

THE FINISHED WORK OF CHRIST Luke 24: 50 - 53

“When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple praising God.”

The way of salvation is an important theme throughout the Scriptures. This is important in an age which does not feel the need of salvation, and it is why in this study we are considering “the finished work of Christ”. We often divide the ministry of the Lord Jesus into three sections - his humiliation (God with us - what we call the incarnation, preaching, teaching, healing, exorcising and so on); the atonement (the cross and the grave); and his exaltation (that is the resurrection and the ascension). The climax is clearly the ascension, Luke 24:50-53. The ascension concludes Luke’s first book, the gospel, but in the second part of Luke’s writing (what we call the book of Acts) we have a fuller account of the same story, and it is clearly necessary to look at them both.

When we listen to the radio, there is somebody sitting in a studio in London broadcasting and we listen to it wherever we are. Now the question is, “Where does the sound go in between?” The answer is, it goes into an invisible medium which is beyond sight and sound, and although we believe that it exists, we could never visit. The Bible gives very little attention to the mechanics of the ascension. I do not doubt that Luke intends us to understand that the ascension was an historical event. This is one of those things where event plus interpretation equals revelation, but I don’t think that Scripture commits us to the idea that Jesus and heaven are a mile or two above us, even if some people have made a great issue of the fact that the story implies that heaven is a place ‘above the bright blue sky’. It is unfair to say that such primitive views are incompatible with modern science. It was necessary to explain that Jesus was leaving earth for heaven, and Jesus simply disappearing, or wandering over the horizon waving a fond farewell to the disciples, or sailing off into the sunset just wouldn’t do. His final appearing to the band of disciples and his bodily absence seem best expressed by going above. The primitive mind accepts it just that way: heaven, the sky, the firmament, the stars and sun and so on are above, and earth is below. Some people want to say that heaven is not a place but a condition. However, since the Bible often puts heaven and earth together as if both are places, I think that we should read it that way, and I would like us to hinge our thoughts on two ideas from the Bible, one from Luke and the other from Acts. I hope these will bring us to the conclusion that the ascension is not an ‘optional extra in the deluxe edition of Christianity to suit those who would like to believe that kind of thing, but absolutely essential to our understanding of the Christian message.

The theologian often contrasts two different states of Christ calling them firstly, his humiliation and secondly, his exaltation. Consider that passage from Philippians 2:

“Christ Jesus ... being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place ...”

The incarnation and death of Jesus are two parts of what we call his state of 'humiliation'. The resurrection and ascension of Jesus, separated by just 40 days, are two parts of what we call his state of 'glorification'. Without a proper focus on his ascension, I do not think that we are doing justice to the completed work of Christ.

Now let's turn to the two texts - Acts 1: 9:

"He was taken up before their very eyes and a cloud hid him from their sight."

And in Luke 24: 52:

"Then they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy."

The typical Bible commentary says that the disciples had great joy because although Jesus had gone from them in a bodily state he was still with them spiritually. I guess that's what most people say - and at first sight you could be taken by it. Why then does the Apostle Paul talk about "departing and being with Christ which is far better" and why are Christians exhorted to await the personal and visible return of the Lord Jesus Christ with eager anticipation? It doesn't seem to fit. Let's be honest, if you were Peter or Andrew or James or John or Mary in the garden on the morning of resurrection, how would you have felt about the Jesus whom you had known, who had walked with you, talked with you, who had eaten and drunk with you, and been with you in a very physical and personal and intimate way, going away? "Then they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy" doesn't seem to fit. What's the answer? The Bible commentators say, "well, the Holy Spirit was coming and they knew that Jesus would be with them by the presence of his Spirit." Why, then, are we Christians now looking forward to the time when we will see Jesus face to face? Why not just be content? Why does Paul say: "I am going to depart and be with Christ which is far better." I think the clue is - "He was taken up before their very eyes and a cloud hid him." The cloud is a clue as to why the disciples were so joyful that Jesus had gone into heaven.

