

THE ASCENSION

We have just celebrated the anniversaries of our Lord's crucifixion and resurrection and Philip has well highlighted their significance to the master plan of God for mankind. Today we remember the next major historical event that took place just forty days after the resurrection of Jesus and ten days before the celebration of Pentecost. For reasons that will be discussed later, the Ascension of Jesus to the right hand of God seldom gets the attention it deserves.

The event was foretold many times in the Old Testament, particularly in the Psalms and described vividly in the New Testament by writers like Luke and Paul who sees its impact on believers like this:

Ephesians 4:7-16

⁷ But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. ⁸ This is why it^[a] says:

“When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people.”^[b]

⁹ (What does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions^[c]? ¹⁰ He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) ¹¹ So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

¹⁴ Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶ From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Overview of Master Plan

The scriptures outline the great master plan of God. Perhaps, at times not quite as clearly as we would like but never the less an overview of what God intends to, and will indeed, achieve. That of necessity is central to the role of Jesus Christ himself; his incarnation, his ministry on earth, his death, his resurrection, his ascension to the right hand of God, his return to earth as the all-conquering king and finally the presentation of a now, wrinkle free church, to his Father . Only when all these stages have been accomplished will the plan have become a reality. Should it fail at any stage then God's great plan for mankind will have become the greatest disaster of all time.

So far so good! True to God's promises Jesus has come to earth in human form; has delivered the wonderful news of a time when the entire world will become subject to his reign, a time in which the love and justice of God will replace the hatred and corruption of man. Although he lived a sinless life he died for the past, present and future sins of the whole world. He died in worldly disgrace so that all of mankind, subject to the condition of belief, could enter into this kingdom with honour.

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The Perceived Reality of His Death

However, that is not how the world around him saw the death of Jesus. To the ordinary man in the street, it seemed to be the end of something that could have led to something good, to his enemies it was the end of a scourge that threatened their very existence. Although the majority of the Jews of the day believed in some form of afterlife it became so intangible when confronted by the stark horror of death.

And so it was with the twelve disciples who had been so close to Jesus for more than three years. Although they listened with interest as Jesus often explained that he would die for the sins of the world and rise again on the third day it was all too much for them to comprehend. All became so much *pie in the sky* when faced by the reality of death.

Just days before his death so many had heralded the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem as the long awaited Messiah but their dream disappeared as HE was nailed to the cross. Then of course there were Mary and Martha who had seen Jesus restore their own brother Lazarus to life just a short time before, sadly for them the life restorer had also succumbed to death.

For the next two days it certainly seemed as if death had again emerged victorious. The Jewish ruling body, the Sanhedrin, who initiated the death sentence and had it validated by the Romans must have felt that their belief, that there is no resurrection, had once again vindicated. The populace who just days before, were ready to crown a newly found Messiah, were again getting ready to resume their search. The enemies of Jesus, including the religious leaders of the day felt that the chief threat to their well-being had passed before any lasting damage had been done.

As for Mary and Martha, they were preparing to pay their final respects to their friend by embalming the body of Jesus. The disciples, who had fled the crucifixion scene as cowards, were getting ready to put an unfortunate episode of life behind them by returning to the occupations they had left to follow a born loser. But those sombre days were not to last.

The Dawn of Faith

True to his word Jesus did arise in bodily form on the third day, that first Easter Sunday, the day that was destined to turn the world upside down. At last the disciples were to really believe and understand that their life with Jesus had not ended, but in reality, was about to begin.

Until the resurrection became a fact, the faith of his disciples was little stronger than that of his Jewish countrymen who orchestrated his execution. When they confronted him with evil intent shortly before his death Jesus said,

John 11:36-38

“-what about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world? Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, ‘I am God’s Son’? ³⁷ Do not believe me unless I do the works of my Father. ³⁸ But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father.”

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Through a miracle, the resurrection became a fact, and only then did the disciples see the one whom they had had grown to love, as God's one answer to the problems of mankind. At long last they really believed **that all things are possible with God.**

From that time onwards they were equipped by the Holy Spirit to play their part in the plan of God and in the process were transformed from snivelling cowards to men willing to give their lives for the sake of their cause.

Why the Neglect?

To the human mind all aspects of God's plan cut across what it can accept, as being possible. Up to the point of the crucifixion, the world at large saw Jesus as strange man on an even stranger crusade. It took the resurrection to challenge that view. The natural view was to deny that the resurrection had ever taken place by advancing all types of theories about how the disciples had disposed of the body. But as supporting evidence grew, the fact of the resurrection could be denied no longer.

The next step of denial was to point to the absurdity of the ascension. Whereas a considerable number of people had witnessed the resurrected Christ very few were to see him ascend into the heavens forty days after his resurrection. Because the focus is on the one, Jesus, and not the witnesses, we are not given precise numbers. 1 Corinthians 15 assures us that at least 500 came into contact with the preaching of the risen Christ. From other scriptures it is evident that far fewer saw him defy gravity by being taken up into the heavens. A reasonable guess may be between twelve and one hundred.

