

Lesson 66: The Earthly Ministry of the Ascended Christ

OUTLINE

The importance of the ascension
The implications of the ascension

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Through our weekly remembrance of the Lord's death for us in the Lord's Supper we have regular opportunity to look back to the cross and think upon Christ as our Crucified Savior. Through the regular praying of the Lord's Prayer we ask for God's kingdom to come in the second coming of Christ and think regularly of Jesus in His future coming as Savior and Judge. We often look back to the cross and forward to the second coming, but we do not spend enough time thinking about Christ's present role as the Ascended Lord as Paul tells us to do. Col. 3:1-3, 'If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³ For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.' Our confession rightly emphasizes this aspect of the ministry of Christ our mediator in chapter 8 paragraph 4, '...was crucified, and died, and remained in the state of the dead, yet saw no corruption: on the third day he arose from the dead with the same body in which he suffered, with which he also ascended into heaven, and there sitteth at the right hand of his Father making intercession, and shall return to judge men and angels at the end of the world.' Last week Thomas helped us to see that Jesus is resurrected bodily from the dead, that the resurrection transformed Christ's humanity and as the firstfruits there are guaranteed benefits that we will now enjoy through our union with Him in His death and resurrection. Today we want to look at not Christ's past work for us; nor His future work for us, but His present work for us.

Firstly, a quick note on the words 'yet saw no corruption.' What does this mean? Does this mean that those who wrote the confession believed that Jesus' dead body did not undergo the ordinary process of decay before He was resurrected on the third day? And the answer is yes! John Lightfoot a man present at the Westminster Assembly wrote regarding Acts 2:27 where Peter quotes from Ps. 16, '...But even there did not God suffer his Soul to abide, separate from his body, nor His body to putrifie in the grave...'. This is felt to be a miracle. J Douglas Macmillan puts it like this, 'Obviously there was no sense in which the ordinary processes of corruption invaded the body of Jesus. That was not because He was embalmed and robed in a great variety of precious spices. It was because of a special ministry of the Holy Spirit to a body that had always been perfect, although truly human. The Holy Spirit who ensured that this body would be 'holy, blameless, pure' in its conception in the womb of the virgin Mary, ensured by His ministry that it would be kept holy harmless and undefiled while He was in the womb of the grave. In addition to the fact that this was the body of the Son, there is a very real sense in which, once death had taken place, sin's debt had been fully paid and so there was no more suffering, no more downgrading, even for the body of the Son.' (Jesus Power without measure, p134-5).

We come now to the ascension of Christ. We know from the Scriptures that for 40 days Jesus appeared to His disciples several times after His resurrection. However, Jesus did not remain on earth, He could not, for He had to go to heaven

to continue the heavenly session of His role as Covenant Mediator, as Prophet, Priest, and King. Acts 1:9-11, 'And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰ And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, ¹¹ and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." Just as we should never see the death of Christ without the resurrection, so we should not separate the death and resurrection from the Ascension. For without the ascension and the heavenly ministry of Christ the cross and resurrection are fruitless. This is not to say that Jesus did not finish all that was needed in paying for our sins, when He died on the cross; or secure in Himself our redemption, when He was resurrected from the dead. He most certainly did finish what was needed for the accomplishing of our redemption. However, it is His ascension which makes the redemption accomplished, the redemption applied. For example, we would not have had Pentecost.

A pivotal verse in considering the ascension is Ps 110. This psalm is quoted no less than 19 times in the NT. This psalm accounts the seating of Christ at God's right hand, His being given the name Lord, His being given all authority to rule, the perpetual role of priest in the order of Melchizedek, and the role of Judge in the Second Coming. It is significant that the most quoted portion of the OT in the NT reflects on the ascended Christ.

As we reflect on the resurrected and now ascended Christ we should think on His heavenly session through the familiar triplex structure of Prophet, Priest and King. Although Christ's life has different stages where He was fulfilling one of these roles more than others, so that during His three and half year preaching ministry we see Him primarily as prophet, during His dying on the cross we see Him primarily as priest, and during His exaltation we see Him primarily as King. He is always all three. We see Him forgiving sins, and casting out demons during His ministry. We see Him crowned as a king in humility, and prophesying during His passion, and we see Him continuing as prophet, priest and king in His heavenly session as well.

I will be looking at Jesus the Ascended Lord and His present earthly ministry; and I will leave Jesus Heavenly Intercession to Thomas.

The implications of the ascension

A good way for us to appreciate the significance of the ascension is to begin with a conundrum. Is Jesus absent or is Jesus present? In John 14:3 Jesus said that He is going to prepare a place for us; and then He says 'I will not leave you as orphans, I will come to you', v18. Heb. 1:3 says that 'After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high;' but Matt. 28:20 says, 'And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.' So which is it, is Jesus present or is He absent, and the answer is? Yes! Liberal scholars make much of this conundrum trying to make out that there are contradictions, or trying to say that Jesus body the church is Jesus symbolic presence, or that the Holy Spirit is the person of Jesus. These are wrong. There have also been creative suggestions by Martin Luther who suggested that the right hand of the Father was omniscient therefore Jesus could be at the right hand of the Father and everywhere at once. Or as we also know through his doctrine of consubstantiation Jesus bodily presence can be everywhere including the Lord's

Supper because the human nature of Jesus participates in Jesus divine omnipresence. For us the answer is obvious. We know that Jesus can be bodily resurrected and present bodily at the right hand of the Father in heaven right now, while also being present with us because the Spirit is given as the Spirit of Christ to mediate the presence of Christ and His benefits. What this highlights is what Jesus said to His disciples in the Upper Room, John 16:7, 'Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.' The bodily ascension and absence of Christ is a good thing because then He will send the Holy Spirit who as the Spirit of Christ will do many things. In one sense it would not be too much to say that all that the Spirit of Christ does in this age is an extension of the present activity of the ascended Christ.