Let me sum up where I think we've reached so far. Firstly, the ascension is an important historical fact. Secondly, Jesus entered into heaven, which is a real place - we cannot see it, we cannot travel there, but it is real. Thirdly, that seeing the incarnation and death of Jesus as one package and calling it his state of humiliation and seeing the resurrection and ascension as one package and calling it his state of exaltation is entirely Biblical. Those are the three things that I think I've said so far.

Why were the disciples so joyful that Jesus had gone away into heaven? Because from all that he had taught them and all that they had learned from Jewish rituals, they saw that the ascension was the 'mission accomplished' seal that needed to be added to the resurrection to make the exaltation of Jesus complete. That is why they were happy.

The gospel of Luke begins and ends in the temple. In the Old Testament, the temple is the meeting place between God and man, and God meets man in the Holy of Holies (NIV most holy place). Where does he meet him? He meets him in the 'shekinah' (cloud of glory). Now I hope you see where we are going - for here in the ascension we see Jesus, fully human, entering

heaven through the cloud which surely represents the glory of God. To find out all about this we have to look at Leviticus 16 and the ritual of the Day of the Atonement. It's a long and complicated ritual which I only touch upon in brief summary now, by no means addressing all its complications and difficulties, but the major thrust of it is this: The purpose of the laws of Israel is to prevent Aaron, the High Priest (in theory the most holy man in Israel) suffering death when he enters into the Tabernacle, which in the wilderness is the forerunner to the Temple. The sacrificial rites teach that no man, however holy, can approach the presence of God without appropriate atonement being made. Only when the sacrifices have been offered can the High Priest enter the most holy place, where God appears above the mercy seat in the cloud of glory. The writer to the Hebrews reminds us that Christ ministers in the heavenly sanctuary (9: 24). This is the cause of the disciples' joy. They know that Christ has gone into the heavenly sanctuary for them.

I am confining myself to just three functions of the exalted Lord Jesus Christ in that heavenly sanctuary.

I. PRIESTLY

You have probably heard of the Jewish festival Yom Kippur. When my Father went to Israel in 1979 he had to change his travel arrangements. He could not fly by El Al, the Israeli Airline, on the day scheduled because there were no El Al flights on *Yom Kippur*. *Yom Kippur* is Hebrew for Day of Atonement. *Yom* being 'day' and *Kippur* being atonement. The word *Kippur* can really mean two things. It can either mean 'wiping the slate clean' or it can mean 'ransom' and these need a little explanation.

We have a very good butchers' shop in St Agnes, and they offer you meat 'on the slate' - that is, you settle up with them at the end of the month. 'On the slate' means debts that stand against us and the Bible clearly teaches us that all our sins stand against us 'on the slate'. Since you were born your life has been a slate (I'm not going to debate whether it was a clean one or not when you started) but since then they've all gone down - all the sins - and in one sense the word '*kippur*' means wipe them off. Our Bibles sometimes use the word 'expiation' for that wiping the slate clean. Expiation in the Bible comes only one way - by blood. According to the Bible, "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins." It is the blood of Jesus Christ and his blood alone which wipes the slate. Some people object that all of this is rather primitive but when faced with this criticism Professor Howard Marshall replies:

"Offering of blood-sacrifice is a central theme of the Bible. The cost of forgiveness is the shed blood of Jesus Christ. God forgives because of suffering, dying love. To abandon this is to abandon Bible Christianity."

Cost is an important word. We saw that the word '*kippur*' and '*yom kippur*' (Day of Atonement) means 'wipe the slate' but it has another meaning. It means 'ransom'. Ransom can be misunderstood. Ransom, these days, means large sum of money paid to kidnappers, terrorists and other evil people. But in the Old Testament ransom could also carry the meaning rather like our 'compensation': a payment made to satisfy the demands of justice. Now you are hearing people say, "if Jesus is our ransom to whom was the ransom paid?" and because the theory is that ransom is always paid to a bad being or bad cause or bad person, some have come up with

the absurd notion that the ransom of Jesus is paid to the forces of evil. This is a most blasphemous idea and needs to be stamped on right away. The ransom of Jesus, which some people have abandoned because they don't know to whom it is paid, is legal compensation. Jesus pays the ransom to God to satisfy the demands of justice. The Bible sometimes uses the word 'propitiation' in this context. Indeed, if you are familiar with the old Order of Service for Communion you will remember the Minister stumbling over that every time he came to it. "He is the propitiation for our sins." We are not helped by the fact that Bible translations muddle up expiation and propitiation - but we won't worry too much about that. 'Kippur' - atonement - has two meanings, wiping the slate, and satisfying the demands of justice.

