

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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A Comparison of the Gospels Ascension

[New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]

The history of the life of our Lord Jesus upon the earth which began with His birth at Bethlehem did not end with His death but with His Ascension to heaven. Ascension is defined as “the process or action of climbing or moving upwards, rising to a position of higher importance, rank, or success” (dictionary.cambridge.org) The word is not found as such in our Bible, but the act of ascension, the process of the Lord Jesus Christ bodily going up to heaven after his death and resurrection is clearly described and amply alluded to or implied in many of our Scriptures. Ascension is one of the accepted doctrines of Christianity, central to our faith in the Lord Jesus. It is in the Gospel writings that we have a record of what Luke refers to as,

“All that Jesus had began both to do and to teach until the day in which He was taken up...” (Acts 1 :1 – 2).

When you read any of the Gospels you realise that their portraits of the Lord Jesus have their beginnings somewhere else. They are vitally linked to the Old Testament and without some knowledge of this, the Gospels cannot be understood.

For instance, the first verse of Matthew speaks of David and Abraham. The Holy Spirit shows us in the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus as the Christ or Messiah, the Son of David and King of Israel, the King coming to set up His kingdom.

The second and third verses in Mark refer to the prophets. The prophet Isaiah records God’s word: “Behold, my servant” (Isaiah 52:13).

So in Mark’s Gospel the Holy Spirit set out the Service of Jesus Christ the Son of God. He writes about the faithful Servant, the perfect workman.

The fifth verse in Luke mentions Abijah and Aaron. The perfect humanity and the sacrificial work as the sympathetic Saviour of mankind are portrayed in Luke’s Gospel.

The seventeenth and twenty-first verses in John 1 speak of Moses and Elijah. These two Old Testament Prophets were seen with the Lord Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration where a preview of His glory was permitted to the Disciples and a declaration of His Sonship was heard.

So John’s Gospel emphasises the divine aspect of the Lord Jesus as the Son of God. Understanding these points helps us to bear in mind that each of the four Gospel accounts has its own divinely intended emphasis in connection with the Person of Christ.

They are really four records of the one gospel, and so as we look at the accounts of the Ascension of the Lord Jesus, we should expect the different emphases or perspectives that are characteristics of the Gospel writers. We should also expect additional references in other Scriptures.

Let us read some of the Scriptures that are part of our consideration today: First, we pick up from

the story of The Empty Tomb in John chapter 20 when Mary Magdalene went to the tomb early and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. Then she ran back and told Peter and John. This was told to other disciples later.

“They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him.”

Verse 9 tells us:

“As yet they did not know the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead.”

Mary Magdalene was the first to see the risen Lord and in verse 17 we read:

“Jesus said to her, “Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, ‘I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God.’””

We notice in these words of the Lord Jesus Him clearly foretelling His Ascension. In His earlier teachings to His disciples, the Lord Jesus had already stated:

“Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. 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 to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also. And where I go you know, and the way you know” (John 14 :1 - 4).

Here, we do not have a description of the Ascension but an allusion to it. The Lord Jesus must go away from the earth. We know from the Lord’s teachings that His disciples did not always understand Him, for example:

“These things He said in the synagogue as He taught in Capernaum. Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard this, said, “This is a hard saying; who can understand it?” When Jesus knew in Himself that His disciples complained about this, He said to them, “Does this offend you? What then if you should see the Son of Man ascend where He was before?” (John 6:59 - 62).

And in John 7:33 we read:

“Then Jesus said to them, “I shall be with you a little while longer, and then I go to Him who sent Me.””

John 16:28,

“I came forth from the Father and have come into the world. Again, I leave the world and go to the Father.”

In Matthew’s Gospel, the Ascension is implied rather than alluded to or described - Matthew 24:30 – 31:

“Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather

together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.”

Matthew 25 :31,

“When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory.”

