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Resurrection Postlude Part 4
The Gospel of the Ascension
Luke 24:50-51; Acts 1:6-11

Introduction

It has always amazed me how little attention is paid to this doctrinally significant event in the life and ministry of Jesus. The ascension refers to Jesus' exodus from the earth by rising into the clouds forty days after His resurrection.

The witnesses in Scripture suggest four things about the ascension of Jesus:

1. **The Old Testament witnesses are found in two categories: typological and prophetic anticipation.**

- **Typological Foreshadowing of Jesus' Ascension.** There are two Old Testament prophets whose end of life experience foreshadowed the ascension of Jesus by their own dramatic translation into heaven. There also are two New Testament witnesses contained in the Book of Rev 11:1-14.

(1) **Enoch, Gen 5:23-24.** While we have no details about Enoch's departure, it is clear he was a devout man who "walked with God," so God "took" him to be with Him. Jude 14-15 states that Enoch preached against apostates saying, "Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of His believers," v. 14. This is similar to the word picture presented in 1 Thess 4:16. In addition, we know from Acts that two angels stated that Jesus who was "taken up [same language used in Gen 5:24] from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven," Acts 1:11.

(2) **Elijah, 2 Kgs 2:11.** Elijah's successor, Elisha, watched as a fiery chariot took him into heaven in a whirlwind. While more dramatic than Jesus' rising into the clouds, it nevertheless foreshadowed Jesus' own exodus. It is significant that Elijah was with Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration and talked with Jesus about His soon coming "exodus," Luke 9:30.

(3) **Two Witnesses, Rev 11:12.** After the sounding of the sixth trumpet [Rev 9:13], there are several events seen by John that are part of the second of three woes announced in 8:13. One of these events is the appearance of two "witnesses" [Greek μάρτυς "witness"

or "martyr"] in Rev 11:1-14. These two individuals are not named. They are given the responsibility to prophesy in Jerusalem, outside the Temple for 1,200 days, clothed in sackcloth as a sign of grief. They also are called "two olive trees" and "two lampstands" who stand before [meaning to serve] God, 11:4. The ministry of these two individuals was predicted by Zechariah 4:1-14, see especially 4:13-14. They prophesy for 1,200 days and have the power to stop rain from falling and to turn water into blood. Their witness ends with an attack of the "beast out of the bottomless pit," 4:6-7. Their bodies lie in the street for 3- $\frac{1}{2}$ days, 4:8-10. After the 3- $\frac{1}{2}$ days, they are resurrected and they ascend into heaven in a cloud. A great earthquake strikes the city and 7,000 people are killed, 4:11-14. These two witnesses reaffirm now prophetically, and in the future after the fact, both the resurrection of Jesus and His ascension.

- **Old Testament Prophetic Anticipation in Psalms.** Jesus' ascension is anticipated in Ps 68:18; 110:1, 4-7; 139:8a; see also Ps 2:7-9. These verses are messianic in their content and point the way to the coming of the messianic King and specifically, at least in part, to Jesus' ascension.

2. The New Testament anticipation of Jesus' ascension. There are two verses that refer to the coming ascension of Jesus, John 6:62; 20:17. These references indicate that the ascension of Jesus was not an afterthought in the plans of God.

3. The New Testament description of Jesus' ascension. Both Mark and Luke describe in brief narrative, the departure of Jesus from the earth, Mark 16:19; Luke 24:51. Luke then added a long account of the event in Acts 1:9-11.

4. The New Testament post-resurrection statements. Paul refers to the ascension in Eph 4:8-11. The writer of Hebrews refers to it in Heb 4:14 and in 6:19-20. John also mentions the ascension in Rev 12:1-6, esp. v. 5.

Of primary importance is the fact that the ascension presupposes a belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Jesus was raised from the dead, glorified, and finally exalted to sit at the right hand of the Father. This seating of Jesus in heaven often is referred to as the "session" of Christ. The ascension also is a prelude to the second coming and the establishment of Jesus' earthly millennial reign at the end of human history as we know it, Acts 1:11. Although the location of the ascension is never distinctly stated, it would appear from Acts 1:12 that it took place on the Mount of Olives. After the ascension, the apostles returned to

Jerusalem "from the mount that is called Olivet, which is the Mount of Olives near Jerusalem, within a Sabbath day's journey," 1:12. According to tradition, the Mount of Olives is the mountain of Jesus' ascension.

Early Christians honored the ascension by worshiping in a cave nearby, probably out of fear of persecution for worshipping openly. After the conversion of Constantine, a church was built on the site around AD 390 by Poimonia, a pious Roman lady. In AD 392, Constantine's mother, Helena erected a basilica over the site—a basilica that was called "Eleona Basilica" which means church of the "olive garden." This church was destroyed by the Persians in AD 614. It was rebuilt and destroyed again in the eighth century. The Crusaders rebuilt it in the twelfth century but, the Ottomans finally destroyed the church leaving only an octagonal structure called a *martyrium*, or "memorial," that may be seen on the site today.

There are several important preliminary considerations to understanding the Gospel of the ascension of our Lord Jesus:

1. **Jesus ascended to a place.** Jesus told His disciples, "I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am you may be also," John 14:2b-3. The word translated "place" is the Greek τόπος *topos*, from which we get the English word topography. It is clear that Jesus had a definite location in mind. The narratives clearly indicate that Jesus departed to a place. He ascended and disappeared into a cloud. It is not that He passed into some ethereal dimension but to a specific place that is clearly identified in Scripture. Jesus spoke of it on the cross as "paradise" in His promise to the thief who was saved, Luke 23:43. Paul also mentions it in 2 Cor 12:2, 4 where he equates "paradise" with the third heaven. John refers to "paradise" in Rev 2:7 as the location of the "tree of life," identified also in Rev 22:14 as a place.

