

Truth for Today

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The Ascension and Coming of Holy Spirit

Throughout the Bible, there are pairs of events which are linked closely together. The first and second comings of the Lord Jesus. His life and His death. His death and resurrection. And, one of the most important pairs, the Lord's ascension to heaven 40 days after His resurrection and the descent of the Holy Spirit from heaven on the day of Pentecost, the 50th day from when Jesus rose from among the dead. The relation of these two miraculous events is so important that we are going to spend this session thinking in some depth about it.

We start from our normal Christian standpoint. We accept the Bible to be our authority for what we believe, in substance and in detail. First of all, then, did the Lord Jesus expect to ascend to heaven when His work on earth was finished? Indeed He did. Three times in John's Gospel He spoke of His ascension. In John 3:13: "No man hath ascended up to heaven, but He that came down from heaven even the Son of man Who is in heaven." In John 6:62 we read: "What and if ye shall see the Son of man ascend up where He was before?" Then, on the morning of His resurrection, He said to Mary Magdalene, "Touch Me not; for I am not yet ascended to My Father: but go to My brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto My Father and your Father; and to My God and your God." (John 20:17). It is quite clear, then, that the Lord Jesus fully expected to ascend back to heaven when His work on earth was finished.

The next question that comes to mind is, "Did it happen?" Oh, yes. It happened all right. Let us turn to the historical record in the Gospels. Mark says, "So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, He was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God." (Mark 16:19). Luke records, "And (Jesus) led them out as far as to Bethany, and He lifted up His hands and blessed them. And it came to pass, while He blessed them, He was parted from them, and carried up into heaven" (Luke 24:50-51). In the book of Acts, which is the continuation of the Gospel by Luke, the record begins from where the Gospel left off. "The former treatise have I made, O, Theophilus, of all that Jesus began to do and teach, Until the day in which He was taken up" (Acts 1:1-2). Again, in verses 8 to 11, "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto Me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth. And when He had spoken these things, while they beheld, 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; Which also said, 'Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into heaven.'"

Notice here the double link. His first coming is linked with His second coming. And the coming down of the Holy Spirit from heaven is linked with both the Lord's ascension to heaven and His coming again from heaven. We shall return to these links later.

All right, then. The Lord expected to ascend to heaven after His death and resurrection. Then, the Bible gives the clear record that it actually happened. The next thing to consider is, is the fact important enough to be included in the body of teaching which we have in the New Testament Epistles?

In Ephesians 4:8-10, we read, "Wherefore He saith, When He ascended up on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. (Now that He ascended, what is it but that He also descended first into the lower parts of the earth?). He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that He might fill all things."

That statement draws a quotation from Psalm 68 written by David over a thousand years before Jesus came into the world. The Apostle Paul affirms the ascension of the Lord Jesus to heaven, after His death and resurrection, as being the fulfilment of the prophetic statement of Psalm 68.

Then, when the Apostle Paul wrote to the younger man Timothy, he summarised the revelation of God that was given to men in Christ trying saying; "God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles believed on in the world. Received up in glory." (1 Timothy 3:16). What a marvellous comment on the climax of the Lord's life upon earth! "Received up in glory!" Some people use the term "the glory" as a synonym for heaven. Fair enough! But, here, Paul is not speaking about a destination, or the terminus of a journey. He is not speaking

about a place at all. It is more the manner of His reception into heaven. As we would say, "He was given a glorious reception." And rightly so! Paul accepts the fact of the Lord's ascension and comments on the manner of it.

Turning to the descent of the Holy Spirit from heaven, let us take the same approach as we did with the Lord's ascension. When Jesus lived on earth, did He give any indication that He expected the Holy Ghost to descend from heaven at any stage? Three times over, in that great upper room discourse recorded in John's Gospel chapters 13 to 16, He told the disciples clearly that the Holy Spirit would surely come.

- In 14:26, He spoke of "the Comforter, the Holy Ghost, Whom the Father will send in My Name."
- In 15:26, He said, "But when the Comforter is come, Whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth."
- Then in 16:13 the Lord said, "when He, the Spirit of truth is come."

Now, the scripture says, "A threefold cord is not quickly broken." (Ecclesiastes 4:12). Then, the Lord Himself said, "In the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established." (Matthew 18:16). In particular, it is always vital to see that when the persons of the Godhead, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are seen to be working in concert, what is happening is very important. Here in these three chapters, the Lord says, "The Father will send the Spirit, I will send Him, and He will come of His own accord." Oh, yes, before the event, the Lord stresses that the descent of the Holy Spirit is so important that it will receive the united attention of all persons of the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

As to the facts of the descent of the Holy Spirit from heaven, the Bible is equally plain. How dramatic is the account! How graphic! Let us read from Acts 2:1-4. "And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance."

This caused great consternation amongst those who heard about it, but the Apostle Peter explained what was happening. Reading from verses 14 to 18, we have: "But Peter, standing up with the eleven, lifted up his voice, and said unto them, Ye men of Judea, and all ye that dwell at Jerusalem, be this known unto you, and hearken to my words: For these are not drunken as ye suppose, seeing it is but the third hour of the day. But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel; And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of My Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams: And on My servants and on My handmaidens I will Pour out in those days of My Spirit, and they shall prophecy."

So there you are. The descent of the Holy Spirit to earth, factually recorded by Luke in Acts 2, had actually been foretold by the prophet Joel more than 800 years before it happened. And it happened because God said that it would happen, and He ensured that it did happen.

Now, where are we up to? We have considered the expectation of the Lord's ascension and the Holy Spirit's descent from heaven. Then, we confirmed the historical facts. We must now consider the reasons for these amazing events and, indeed, the results flowing from them.