The title “Son of Man” is applied to the coming of the Lord Jesus in glory to Israel and to the world. It is that great event to which the Scriptures points (Matthew 16 :27).

A preview of His glory was permitted when the three Apostles saw the Lord transfigured on the mountain top (Matthew 17 :2). Also, the Lord spoke of the throne of His glory (Matthew 19:28), adding that the Apostles would sit upon twelve thrones “judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” In Matthew 26:64, the Lord told the high priest that they “will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven”. We will refer to the scriptural significance of clouds again later.

The act of the Ascension itself is described by the Holy Spirit in the following Scriptures in four different words:

Received up,
Carried up,
Taken up,
and
Ascended up.

Firstly, in Mark’s Gospel we have a brief but descriptive reference to the Ascension:

“So then, after the Lord had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs. Amen” (Mark 16 :19 - 20).

We spoke earlier about the different emphases that the Gospel writers portray. Mark presents the Lord Jesus as the perfect Servant of Jehovah who, having finished all the work given to Him on earth, is now received up, that is to say, welcomed back to the highest place of honour at the right hand of God.

Secondly, it is in the writings of Luke, the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, that we have a more detailed description of the Ascension.

Luke 24 :51-52:

“And He led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up His hands and blessed them. Now it came to pass, while He blessed them, that He was parted from them and carried up into heaven. And they worshipped Him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple praising and blessing God. Amen.”

He was carried up, Luke 24:51. Here Luke speaks of the perfect Man, victorious over death, being carried up, escorted in triumph (perhaps by angels) into heaven itself. It is worth noting here that the Lord was carried up while blessing His disciples. To us He now continues to bless His people from His place of exaltation. We’ll say a little more about this towards the end of the Talk.

Thirdly, Acts 1 :9–11:

“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.”

What we see here is the Lord went up and was taken up - by the power and glory of God. Hence the appearance of the cloud receiving Him out of the disciples' sight.

The cloud reminds us of the “Shekinah” - the cloud of glory that is associated with the presence of God in the Old and New Testaments: in the wilderness journey and on the mount of transfiguration.

He was “taken up” - in answer to the request,

“And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was” (John 17:5).

And as He was raised up from the dead by the power and glory of the Father, here we see Him taken up to heaven by the same power.

There many other places in Scripture where clouds accompanying the return of the Lord Jesus are mentioned, Acts 1:11; Matthew 24:30; Matthew 26:64; Mark 13:26; Revelation 1:7; Daniel 7:13. The clouds are an emblem of sublimity and grandeur, and perhaps this is all that is intended by these expressions, Deuteronomy 4:11; 2 Samuel 22:12; Psalm 97:2; Psalm 104:3.

Fourthly, Paul explains, in Ephesians 4 :8 -10 the doctrinal implications of the facts of the Ascension that Luke had stated.

“Therefore He says: “When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, And gave gifts to men.” (Now this, “He ascended”—what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.)”

He has ascended up. He, in humility first descended to the lower parts of the earth, now ascends up to glory in His own power far above all the heavens. In resurrection He was able to raise Himself up; He now ascends up by that same power.

One hymn by J G Deck meditates on this aspect of the Ascension:

Lord, we rejoice, that Thou art gone
To sit upon Thy Father's throne;
Thy path of shame and suffering o'er,
Thy heart shall grieve no more.

We joy to see Thee, Lord, arise
Triumphant through the opening skies;
And hear all heaven united own
Thee worthy to ascend the throne.

Lord, now we wait for Thee to come,
And take us to Thy Father's home;

What everlasting joy 'twill be
To spend eternity with Thee!

J G Deck (1802 – 84).

Conclusion

We have seen that the bodily Ascension of the Lord Jesus is a truth that the Scriptures confirm in many passages and describe in so many ways. It is more than just a historical event. We conclude by briefly remarking on three aspects concerning His Ascension:

The timing
The testimony
The teaching

Timing

Everything that the Lord Jesus did had its proper place in the timeline of His life on earth:

“But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons” (Galatians 4:4-5).