The world view is that the ascension was scientifically impossible. The Christian view is that Christ merely did, what he said he would do.

Psalm 110:1,

The Lord[Father] says to my Lord[Son]:

“Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.”

For the believer, the ascension becomes a proven historical fact when Christ again does as he said he would do by immersing Jerusalem in the Holy Spirit just ten days later. Meanwhile the world will persist in the absurdity of the ascension until Jesus reappears, as he says he will, fully visible to the whole world. When he does so, the foundation of the secular argument will be blown wide open.

The Fact of the Ascension

That grand old physician described the ascension like this.

Acts 1:4-10

On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. ⁵ For John baptized with^[a] water, but in a few days you will be baptized with^[b] the Holy Spirit.”

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⁶ Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

⁷ He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

⁹ After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

¹⁰ They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ¹¹ “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? 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.”

This time the disciples did not flee and at the appointed time were to be found in Jerusalem full of expectation.

The crucifixion was the final act of Christ’s redemptive ministry. He had faithfully done all that his Father had sent him to do. The works of salvation were done; all that remained was for the people to believe. The physical body of Jesus, the one that the people could see, feel and touch had served its earthly purpose. As the works of salvation ended the works of reconciliation were to begin. It was time for the church, backed and empowered by the presence of the Holy Spirit, to step up to the plate to mature and harvest the fruits of salvation. Time had come for Jesus to return to the right hand of his Father to concentrate on the next stage of the plan.

Why Did He Have to go?

At this point it seems reasonable to ask why did Jesus have to go? Could he not have executed his Father’s plan just as well, if no better by staying on earth?

Human expediency would suggest that now things are beginning to happen on earth why depart the scene. As so often is the case the simple answer is found in Isaiah 55
“My ways are not your ways

When God says he will do something we can be certain that he will. However, *the how will he do it*, usually remains a mystery until it is done in His way and in His time. The achievements of God come through the involvement of all three persons of the Godhead. And it is with the great plan of salvation. The Father devised the plan and the Son died as an acceptable sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. Jesus defines his role in John 3:17; **“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”**

Jesus did as the Father commanded only to be crucified for his trouble

As we have already seen, Jesus died with no more than a handful, if indeed any, genuine believers. Had he not been resurrected the number of believers could never have grown. The Plan of Salvation would have ended in total disaster. But that was never what God intended.

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It was time for the Holy Spirit who had already played a cameo role in the birth of Jesus and a supporting role in the earthly work of Jesus to move to centre stage. Romans 8:11;

“And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.”

Here is a dual purpose scripture, explaining the source of the power behind the resurrection of Jesus and at the same time reassuring us that our fondest hope will one day become a reality through that same power.

Rather than the role of the Holy Spirit diminishing at this point, Jesus in John 15:26 outlines the part that the Spirit will play until he personally returns to earth.

“When the Counselor [referring of course to the Holy Spirit] comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me.”

Jesus goes into greater detail in the following chapter,

John 16:5-11,

⁵ but now I am going to him who sent me. None of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’

⁶ Rather, you are filled with grief because I have said these things.

Here we have a gentle rebuke because the concern of the disciples was limited to their personal concerns without thought given to the work of God.

⁷ But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.

Here Jesus gives the reason why he must leave. It is good for them, and necessary for him, to leave, if the plan of salvation is to move on to the next stage. Their growth is dependent on the indwelling of the Spirit which is dependent on the return of the Son to the Father.

⁸ When he comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: ⁹ about sin, because people do not believe in me; ¹⁰ about righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; ¹¹ and about judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.

As stated the Holy Spirit will convict the world of sin, the greatest of which is non-belief in the One sent to save it. How will he do this? Although all things are possible with God wherever possible He chooses to use those who already believe, and by grace been equipped, to share the reason for their hope. As we have already seen it took the resurrection to bring forth the first wave of believers. Jesus instruction to them was given in Matthew 28:19,

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

Three persons of the one Godhead, all with a common will. A designer, one to obediently execute it and one to bring it to fruition. At a personal level Peter says in 1Peter 3:15;

“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.”

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Note that it does say everyone, all that may have been impacted by our lifestyle and inspired by the Holy Spirit to learn what really makes us tick. Just as it took the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to empower Peter's Pentecost message, it takes the same power to make our testimony effective. Like a good farmer, the Holy Spirit, both prepares fertile soil and uses the best seed available; the ingredients necessary for the best crop. We are speaking of the one who would never have come had the ascension never taken place.

But Jesus had more to say on the credentials of the Holy Spirit.

John 16:13-16:

¹³ But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you. ¹⁵ All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you." ¹⁶ Jesus went on to say, "In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me."

Here Jesus is giving an assurance that the Holy Spirit is coming to take over from where he left off. No newcomer, but another member of the team without any intent to introduce fresh ideas or to assert new authority but to faithfully follow the same blue print that Jesus had worked from. The perfect blueprint that had drawn up by the father. The same blueprint that we have been created to follow.