First of all, then, why has Jesus gone back to heaven? It is basic to the Christian faith that Jesus went back to heaven because His work on earth was finished, and finished to the full satisfaction of God. In Hebrews 10:12, the writer says about Jesus: "this man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever sat down on the right hand of God." Indeed, because of the special purpose for which the Epistle to the Hebrews was written, we can get therein all the confirmation we need about the reasons why Jesus went back to heaven after His time on earth came to an end. Collecting the statements together, we can say:

- First, Jesus is in heaven because of Who He is. He is the Son of God. Hebrews 1:3.
- Second, Jesus is in heaven because 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, Jesus is in heaven because of what He has done on earth, the work of the cross. Hebrews 10:12.
- Fourth, Jesus is in heaven because 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.
- Fifth, Jesus is in heaven 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. It is like the conductor of a great orchestra, blending together into one great symphony all the notes produced by the individual instruments. Hebrews 8:2.

- Sixth, Jesus is in heaven because of where we are going. He is our forerunner. The fact the He is in heaven is the guarantee that those who trust Him as Saviour will also be there. Hebrews 6:20.
- Seventh, the Lord Jesus made it perfectly plain that unless He ascended to heaven, the Holy Spirit could not come down from heaven. In John 16:7. The Lord is recorded as saying: "I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send Him unto you."

So apart from all the other reasons, Jesus ascended to heaven so that the Holy Spirit could come down from heaven.

We shall have to be equally brief in seeing what the Bible says about the reasons for the Holy Spirit coming down from heaven. When the Lord, Jesus told His disciples that He had to leave them, they were absolutely devastated. Difficult though it was for them to understand it, He told them, "When I've gone back to heaven you will, in fact be better off than while I have been with you. Yes, I know. I've taken care of you, provided for you, led you, guided you, solved your problems, overcome your difficulties. You will certainly miss Me. But, the One Who will take My place will look after you just as well as I have ever done. In fact, in some ways you will be even better off in His care than you have been in Mine."

As with the Lord's ascension, so with the Holy Spirit's descent. Much of what we need to learn is concentrated together so that we can readily take it in. We need to go back to those three grand chapters in John's Gospel, 14, 15 and 16.

John 14:26 says: "the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost ... shall ... bring ... to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you." We must remember that the Lord's words were directed particularly to His disciples who had been with Him for over three years. By extension, what was promised to them is also available to us.

John 15:26 says: "When the Comforter is come ... He shall testify of Me: And ye also shalt bear witness." The direct fulfilment of this is clearly seen in the history of the early years of the Christian church given in the book of Acts, beginning with Peter's preaching on the day of Pentecost itself.

John 16:13-14 tell us: "When He, the Spirit of truth, is come, He will guide you into all truth ... He will shew you things to come, He shall glorify Me." How wonderful for the disciples to be assured by the Lord that all these benefits would accrue because He was ascending to heaven and the Holy Spirit was descending from heaven to take His place. Of course, He, the Lord, had been with them physically. As the Apostle John says in 1 John 1:1: "We have heard Him, we have seen Him with our own eyes, we have looked upon Him, and with our own hands we have handled Him." The Holy Spirit was to be with them as a spiritual presence, but none the less real for that. How about us? Let us take the Lord's promises again, one by one. "He shall...bring...to your remembrance whatsoever I have said unto you."

Where do we get the record of what the Lord said to His disciples? In the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. As we read them, meditate about them, pray over them, the Holy Spirit makes the truth of them good to our souls. "He shall testify of Me; And ye also shall bear witness." If the direct fulfilment of that is given in the Hook of Acts, surely any valid Christian witness now can only be in that self-same power, the power of the Holy Spirit. "He will guide you into all truth." It is abundantly plain that this promise is fulfilled as the Holy Spirit helps us to understand the complex spiritual truths contained in the New Testament Epistles. "He will shew you things to come." both Old and New Testaments of the Bible are full of prophecies that can only be fulfilled in and by our Lord Jesus Christ. As we read in 2 Corinthians 1:20: "All the promises of God in Him are yea, and in Him Amen."

These prophecies come to full fruition in the book of Revelation. The Holy Spirit alone can help us to see the significance of these prophecies. "He shall glorify Me." The overall object of the presence and work of the Holy Spirit is to glorify Christ, to make much of Him, to enhance our appreciation of Him. How well He does His work. It is very obvious from this that we need to read all the Bible, and in particular all the New Testament, not just our favourite little bits, if the Holy Spirit's work in us is to be achieved, as outlined by the Lord.

One last question. Is it realistic to expect that what the Lord said would happen did really happen? Of course, it should be sufficient for us that the Lord said it would happen. However, the Lord is, as ever, exceedingly gracious in explaining to us the validity of what He says.

First of all, the Christian church was inaugurated by the Holy Ghost Himself in that great day of Pentecost, when He first came down from heaven. 1 Corinthians 12:13 tells us about that great historical event.

Secondly, the Holy Spirit indwells each individual Christian believer to empower him or her to get the benefit of all the Lord's promises.

Thirdly, He indwells the Christian church as a whole, so that Christ might be glorified in the way the church lives and acts and works together.

Fourthly, the Bible itself, the Word of God, was brought into being by the power of the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21).

Fifthly, the Lord has promised that the Holy Spirit is here to help us as long as we are here, needing His help. "I will pray the Father and He shall give you another Comforter, that He may abide with you for ever." (John 14:16). He has been here, helping Christians, empowering Christians, guiding Christians since He Himself brought the Christian church into being on that remarkable day of Pentecost. That help will continue to be available as long as there are Christians on earth, that is, until the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us pray.

We thank Thee, Lord Jesus, for sending the Holy Spirit into our hearts. We pray for grace to use His help, whenever we need it. We ask this in Thy precious Name. Amen.

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