Why were the disciples overjoyed when they saw Jesus taken into the cloud? Because they knew that he had gone forward to minister in the heavenly sanctuary. There is truth in the idea that the Day of Atonement prefigures the crucifixion of Jesus, but we need to go on and say that the Day of Atonement also prefigures his ascension. At the crucifixion the temple curtain, the veil which separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place (or 'Holy of Holies'), was torn in two from top to bottom (Luke 23: 45). At the ascension we see Jesus, our great High Priest, no longer entering into the earthly sanctuary but into the heavenly sanctuary. Jesus died on the cross to make atonement for sins not his own. He enters the Most Holy Place having shed his own blood for human sins, so that on the one side the slate of his people may be wiped clean, and on the other side the demands of justice may be met: expiation and propitiation.

The Old Testament sacrifices were not properly effective - for one thing, the High Priest had to offer sacrifices annually on the Day of Atonement. When Jesus had finished his work on the cross there was no further need for blood sacrifices. That is why the Reformers believed that an altar - the place of blood sacrifice - had no place in the Christian Church. If you have a Chapel at home which has something at the front that approximates to being an altar, you must be all the more resolute in reminding your Christian friends there that it is a table and not an altar. The Christian Church knows nothing of blood sacrifice: the sacrifice of blood was made by Jesus once and for all on Calvary's cross. Even so, the Old Testament sacrifices were not effective in themselves. The people had to demonstrate true penitence and to identify in a very real way with the sacrifice. How did they identify with the sacrifice? They did it by laying their hands on it. Perhaps there have been times when you have been to the shops for the sales and it has been very busy. Consequently, when you find an item that you want to buy, you put your hand on it and once your hand is on it you are saying 'that one's mine'. That is what they were doing. They were laying their hands on the sacrifice; they were pressing on to it. This thought prompted Isaac Watts to write in a hymn that was regrettably omitted from our latest hymn book:

“Not all the blood of beasts
On Jewish altars slain
Could give the guilty conscience peace
Or wash away our stain.

But Christ, the heavenly Lamb,
Takes all our sins away;
A sacrifice of nobler name,
And richer blood, than they.

My faith would lay her hand
On that meek head of Thine,
While as a penitent I stand,
And here confess my sin.”

So we rejoice with the disciples that Jesus entered into the heavenly sanctuary to make atonement. Just to please those who like the modern hymns - “Jesus is King and I will enthrone him” (one of the better ones) says, “We have a hope that is steadfast and certain, Gone through the curtain and touching the throne.”

Jesus entered into the heavenly place above covered with meritorious scars, carrying (at least figuratively), his own sacrificial blood into the presence of God. There he pleads as our advocate on high. His first heavenly ministry is priestly.

II. PROPHETIC

But his ministry in heavenly places is also prophetic. There are just three points that I want to make about Jesus’ prophetic heavenly ministry. When Jesus is formally admitted into the heavenly realm it is a pointer to judgment. Psalm 110 says:

“The Lord says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet’.”

The second point to note is that the ascension of Jesus embodies the hope of heavenly glory for all believers. In fact I would say “no historic ascension - no future heavenly glory for anybody.” I don’t know that everybody would come down that road with me. This is expressed, though, in the children’s hymn with the line:

“And he leads his children on
To the place where he is gone”

(‘Once in Royal David’s City’ - for those of you who are racking your brains!)

The third point is that, just as Jesus prepares for us, so we must also prepare for him - for he has promised that he will come again. I like the ambiguity of the word ‘risen’. In our communion service we affirm these three things - “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.” Christ is risen - does it mean resurrected or ascended? Well, from now on take it to mean both. Christ will come again.

