the tune St. George's Edinburgh. If I thought I could do it without embarrassing either myself or Dan Cole I would just break into song at this point.

"Ye gates lift up your heads on high;
Ye doors that last for aye,
Be lifted up, that so the King
Of glory may come in.

But who is he who is the King,
The King of glory? who is he?
The Lord of hosts and none but he,
The King of glory is."

Oh to be able to sing. You'd love it. I mean the Psalm.

And you know, interestingly the early church used to think that those verses in Psalm 24 were a wonderful description of what happened when Jesus ascended. It's interesting isn't it, we've got the kind of earthbound view as he leaves the disciples are gazing up and the angels have to say to them, "What are you doing staring up into heaven? Get on with preaching the gospel." And they see it from the earthbound view but imagine, as it were, you could see it from the heavenbound view. Imagine you were an angel leaning over the parapets of heaven as Jesus was ascending and all the angels singing, of course to the tune St. George's Edinburgh. "Who is this King of Glory?" And the answer coming back from the angels who were accompanying Jesus as he entered into the throne room of his heavenly Father, "The King of glory has ascended." His work is finished. Jesus is the King of glory. Open up the gates of heaven and let Jesus come in and his majesty and glory and triumph because he has conquered sin and death and hell and Satan and he has come to reign.

Now I think if I were a little boy at that point and I were listening to middle-aged Sinclair Ferguson speak about this, I'd want to say, "Excuse me. That's all very well for the angels but what about us? What's the relevance of this to us? How do we know that Jesus is enthroned as the Lord of the universe? He's disappeared. How do we know he has been enthroned?" I wonder if you know the Bible's answer to that question. The Bible's answer to the question how do we know that Jesus is enthroned is the day of Pentecost. That's how we know that Jesus is enthroned because from heaven he has poured out his Holy Spirit. That's how Peter explains Pentecost on the day of Pentecost. "You crucified him but the meaning of this amazing outburst is not that we are drunk with wine, it's early in the morning. No, the meaning of this is that this same Jesus whom you crucified God has exalted and raised up and given to him to give to us the Holy Spirit he promised." Do you remember how Jesus put it in the Upper Room? He said, "Now I'm going to my Father and I will ask my Father and he will give you the Holy Spirit." And all that happened, those strange marvelous miraculous things that happened around Pentecost were really like a celebration of Jesus' coronation.

Now I'm on difficult ground when I speak about coronation. It's not the same as a presidential installation, and in my lifetime there's been only one coronation. I mean one coronation that matters to me and that's the coronation of Queen Elizabeth in 1953. I was a tiny little boy and the thing I remember about it is every single child in the United Kingdom was given gifts. That was the sign. We didn't even have television. How did we know she'd been enthroned? Well, in my town we were given a mug with the Queen's picture on the front that was full of candies that probably wrecked our teeth permanently. I sure wish I'd kept that mug though because it'd be worth a fortune now fifty odd years later on. But it was the sign that the coronation had taken place and it's one of the things the New Testament teaches us in the life of our different fellowships and we come from different fellowships here on Wednesday, don't we, that every single spiritual gift that's given to our fellowship is a sign that Jesus is King which is one of the reasons why you should never use the gift that Jesus has given to you for yourself but to show that he is King.

But there's a second thing here. Jesus has ascended in order to be enthroned as King but Jesus has also ascended in order, if I can put it this way, to mastermind his church building program. He's ascended to what we might call the World and History Church Planting Center and he has this plan, you remember, that he announced to his disciples in Matthew 16, "I'm going to build my church. I'm going to build it all over the world." And it's one of the interesting things about Matthew's gospel incidentally, you remember it begins with people coming from the East to Christ and then it ends with Christ sending this tiny group of disciples all over the world to build the church of Jesus Christ.