If we ask the direct question what does Jesus do for us in His ascended state as Lord, as Christ, as the Son of God and head of the church? We would not have enough time to list all that our resurrected Savior continues to do for us. So in no particular order let me help us all appreciate that Christ as mediator, as prophet priest and king, is still working, not to finish His cross work but to apply the benefits of the redemption He has won for us.

We know that in His earthly ministry Christ prophesied many things. Does Christ still act as Prophet for His Church today? Yes He gave them the NT Scriptures through His hand picked apostles. He gave the Holy Spirit to write those Scriptures, reveal the future, and even now illuminate them to us. As Prophet Christ still speaks to us through the preached word. And continues to proclaim Law and Gospel through the same ministry. Rom. 10:14, 'How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?' Read the footnote in the ESV, 'Him whom they have never heard,' in other words Paul seems to be saying that our preaching is Christ making His appeal through us, 2 Cor. 5:20.

Col. 1:28-29, 'Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. ²⁹ For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.' In the great commission Christ promises His presence, here Paul as a minister of the gospel spells out what the ascended Christ is doing in the present in His ministers. His energy, His power is at work within us. It has been suggested that the book of Acts should not be called the Acts of the apostles, nor even the Acts of the Holy Spirit, but rather the Acts of the Ascended Christ because He though absent is present and working as He promised. This will give you new eyes to read the book of Acts, if you recognize that the title 'Lord' is a description of the ascended Christ then so much more of His activity will jump out at you. For example, Jesus opens spiritual eyes, Acts 16:14, 'One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.' Closing the eyes of Elymas, Acts 13:11, 'And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time.' Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand.' He rescues saints, Acts 12:11, 'When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting." Paul says the same in 2 Tim. 3:11. Jesus healed through Peter, Acts 9:34, 'And Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; rise and make your bed." And

immediately he rose.' These are just some verses that add up to showing to us and encouraging us with the fact that Jesus is with His church and continuing to act through her.

1 Cor. 1:7-8, 'so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁸ who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.' Jesus is sustaining His saints right now. What a precious thought, not only did Jesus do all that was necessary to save us from our sins, but He continues to work for us to sustain us that we endure to the end as well. No doubt this is directly linked to Christ's heavenly intercession. I don't want to steal Thomas's thunder but it can be pointed out that just as Jesus interceded for Peter who would be sifted as wheat that he would be restored, we can be confident that Jesus prays for us as well.

We should not miss the fact that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus, Paul adds to this in Eph. 1:20-23, 'that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. ²² And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.' Think about that, Jesus holds the highest position of power and authority over the universe. There is no one stronger or who has more authority than Him, and He is the head of the church. He exercises His power on whose behalf? On our behalf. History runs its course according to His will, the rise and fall of governments do so at His bidding. There is no activity of satan or demons that is not permitted according to His holy power and will. There is no persecution that comes upon the church that is not strictly regulated according to His purposes which are for our good. One of my favourite pictures of the ascended Christ is found in Revelation 5. We see a scroll in the right hand of God, and no one is found worthy to open the scroll which is a symbol of God's plan for the ages. But then there is the lamb who has been slain but who is standing. Christ the resurrected and ascended Lord takes the scroll and opens it, 6:1, 'Now I watched when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say with a voice like thunder, "Come!" the seven seals of God's judgement upon the earth which include the four horsemen of the apocalypse are all unleashed. But we must not miss at whose hand, who is coordinating what appears to be a flood of judgements, by whose will are these things unleashed, whose design and power ensure how they will proceed to the guaranteed end that God has planned? The risen and ascended Lord stands over all of history and is guiding it for His purposes.

We should not miss that the ascended Christ is the one who walks among the seven lampstands in Revelation 1. This is a priestly picture which speaks of His intercession for us. This involves many things but one of those things is that Christ is present among His people to discipline them. He promises to come and remove lampstands unless there is repentance, 2:5, 'Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.' Christ is present to make His people holy not only corporately but individually as well using the act of faithful church discipline to hand people over to satan. 1 Cor 5:4-5, 'When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵ you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day

of the Lord.' Jesus says as much Himself, Matt. 18:18-20, 'Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.' Paul gives further warning of this concerning the Lord's Supper, 1 Cor. 11:28-32, 'Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹ For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. ³⁰ That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. ³¹ But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. ³² But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.'

Let me end with one last encouragement. Because Christ is ascended the death of a believer is going home to be with Him. Paul tell us that to live is Christ but to die is gain. To be alive is to be absent from the Lord, but to die is to be at home with Him. Stephen on the day He died saw the Lord standing as if you to meet Him. death is going home, death is going to our greatest love, death which was once hated and feared is now longed for as it will unite us bodily with the ascended Christ.

This was a short study but I hope you are encouraged to consider the ascended Christ. that you have been reminded of a Savior who saves to the uttermost not because He has stopped working for us, but continues to apply the redemption He won for us by His crosswork.