

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #65: THE DAY CHRIST WENT BACK TO HEAVEN

By John Temples

We think often of our Lord's death, His burial, and His resurrection. We do not think as often about His ascension back to heaven. We should. The ascension was a crucial part of God's plan for our salvation. Here is the record, from Acts 1:4-12:

“And being assembled together with them, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, 'which,' He said, 'you have heard from Me; for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.' Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, 'Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?' And He said to them, 'It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.' Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.' Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey.”

This was forty days after the resurrection. Jesus gave some last-minute instructions to His apostles; then He began to rise up into the air. The disciples watched Him until the clouds received Him out of their sight. That's important. Why? First, it established the fact that this was not some “beam-me-up” trick, or some magician's so-called “levitation” a few inches above the ground. Second, it gave the disciples closure. He did not just vanish; that would have left the disciples

uncertain as to what had happened. And third, it meant that there were eleven eyewitnesses to the ascension--more than enough to establish it as fact.

The Lord's ascension is also important to us. Why?

FIRST, THE ASCENSION WAS THE LOGICAL AND NECESSARY FOLLOW-UP TO THE RESURRECTION

Have you ever wondered why Jesus didn't just stay here with us after His resurrection? If He did, we would have a resurrected Lord; but not one who is seated at God's right hand, possessing all the glory He had before time began and exercising all authority in heaven and in earth.

And if Jesus had stayed on earth, His connection with us would be limited by time and space. Burton Coffman says, "The establishment of a worldwide religion with benefits of salvation from sin and eternal life for all humanity would have been impossible if the head of it had remained on earth, limited by earthly conditions, physically present at only one place at a time, inaccessible unless approached through other men (as did the Greeks, John 12:21,22), dependent upon human systems of communication, and his every contact with humanity subjected to monitoring and interpretation by human aides with their inevitable taint of fallibility and bias" (Coffman's Bible Commentary, comments on John 16:7).

The ascension was necessary to remove the last vestiges of Christ's humiliation and the limitations of His human existence.

SECOND, THE ASCENSION WAS NECESSARY TO COMPLETE CHRIST'S SAVING MISSION

He had to fulfill the symbolism of the Jewish high priest on the Day of Atonement by carrying His blood into the true Holy of Holies to offer for the sins of mankind. "Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption" (Hebrews 9:12).

I do not know whether Christ carried His blood into heaven physically or in some representative way; but I know that somehow, that precious cargo was delivered to God as “payment in full” for the sins of all who would obey Him.

THIRD, THE ASCENSION WAS NECESSARY TO COMPLETE GOD’S ESTABLISHMENT OF THE CHURCH

The church had been paid for, but not yet built and organized.

Jesus told the disciples in John 16:7, “It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper [the Holy Spirit] will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you.” Each member of the Godhead participated in the establishment of the church: the Father had willed and designed it, the Son had paid for it and built it; the Holy Spirit needed to come to energize and organize it.

FOURTH, THE ASCENSION WAS NECESSARY TO FIRMLY ESTABLISH AND SOLIDIFY THE FAITH OF THE APOSTLES

Jesus appeared to His disciples several times over forty days after His resurrection. But suppose that one day, He just vanished--disappeared--and failed to show up. The disciples would be left hanging, with doubts and fears. (What happened? Did He die again? Did He desert us?)

The ascension was a definite and orderly close to the Lord’s association with His disciples on earth. They still would not completely understand the significance of it until the day of Pentecost; but for the rest of their lives, seeing the Lord go into heaven was the solid anchor of their faith.

FIFTH, THE ASCENSION WAS NECESSARY FOR OUR ASSURANCE AND ENCOURAGEMENT

Hebrews 4:14-16 says, “Seeing then that *we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens*, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us

therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” Jesus is now mediating for us in heaven, representing us in God’s court. As such, I want Him there with God, not here with me!

WHAT WAS THAT DAY--THE DAY THE LORD WENT BACK TO HEAVEN--LIKE?

In many respects, it was just like any other day--a late May or early June day in AD 33. But obviously, it was no ordinary day. Let us think about the ascension from the viewpoint of the parties involved.

On that day, the majority of mankind missed it. Most people did not even know it happened. Certainly, the Jewish leaders did not see it. It is interesting that Christ never appeared to His enemies after the resurrection. They had had their chance, and had showed themselves unworthy of seeing Him. There’s a lesson for us here: things of cosmic and eternal importance can be going on in any given day, and we may be unaware of it.

Also on that day, the disciples doubted. Even on that day, they still did not completely understand what was happening. “They asked Him, saying, ‘Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?’ (Acts 1:6). We have to realize that they had big hopes in Jesus. They had left all to follow Him. He had left them once in death; now, after having been resurrected and having spent forty days with them, He was leaving again.

And on that day--at least from the disciples’ perspective--everything on earth was still the same as it was.

- The kingdom Jesus had promised them had not been established.
- The Roman Empire was still standing and still in control of Palestine.
- The wicked Jewish leaders were still in power.
- Jesus had promised them they would sit on twelve thrones, and that had not come to pass.

Thanks be to God that we live on the other side of Pentecost, and we know the outcome; but at the time the disciples did not.

Also on that day, Satan shuddered. He knew that that very day, Jesus would sit down on God's throne--the same throne that he (Satan) had hoped to sit on. He now understood Matthew 16:18--"Upon this rock I will build My church, and the gates of hades shall not prevail against it." Satan had gambled everything by engineering the death of Jesus, but he now realized that he had made a colossal cosmic miscalculation.

And on that day, the Ruler of heaven rejoiced. As a Father, God had anxiously awaited His Son's return. At long last, He could do something He had wanted to do for centuries: start forgiving our sins. We can only imagine the joy in God's heart as He welcomed His Son home.

We regularly think about and honor the day the Lord died and the day He rose from the dead. We ought also to think about another day that is marvelous and vital to our eternal salvation: the day of His ascension. --John Temples