

[IN GOD'S IMAGE 50 - JESUS' ASCENSION]

We move now from Jesus's resurrection to His ascension to the Father.

- ◆ It's not very often we hear a sermon on the ascension.
- ◆ The ascension is one of those overlooked aspects of Jesus' ministry and to neglect it impoverishes an important aspect of the gospel message.

What do you think would have happened if Jesus had not returned to the Father and simply stayed here on earth?

- ◆ Do you think mankind's reaction to the risen Christ would have been any different to the pre-resurrection Christ?
- ◆ In the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, Jesus Himself gives the answer.
- ◆ ***Luke 16:30-31 "No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent."³¹ "He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"***
- ◆ It would naïve to think humanity would have a change of heart and suddenly accept Jesus as their Savior even though He had risen from the dead.
- ◆ No, more work needed to be done before this would happen.
- ◆ This is one of the reasons Jesus had to withdraw Himself physically from the earth.
- ◆ However this did not mean he was not involved in the ongoing process of drawing humanity back into relationship with their Creator.
- ◆ In fact, there is no way He could not be involved after all He has done on behalf of mankind to make this incredible notion possible.
- ◆ He is the mediator between God and humanity.
- ◆ Although not physically visible, Jesus Christ is intimately involved in directing the Father's ongoing work of restoring the relationship with mankind.
- ◆ Through His life, death and resurrection, Jesus had prepared the groundwork for the salvation of mankind.
- ◆ Humanity through Jesus Christ's saving work has in a corporate sense been reconciled to God. However, true reconciliation, in order to be genuine requires a response from both parties.
- ◆ Jesus has achieved this response in a corporate sense in that He obediently responded to the Father on behalf of mankind, but the task now is to elicit a positive response from individual humans.
- ◆ The corporate or objective reality has to become subjective or personal reality.
- ◆ The primary task of moving individuals from the objective reality to the subjective reality would be the work of the Holy Spirit.
- ◆ This is the promise Jesus made to His disciples at the last supper.
- ◆ ***John 14:16-17 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—¹⁷ the Spirit of truth.***
- ◆ ***John 14:26 But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.***
- ◆ We see the primary task of bringing individual humans to the knowledge of what Jesus Christ has accomplished on their behalf is delegated to the Holy Spirit.
- ◆ However, as in all other aspects of God's saving work, all three persons of the Trinity are intimately involved in the process.
- ◆ The major advantage the Holy Spirit has in this task over Jesus is that He could move wherever He willed while Jesus was limited in His capacity to influence by His physical presence.
- ◆ As spirit, He would not draw the same negative attention of those who opposed Jesus in the same way if Jesus were physically present.

We will talk more of this later, but for now our focus is on Jesus' ascension.

- ◆ Jesus has spent 40 days since His resurrection reassuring the disciples He is the same Jesus they knew before the resurrection, and preparing them for the task of taking the gospel to the world.
- ◆ ***Luke 24:50-52 When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them.⁵¹ While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven.⁵² Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.⁵³ And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.***
- ◆ With Jesus' ascension to heaven we come full circle.

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- ◆ When Jesus arrived in Bethlehem, it was God joining us in our humanity. Now as He ascended from Bethany to heaven, Jesus is taking our humanity into the very presence of God.
- ◆ The incarnation is God humbling Himself to join us in our earthly realm, whereas the ascension is the exalting of humanity to meet God in His heavenly realm.
- ◆ God's purpose from the beginning is to bring humans into union with Him so they too can share in the life and love of the godhead.
- ◆ Now sitting at the right hand of the Father is a human being.
- ◆ This is not a sin-racked decaying human we normally think of. This is the sinless, glorified head of the new race, the pinnacle of true humanity, the firstborn of the new creation.
- ◆ The ascension of Jesus is the completion of the miraculous journey from the darkness of death, to the glory of heaven.
- ◆ ***Philippians 2: 8-11 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.***
- ◆ This is the new reality. Under the new creation, humanity is now wedded to eternity through the mediator, Jesus Christ.
- ◆ And amazingly, as the new Adam, he is the forerunner of the whole human race. What has happened to Jesus can happen to every human being (1 Corinthians 15:45).
- ◆ ***Philippians 3:20-21 But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ,²¹ who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.***

But as this verse implies, Jesus is not sitting idle now that he has returned to heaven. He is the risen Christ charged with the responsibility of completing the task of bringing fallen humanity into fellowship with God.