The communion service is only a proclamation of his atoning death for a limited time: until he comes. The ministry of the ascended Lord is priestly: he is gone, entered into the holy place where no-one else could go. It is prophetic: he is gone there because now he has authority; he is highly exalted as king and judge. He is also leading his people there. He is coming again.

I once went to a Pentecostal meeting in Wimbledon, London. I'd been playing football that particular afternoon and the football match started at about 2.30 p.m. I knew that this Pentecostal meeting was to be a long 'do' beginning at 4.00 p.m. and so, partly changed and looking a bit decent at least, I got there at about 5-ish. They were West Indian Pentecostals in great fervour and, to be honest, I found it very difficult to understand what the visiting Bishop was saying. It was a great occasion and I felt so privileged to be invited. Suddenly the whole place erupted and there was shouting and hallelujahs and dancing and tambourines and I said to the person who was sat next to me: "Excuse me, do you know what the Bishop said?" She replied: "I'm not sure, but I think he said 'Jesus is coming again'." I've said it three times and I haven't even woken up the sleepers yet!

Firstly, the message of Jesus in the ascension is priestly, second it's prophetic and thirdly it is pioneering.

III. PIONEERING

Someone has written that on the Day of the Atonement the high priest temporarily entered the other world, through the curtain into the very presence of God. Jesus has also entered into the presence of God, not by permission but as of right, not temporarily but in eternity.

In the earthly holy of holies, in the most holy place, the Ark of the Covenant stood. The top of the ark is in the NIV given the horrible name 'atonement cover' (what we used to call in the Authorised Version 'mercy-seat'). It was there that the blood of sacrifice was sprinkled. Another Christmas Carol 'See amid the winter's snow' says of the incarnate Christ:

"Lo, within a manger lies
He who built the starry skies,
He who, throned in height sublime,
Sits amid the cherubim."

In Psalm 99, God is said to be enthroned between the cherubim. That is where Jesus now sits enthroned. Certainly it is a throne of judgment, but because of the blood of Jesus it is also a throne of mercy. That is why "mercy-seat" is such a precious expression to Christians. Christ ministers in the heavenly sanctuary once for all, and we have confidence in his blood because we know that the ground where he treads is the ground where we may now follow. Which way did Jesus go then? His way was the way of sacrifice, the way of the cross. For us, that means that it could often be the way of penitence and self denial. Yet it is the way of resurrection and being caught up in his eternal kingdom.

I think that a lot of modern Christians want resurrection without the cross. You cannot have it. You must have the cross first, then the resurrection. But the bodily ascension of Jesus teaches us that he is the world's redeemer, he is not running away from the world. You know, sometimes you hear people say, 'If Jesus was the great teacher and exorciser and miracle worker that the Bible says he was, why didn't he stay longer and do more of it?' The answer is easy: because the completed work which he finishes in the ascension is of even more worth and value. In the

ascension Jesus did not discard his humanity: he entered into heaven, fully man and fully God, there to be our great high priest, our prophet, our pioneer, our perfecter of salvation.

It is good to get excited and to be emotional in Christian worship, but let's not forget what we're getting excited about. The joy in Christian worship comes from one source alone: knowing that Jesus Christ, our great high priest, has made atonement on our behalf. I really regret that so many of the hymns to which I have referred have been lost to our collection but none sums it up better than "Come ye sinners, poor and wretched" which moves us from the penitence and belief that are the birthmark of every Christian, to our great joy with the disciples in all that Jesus risen, ascended, and glorified has won. No wonder then that when Jesus ascended they worshipped him! This was the great cause of their joy: that the Jesus they had known, the Jesus with whom they'd walked, talked, shared, slept, and wept, and all the rest of it, the Jesus whom they had seen offered on Calvary's cross, the Jesus whom they had met as victorious and risen Lord, had entered now into the very presence of God, there to reconcile sinful mankind with a holy God by his most precious blood. No-one else could have done it.

"Lo! the incarnate God ascended,
Pleads the merit of his blood;
Venture on Him, venture wholly;
Let no other trust intrude;
None but Jesus,
Can do helpless sinners good."