“God was manifested in the flesh, Justified in the Spirit, Seen by angels, Preached among the Gentiles, Believed on in the world, Received up in glory” (1 Timothy 3:16).

Even the Ascension did not take place straight away after the resurrection but forty days later and ten days before Pentecost. The Ascension was the fulfilment of prophecy and the verification of the Lord's own words. It was prophesied that He would ascend on high, lead captivity captive, and gave gifts to men. He himself had foretold that He should go away to heaven.

Testimony

He ascended in full view of His disciples (Acts 1:9-10). Stephen was the first believer put to death for his faith in Christ. As he was dying by stoning, he looked up into heaven and saw Jesus.

“But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and said, “Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!”” (Acts 7:55-56).

In addition to the Gospel records already discussed, there are many more Scriptures which testify to the Ascension of the Lord Jesus, including the prophecies and Apostolic writings.

Teaching

Another one of J G Deck's hymn has an appropriate application here:

O God, Thou now hast glorified
Thy holy, blest eternal Son;
The Nazarene, the Crucified,
Now sits exalted on Thy throne:
To Him in faith we cry aloud,
Worthy art Thou, O Lamb of God.

J G Deck (1802-84).

Having been raised from the dead, Christ is now glorified and seated at the right hand of God - His work on earth completed to the full satisfaction of God the Father.

“But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God” (Hebrews 10:12).

And in Philippians 2 :9 -11

“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 of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

We find in Hebrews all the information we need about the reasons why Jesus went back to heaven after His time on earth had come to an end. Collecting the statements together, we can say that Jesus is in heaven because:¹

First – of who He is. He is the Son of God (Hebrews 1:1-3).

Second – of what He is - morally perfect. There could be no moral reason for excluding Him from heaven. Heaven is the only proper terminus of the perfect life He lived upon earth (Hebrews 1 :9 and 12 :2).

Third – of what He has done on earth – His sacrificial work on the cross (Hebrews 10 :12).

Fourth – of what He is doing now in heaven - He is our Great High Priest, loving us, caring for us, answering our prayers (Hebrews 4 :14-16).

Fifth – because He is the “minister of the sanctuary.” That is, He gathers together the threads of the praises of His people and presents them to God (Hebrews 8:1-2).

Sixth – of where we are going -He is our forerunner. The fact that He is in heaven is the guarantee that those who trust Him as Saviour will also be there (Hebrews 6 :20).

Seven – because the Lord Jesus made it perfectly plain that unless He ascended to heaven, the Holy Spirit could not come down from heaven (John 16 :7).

Finally

“This same Jesus” (Acts 1:11), He who is the same yesterday, and today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8) went up visibly; He will return visibly and publicly, “every eye will see Him” (Revelation 1:7).

These truths should not be just read about or even marvelled at, necessary though that is. We should have our eyes set on the Man in glory; seek to have our lives transformed and our minds renewed to more Christ likeness. A lesson from the prophet Elisha, the condition for his receiving a double portion of Elijah’s spirit, was that he should see his ascending master.

So in our case, a realisation of the truth of Christ in glory, should cause us to seek those things that are above, ‘where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God’ (Col 3:1). Such a vision should detach our affections from things that are on earth. Like Stephen, who having seen the heavenly vision of the Son of man, asked for the forgiveness of his executioners, just as his Saviour had. Fixing our eyes on the glory of the Lord, with faces not veiled by the cares and ambitions of this earthly life, we are changed ‘into the same image, from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord’ (2 Cor 3:18).

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today Talk on Comparing the Gospels – Ascension. Talk Number T1377.

Notes

1. Adapted from: The Lord’s Ascension and the Coming of the Holy Spirit, Ernie Brown, pp 294 – 295, Scripture Truth 2024, Volume 61 No. 11, STP Publications, Crewe.

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