- ◆ As Philippians 3:21 says, He now has the ***“power that enables him to bring everything under his control.”***
- ◆ With His ascension, Jesus is enthroned as King of kings and Lord of lords. He will rule righteously until all His enemies are put under His feet (1 Corinthians 15:25) and every tongue acknowledges that Jesus Christ is Lord (Philippians 2:11).
- ◆ The Father has delegated this power to Jesus, as it is rightfully His to exercise. After all He is the one best equipped to bring about reconciliation between God and humanity.
- ◆ Not only does He know what it is like to be both divine and human, but He has also been the one to pay the supreme price in paving the way through His life, death and resurrection to bring about reconciliation between the parties.
- ◆ Of all people He is unique in that sense. It is this uniqueness that qualifies Him to fulfill the reconciling role of prophet, priest and king on behalf of mankind.
- ◆ ***Hebrews 5:7-9 During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.⁸ Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered⁹ and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him¹⁰ and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.***
- ◆ ***“Once made perfect”*** is not a reference to Jesus' character, but rather speaks of Jesus being in this unique position by what He has experienced during His earthly sojourn to qualify to be the mediator between God and humanity.
- ◆ He is the perfect candidate to fulfill the role of being prophet, priest and king acting on behalf of humanity in bringing about reconciliation between God and mankind.

Let's take a look at these three roles now that Jesus has ascended to heaven.

- ◆ The first thing we should consider about all three roles is how they are exercised.
- ◆ Surprisingly, we see little difference between how Jesus exercises His pre-resurrection ministry and His post-resurrection ministry.

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- ◆ His role may have changed from being the “suffering servant” to one of “Lord of lords,” but we see little, if any difference, in His approach to the task at hand.
 - ◆ After all, His main title still remains one of being humanity’s “Savior.”
 - ◆ Sometimes even we Christians may want Him to exercise His unlimited power as King of kings and Lord of lords with a little more gusto, and show the world who the boss is.
 - ◆ But this a God of love we are talking about and He would rather “every tongue confess He is Lord” by leading them to that admission voluntarily rather than forcing them to do it with an iron fist.
 - ◆ To restate a popular phrase, “A man convinced against their will is of the same opinion still.”
 - ◆ So it is when it comes to “love.” We cannot force another individual to love us. It has to be a personal choice.
 - ◆ To go back to our earlier story of the king who wanted to win the heart of the humble maiden by Søren Kierkegaard, the challenge now is to get the maiden to respond voluntarily to the king’s overtures of love.
 - ◆ Jesus, through His incarnation and His atoning work on behalf of humanity, has more than demonstrated God’s love for His creation.
 - ◆ The task now is to make mankind aware of the love this self-sacrificing God has demonstrated on their behalf.
 - ◆ The goal of Jesus ministry remains the same, to save the world. The hard work of providing justification and reconciliation for all humanity has been accomplished.
 - ◆ The emphasis of His ministry now changes to enlightening an oblivious humanity of what God has accomplished on their behalf and to get them to respond voluntarily to His overtures.
 - ◆ They need to be made aware of the “good news,” as that is what the “gospel” is all about.
 - ◆ And He would prefer to do it through the conquering power of love, rather than with an iron fist.
- And this, too, is why Jesus’ ascension is so important, as His removal from the scene forces us to focus our attention on the historical Jesus, the God of love who willingly joined us in our humanity, who suffered, bled and died on our behalf so that we could join Him in eternity.***
- ◆ And this is why the primary focus of the gospel writers is on the “suffering servant” rather than the “Lord of Lords” as this demonstrates for all time the enormous love God has for His children.
 - ◆ So next time we will explore how Jesus exercises these three roles of prophet, priest and king from heaven as He begins the process of spreading the gospel message.