I don't know where I picked up this story and it's not true, well, let me put it another way around. There's no way we can at the moment find out whether it's true or not but there's this story that when the Lord ascended and had just left his little group of disciples, that one of the rather forward angels said to him, "What's your plan now, Master?" And Jesus said, "I'm going to build my church all over the world. I'm going to build my church. Every people, tribe, nation, tongue, I'm going to build my church. All over the place to the end of the world and to the end of the ages, I'm going to build my church." And the angel, not satisfied with the answer, said, "Well, what have you left behind in order to build it?" "Well, there's this little group of 11 men, there used to be 12 of them, there's 11 now basically. A couple of them were pretty strange characters, some of them fishermen. Didn't like to ask too much about some of the others. A doubter. Well, that's my plan." And the angel says, "Master, what's Plan B?" And when you think about it, it's amazing, isn't it? This motley lot in ancient Palestine, a subjugated nation, and that was Plan A and Plan B and Plan C and the truly extraordinary thing is that the reason you and I are sitting in this room, enjoying one another's company and even thinking about these things, is because Plan A, which is Plan B, which is Plan C, which is Plan Z, worked and he's been building his church ever since.

Now, if you're somebody like me, you might look out on the Western world and say, "Well, he was doing it for a while, but he sure isn't doing it any longer." If you came to the United Kingdom, more if you came to Europe, if you came to France, you would say, "Maybe that angel was right to doubt Plan A." But you see, it's not like that. Here's something I picked up from listening to an Anglican academic. I know his name, but I

can't remember in what context I heard him say it, so I'd better not tell you his name. But he began an address to Anglican Christians by saying this, and I found it fascinating. He said, "The average Episcopalian," let's not just have the English, let's have the world Anglican Communion, "the average Episcopalian, number 1, is not white. The average Episcopalian, number 2, is under 30 years old. The average Episcopalian, number 3, lives below the equator. And the average Episcopalian, number 4, is an out-and-out evangelical Christian." Isn't that something? Now what's the message? It is that as Jesus builds the church, as he's doing, it's not just a cottage he's building, it's an entire world compound he's building and sometimes, sometimes when the buildings he has built refuse to cooperate with his purposes, he does what you would do if you were building a compound. He says, "I think I'll leave that just now. I don't need to destroy it, but I think I will just leave that just now. It will fritter out because it's no longer cooperating with my glorious purposes. It's no longer a praying church. It's no longer a witnessing church. It's no longer a church that has a burden to reach the world."

And alas, that's happened in the English speaking world. Interestingly, the statistics of life committed missionaries from our own country has taken a nose dive in recent years and it's fine for us to go on short term missions but it's almost like a Christian hobby in a way. Lifetime commitment. That's not in the DNA of younger people today. And you know, I believe this is true, the nation in the world that now is number 2 in the lead table of sending missionaries throughout the world is little South Korea. And knowing little South Korea, I'm sure it's determined to take over the top of the lead table. Now what does that tell us? Well, among many things it tells us that we should never look at our own little corner of the vineyard, as I used to hear older Christians say, and think the church is done for. The very reverse is true. God is building his church through Jesus Christ all over the world.

So Jesus has gone to heaven, first of all, to reign and to build his church. Then Jesus has gone to heaven for another reason and this is really what Hebrews is almost all about. He's enthroned as King, he's building his church really as prophet, and he's appearing in heaven as priest. Someone was telling me recently that in the Newark arena, the Newark arena Bon Jovi has agreed to do a dozen concerts. How many of you know who Bon Jovi is? Well, you are really hip if you know who Bon Jovi is. Whoever Bon Jovi is, he's an individual. He's an individual isn't he, though? He is an individual. He's a pop star, rock star. He's one of the great ones. He is one of the great ones. Do you know how much it will cost you if you want to go to the concert and get a semi-decent seat? \$200. So he must be one of the great ones. Now imagine, imagine we could announce that Bon Jovi, now this isn't everybody's taste, maybe you'd prefer Yo-Yo Ma, how many of you know who know...no don't, I'll not go there. Bon Jovi appearing at the Kroger Centre. Yo-Yo Ma. Wow. Yo-Yo Ma. Well he's even appeared on Sesame Street. How did those little furry animals ever get the great cellist on Sesame Street? Maybe Bon Jovi's been on Sesame Street as well. But Bon Jovi, Yo-Yo Ma, or name him, you know, maybe you want the Righteous Brothers. You know, or Pat Boone maybe, or man I don't know. Appearing. Think of the excitement.

