

The Ascension of Christ: Acts 1:1-11

Introduction

The bodily ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ into heaven is a wonderful event that is too easily overlooked. Luke, the gospel-writer, is not guilty of this! In fact, he gives two accounts of the ascension: one at the end of his gospel, and one at the beginning of the book of Acts. What is the dividing line for Luke between his gospel and Acts? Not the crucifixion, not the resurrection, but the ascension.

As we begin, let's look at the event itself - look at verses 9 and 10. The ascension is a physical, bodily event, but there is still mystery involved. Christ in his human nature departed the earth to be present with the Father in heaven, not to travel through 'outer space' as it were. He left one world for another, he left this age in readiness for the age to come. 'A cloud received him out of their sight.'

But why did Jesus have to leave? This is the question that Luke answers for us in his account of the ascension. It was certainly the question the disciples seem to have had. From Jesus' words and those of his heavenly witnesses, we gain two answers: firstly, Jesus must leave so that they may have the Holy Spirit, and secondly, because he will return one day in just the same way as he departed.

Or, to put it in another way. As a result of the ascension, Jesus is absent in body, but present with us by the Holy Spirit.

Part A: Present by the Holy Spirit (verses 1 - 8)

1. Jesus told his disciples to expect the Holy Spirit. (verses 3-5)

Note how all of Jesus' instructions, after showing himself risen to his disciples, center on them being ready to receive the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem.

2. The disciples would rather see victory now. (verse 6-7)

This was not what the disciples were expecting. As we find in the gospels, they misunderstood Jesus' mission at every step. They had expected something like the Exodus out of Egypt, followed by Joshua leading Israel into the Promised Land. The cross and resurrection of Jesus showed them real Exodus, but they were still even now expecting Jesus to be their 'Joshua' and lead them into the Promised Land of a restored Israel, like in the days of King David. Instead, Jesus told them this day was hidden in the plans of the Father. The end was not yet.

3. Instead, Jesus would conquer by the Holy Spirit. (verse 8)

What was true for the Master is also true for the servants. Jesus said as much in his reply to the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:26): Christ must suffer first, then enter his glory. Now he says to his disciples: you must witness first, then see your glory. But how would they witness? Through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Through the Holy Spirit by means of the witness of the disciples, Jesus, though ascended to heaven, would continue his conquest as the victorious Messiah-king. But it was not the conquest that the disciples were expecting. Instead of a glorious earthly kingdom, it would be a spiritual kingdom expanded by the word of witness rather than the sword. Instead of national Israel, it would be global in scope, including even Samaritans and Romans in its embrace. The rule of the ascended Jesus would be spiritual and global, not physical and local. The disciples had forgotten that between the Exodus under Moses and the Conquest under Joshua had been the long years of wandering in the wilderness.

Application:

- are we content with the Holy Spirit and the means he uses - Word, sacraments and prayer? Or are we always impatient for visible glory?
- Do we take witnessing to Jesus seriously?
- Do we value humility? The God of all glory has chosen to increase the kingdom of his son Jesus through the witness of the Spirit and not through visible glory. What do we learn from this about what God values most?

Part B: Absent in Body

Why would we call this time the wilderness years? Because Jesus Christ, humanly speaking, is absent from us.

1. Jesus, in his human nature, is really absent from us.

You can sense this from the fixed stare of the disciples at the cloud which hid Jesus as he ascended into heaven. He was really gone! Their Lord, with whom they had shared everything for three years, was really gone! While we talk of the Son of God as being one person, it is also true to say he has two natures - divine and human. We cannot be united to Jesus Christ without being united to him in both of these. Yet his human nature is a real human nature. That means it can exist only in one place - and that is in the Father's immediate presence in heavenly glory. Any communion we have with him is through the Holy Spirit. We cannot be with him, physically right now.

That means the disciples suffered a real loss, a loss that we should also feel.

2. The absence of Jesus should give us a hunger for when he returns.

A full understanding of the ascension of Jesus Christ should give us a desire for the Last Day. We see this interest in all of the New Testament, but not so much in our own Christian lives. While we are grateful that Jesus is with us through the Holy Spirit, we can be wrongly 'content' with our present solely 'spiritual' communion with God. This can lead to an over-spiritualising tendency that is not true to biblical Christianity.

The Son of God performed all his great redemptive acts in union with his human nature - his birth, obedient life, death, resurrection, ascension, present intercession and his return.

The ascension reminds us of this great truth. We should not be satisfied until the end of the story.

Part C: Living in the Tension between Christ physically absent but spiritually present

Some concluding applications:

1. Where is your life now? See Colossians 3:1-4
2. Between the coming of the Spirit and the return of Jesus Christ, there is a time of mercy. Will you receive the mercy of God?