

May 17, 2015

Ascension Observed

Acts 1:1-11

Jesus' Ascension is Worth Remembering

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Dear Friends in Christ,

There is a saying that history is written by the winners. The implication is the winner's account might be full of exaggeration and self-promotion. I would agree we need to be cautious of this in the records men have recorded about historical events.

There are no exaggerations or self-promotions in this written historical account St. Luke produced for his friend, Theophilus. It is an account written by a winner in order that other winners could remember the victory. The victory needs no embellishment because it stands on its own merit. Luke did not write from his perspective of the event. He wrote by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

We are victorious in the Son of God who became the Son of Man, completed his work in triumph, and then physically returned to heaven to rule over all things under his feet. He will return from there to gather us, his church, and in the meantime he equips us as his witnesses to the ends of the earth.

Jesus' Ascension is Worth Remembering. Because of his preparation for it. Because of his commission on it. Because of his return from it.

Jesus prepared for his return to the full use of his divine power and authority by giving up their use for a time. This was the time of his humiliation that began with his conception and birth in Bethlehem. The Son of God descended as Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "What does he 'ascended' except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions." [4:9]

The Son of God descended to keep the commandments, then suffer and die for our sins. We do not always put the Father first in our lives. Jesus did. We do not honor our parents and superiors. Jesus did. We hurt and harm our own bodies and do not always befriend our neighbors. We may get upset when those we have helped take advantage of us. Jesus helped people and still loved them when they did not deserve it.

Luke describes the preparation Jesus made for his ascension with this description, "after his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave them many convincing proofs that he was alive." Jesus paid for those sins and the Father accepted his payment. His preparation for his ascension ended with his death on the cross. His burial testifies to the reality of his death from which the Father delivered him. Because the Father delivered his Son from death he also has delivered us from sin and death. "Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord." [Rms 7:25] The Father raised Jesus from the dead in victory, his victory and ours.

Jesus' ascension is worth remembering. It followed the successful completion of God's Son's mission to redeem us lost and condemned creatures. Even though their Savior would no longer be with them physically, the good news of that successful mission would go out to the ends of the earth. Jesus' ascension is worth remembering because of his commission on it.

The disciples were eyewitnesses. "He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God." Jesus told them to remain in Jerusalem and he would pour out the Holy Spirit as he had promised. Jesus had to ascend before the Holy Spirit came on them to the carry out their great commission to "the ends of the earth."

We notice that Jesus' words about being his witnesses in an ever widening circle like ripples in a pond beginning in Jerusalem were not in the form of a request. He did not ask them if they would like to do it. It was not a command. It is a statement of promise, "You will be my witnesses."

Jesus would give them the power of Holy Spirit to do that. No, they would not help him restore some earthly greatness to Israel with a palace and throne on which he would sit and rule in Jerusalem. The disciples show their need for the Holy Spirit in their commission in this weakness of understanding. Their patient Lord gently rebuked them and the church today from trying to figure out God's timing for things. "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority."

Jesus' ascension is worth remembering because of the commission on it. It is our commission. It is not to help Jesus establish a great earthly kingdom of righteousness and peace. It is not to spend our time trying to figure out exactly when and how the Spirit will bless the Word we share. It is not to try and know when Jesus will return. Those things are in the Father's knowledge and control. Our great commission built on his ascension is to witness to his death and resurrection. It is to proclaim the good news of forgiveness and salvation in Christ alone. It is to teach the nations all things he has commanded us.

This commission is not forever. We know that by Jesus' promise through the angels, "This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." Jesus' ascension is worth remembering because of his return from it.

When a loved one goes away and promises to come back, we live the days until that return in eager expectation. We certainly can't wait for them by standing around doing nothing except look for them. We are busy in the activities of our lives even as we watch.

This is why Jesus physical return to heaven, even as he fills all things as God and man, is something we want to remember. He came first to leave in triumph. He comes again in triumph so we can leave with him this time for our eternal home. In these days in between we are busy carrying out our commission. We are busy and looking. We do not see his body though it is here with us as he promised, "I am with you always."

Jesus' ascension sadly does not get the celebration it deserves along with Christmas and Easter. It is just as important none the less. Jesus was born to die. Jesus died to live. Jesus lives at God's right hand to rule all things for our good and will return visibly.

Jesus is the winner who has written the history of our redemption and salvation. It is a history of victory without embellishment or self-glorification. It stands on its own merit and gives all glory to God where it rightfully belongs. Amen. <SDG>