Well, you see, that's what's conjured up in this idea for Christians, that Jesus is appearing. Now listen, sure would be something if Bon Jovi came. \$200 a seat. And there'd be fewer

seats so we could up at \$500. But imagine, imagine I was able to say to our own congregation here, "Now I'm a little embarrassed in telling you this and you know I don't usually talk about this thing, that Bon Jovi is appearing in the Kroger Centre in a Sinclair Ferguson benefit concert and the seats are only \$500 a time." Wouldn't that be something? Now listen, Jesus is appearing in heaven in our benefit. That's what he said. Those are his very words.

He's gone to heaven to appear there on our behalf and what's he doing there? Well, one of the things he's doing is just being there. If I can put it this way, is there somebody in your life that every time you look at them you remember something? You know, that just triggers off a memory. Every time the Father casts a side glance at his Son he remembers something. "This is my Son who died for their sins." And that's what he's appearing there to do. It's not that the Father needs to be reminded because the Father sent the Son into the world to be its Savior. It's just that it's like the rainbow. God doesn't need a rainbow to remind him of the covenant that he made but every time there's a rainbow we know God is remembering his covenant. And because Jesus is there on our behalf, we know that the Father is remembering that Jesus died for us and that's the great assurance that our sins are forgiven.

But he's doing something else that the New Testament kind of underlines. He's gone to heaven on our behalf to make what the Bible calls intercession for us and it's almost as though the Bible is inviting us to think as we find ourselves in all kinds of situations, good and bad, we find ourselves under pressure when we're saying, "Where on earth am I going to look?" It's saying, "Now look up," and actually a number of our hymns teach us to do this, "to look up and to remember that Jesus is interceding for us." He's praying for us. He's saying, "Father, these are our dear children. Come, come, let's send the Holy Spirit to them in wonderful ways."

And perhaps the most important thing for us to remember is this, and Hebrews also speaks about this using a completely different picture, it says, Jesus, and I've loved this since I was young, Jesus has gone into heaven like our anchor, gone beyond the veil. And it's this wonderful picture of Christians being tied to Christ and Christ being like the anchor who's anchored in heaven which guarantees that in the midst of all the storms of life, he'll not let us go. And one day, instead of us pulling the anchor in, it's almost as though by faith the anchor will pull our ship in and we'll be there to see him face-to-face and be like him, and then he'll not only be appearing there on our behalf, he'll be appearing there before us in person. And you know what you'll say, you'll say, "Lord, if I'd known you were like this, I would have loved you and served you so much better." But here's the good news, that will be the last moment of regret if you're a Christian, you'll ever, ever have.

So this is a great creed, a 100 words, and the whole of the Christian faith.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, thank you today for the way in which Jesus is appearing at your right hand on our behalf. We think of the many times we say to those we love, especially when they're in difficulty, "I want to be there for you." And we praise you even more for the

fact that the Lord Jesus says to us in the gospel, "I will be there for you," and that he's there in glory at your right hand for us. What a great and glorious Savior. We pray as we trust in the Lord Jesus and as we're anchored by faith to the Lord Jesus, and as we live in a world that's full of sorrow as well as joy, that we may live not only knowing that he has died for our sins and that he will come again to right all wrongs, but that even now he is appearing on our behalf in your great presence. Help us then, as though we could sing it with angels, to say about our own lives, "Open up the door and let the King of glory come in." So bless us, we pray. Thank you for our time together, for one another, for the strengthening of food and the strengthening of our friendship and fellowship together and for the nourishment of your word. In Jesus' name, Amen.