Obviously, no one can plot the topographical location of heaven. There are other lines of evidence for its existence as a place. Jacob saw angels ascending and descending a stairway to heaven, Gen 28:12. Elijah was taken up in a fiery chariot and the destination is specified as "heaven," 2 Kgs 2:11.

2. **Jesus ascended and received glory, honor, and authority.** Immediately after the resurrection, Jesus indicated that some things would be different about Him after He ascended, John 20:17. Part of Jesus' High Priestly prayer was, "And now O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with you before the world was made," John 17:5. The New

Testament clearly refers to the fulfillment of this prayer. At Pentecost Peter's sermon stated that Jesus was "exalted to the right hand of God," Acts 2:33. In writing to the Philippians Paul said, "Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven and those on earth, and of those under the earth," Phil 2:9. In 1 Tim 3:16, he said that Jesus "was received up in glory." The writer of Hebrews gives extended discussion of Jesus as highly exalted above all the angels of heaven, Heb 1:5-14.

3. **Jesus was seated at the right hand of the Father.** This was predicted in the messianic psalm when God said, "Sit at my right hand, until I make Your enemies Your footstool," Ps 110:1. The writer in Hebrews states that "when He had by Himself purged our sins, [He] sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on High," Heb 1:3. This is the description of a highly honored person. It means that the Son has all authority to rule the earth, including authority over all principalities and all other spiritual powers. Jesus will reign until He has put all enemies under His feet," 1 Cor 15:25.

Jesus' position at God's right hand does not suggest that He is fixed or inactive. Stephen saw Him "standing," Acts 7:56, and John saw Him "walking" among the seven golden lampstands in heaven, Rev 2:1. A ruling king may sit on his throne as a sign of authority but may depart to attend to other affairs of state. Jesus' position then is emblematic of His authority but does not suggest that He will sit on the throne without moving, for eternity. He most certainly will be actively engaged in the activities in heaven.

4. **The Gospel of the ascension.** Jesus foretold His return to the Father, John 6:62, 14:2, 12; 16:5, 10, 28; 20:17. Luke gives the most coverage of the ascension, Luke 24:50-51; Acts 1:6-11. Paul and the writer of Hebrews refer to the ascension, Eph 1:20; 4:8-10; 1 Tim 3:16; Heb 1:3; 4:14; 9:24. So what is the meaning of the ascension and what is its Gospel message for us?
 - The ascension is more than merely a transfer of geographical location. One cannot get from earth to Jesus' present location by any physical means of travel. Jesus entered a different dimension, which clearly requires a spiritual change to enter, see 1 Cor 15:35-58, esp. vv. 44, 50.
 - Jesus departed earth to prepare the future dwelling place of all believers, John 14:2-3. Jesus' ascension gave all believers the assurance that where He is, they will be also.
 - Jesus departed earth in order to dispatch the third member of the trinity, the Holy Spirit. By the coming of the Holy Spirit, Jesus

would continue His work with the disciples and with all believers through all time, John 14:17. In this new environment, Jesus promised He would be with believers forever, Matt 28:20.

- Jesus departed earth to send the Holy Spirit to equip all believers to do their assigned work in preparing for the Kingdom of God, John 14:12.
- Jesus departed earth to take His rightful place at the "right hand" of the Father, Matt 26:64; Acts 2:33-36; 5:31; Eph 1:20-22; Heb 10:12; 1 Pet 3:22; Rev 3:21; 22:1. This position is one of authority and active rule by Christ over heaven and all creation. It is from this position at God's right hand that He makes intercession for believers, Heb 7:25.
- Just as Jesus is the "firstfruits" of the resurrection, 1 Cor 15:20, He also is the "firstfruits" of the ascension by which He foreshadows the ascension of all believers who will meet Him in the clouds upon His second coming, 1 Thess 4:13-18; Heb 7:11-28; 12:1-2.
- Jesus' ascension provided a guarantee of our home in heaven. Years ago Dr. W. A. Criswell wrote a little booklet he used to give to the bereaved entitled, *Our Home in Heaven*. In the first section entitled "All the Prophets and Apostles Have Portrayed," is a collection of Scriptures about heaven arranged under several subject headings. The first of these is "Our Going to Be With Jesus," and includes the texts of Isa 33:17; Luke 23:42-43; Acts 7:55-56; Matt 18:10 and II Cor 5:1-8. The booklet closes with a section entitled, "The Heavenly City of God," with verses from John 14:1-3; Heb 11:10, 16; 13:14; 2 Pet 3:13; Rev 21:1-27; 22:1-5. Jesus' resurrection guaranteed all of these promises and more.
- Jesus has promised that we will share authority over the universe, the new heaven and new earth. Believers will sit with Him in heaven and share His reign and authority, Eph 2:6. Paul told the Corinthian believers, "Do you not know that we shall judge the angels?" John in the Revelation also said we will reign with Him "as kings and priests," Rev 1:6, see also Rev 2:26-27; 3:21.

Conclusion

Jesus' ascension is replete with theological significance. Just as the resurrection was both a preview and a guarantee of our own resurrection, the ascension presents the guarantee that we will ascend into heaven to take our place in the mansion that Jesus has gone to prepare for every believer. There believers will reign with Him as kings and priests and be seated at the right hand of the Son. This prepared place is for a prepared people who have made Him their Savior and secured their eternal salvation by their personal commitment to Him, John 3:16-18.