The final verse, when spoken, left the disciples in total confusion but after further explanation the mist began to clear and in verse 31 Jesus was able to say, "**You believe at last!**" But at the crucifixion the belief again disappeared into the mist. It took the resurrection, for even, those who had lived with him for more than three years to really believe that Jesus was the promised Messiah.

As the plan of God unfolds each step is validated by the one to follow it. It took the resurrection to make sense of the crucifixion. Likewise it took the ascension to better understand the resurrection. In turn, the ascension is authenticated by Pentecost when the promised Holy Spirit arrives as planned. All these stages are now proven historical fact.

As the now present, Holy Spirit goes about his work we have to wait until the return of Christ before we can fully evaluate his work. Although all believers possess the Holy Spirit living within them, not all believers have the faith to allow the indwelling Spirit to affect their lives. As we look around we see fruits of the Spirit on all sides but at present these, fall far short of fulfilling the plan of God. Time alone, will be the final judge, yet the genuine believer has the foresight to appreciate the outcome as an ever increasing number of believers have the faith to become the people they were created to be by surrendering their wills to the will of God.

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Does Jesus Really Leave Us?

As we have seen Jesus explained that he must leave his disciples and true to his word has done so. But how does that action fit with scriptures like John 15:4 and Hebrews 13:5 which read, John 15:4, **“Remain in me and I will remain in you”** and Hebrews 13:5, **“Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”**

On the surface they appear to directly contradict the action taken by Jesus. If that is so, how can we believe anything that Jesus ever said and the great plans of God are worth no more than the paper that they may be written upon.

I am confident that you already know the answer. From Romans 8:9-11 we can safely deduce that the indwelling of Christ and the Spirit are identical you cannot have the one without the other.

The disciples watched as Jesus ascended into the heavens but his Spirit was to return within ten days to exert a miraculous influence on the events of the day of Pentecost. Baxter Kruger offers this explanation,

The miracle of [Jesus' birth] is that the Son of God became human. The miracle of the ascension is that he continues to be human. He sits now, as a human being, at the Father's right hand, knowing his Father and sharing all things with Him in the fellowship of the Spirit.^[1]

No longer subject to the constraints of a physical body which could be only in one place at any given time, he was now free to be anywhere, or everywhere at any time, according to need. Little wonder did he say, **“It is good for you if I go”**

The Triumph of the Ascension.

Having seen why Jesus had to go, and how he went, it is time to ask, what is he doing now apart from his continuing work on earth? But before considering this we should learn what is meant by the opening passage from Ephesians which among other things said, in verse 8, **“When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people.”**

In his inspired message on the crucifixion and the resurrection Phillip made plain, how in his earthly life, Jesus confronted every form of evil, including death, without being overcome by any of it. Although the world view is that Jesus died as a born loser, the reality is that he emerged as the greatest victor of all time. He has taken all the evils of the world captive and although their influences continue for a time, he will finally remove every trace of them at a time of his choosing.

Until that time comes the believer must live within a world of great evil secure in the knowledge that they too have an ever increasing share in the victory of the risen Messiah. As we submit to the will of God we find that little by little our evil ways are disappearing and that when we are in danger of being overcome, an unseen hand invariably appears to provide the strength we lack.

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Then it says, **He gave gifts to his people.** There is little doubt that the greatest gifts of God are in order faith and the Holy Spirit culminating in eternal life. But there are other gifts such as those mentioned in Galatians 5:23, the gifts which are, or will become, the tools of our trade. Sometimes it is through the distribution of these gifts that we best see the oneness of Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

Although we best know them as fruits of the Spirit we find many passages where Jesus claims to be the benefactor. Whichever the case, they are the same fruits or gifts coming from a common origin.

So What Else Is Jesus Doing Now?

Thus far we have been dealing with history, the events that have passed; now we come to things yet to happen. Whilst it is certain that such things will come to pass, we always seem to run into trouble when we speculate on **how** they will come to pass. The twin truths of, “**All things are possible with God**” and “**My ways are not your ways**” always seem to bring us undone.

But although having said that, I do believe that Jesus has given a broad outline of what he is now doing, apart from his continuing involvement in the work of the Holy Spirit. Let us go back to **Ephesians 4:11-13,**

¹¹ So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Here we have a picture of the type of organisation that leads to the smooth functioning of the body it represents. Dropping down to verse 16,

¹⁶ From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

As we grow older we look back to the days of our youth, when at least, most of the parts of our bodies functioned as they should. The verse looks forward to the fullness of the body of Christ, the church, where all parts forever remain in perfect working order.

As Christians we are destined to become an integral part of that body. God loves variety and I fervently believe that each one of us is being prepared for a role that we will be able to play better than any other person that has ever lived or will live. If you find that difficult to believe, reflect on the reason why no two persons have identical fingerprints, voices or DNA's.

Jesus describes how each succeeding generation will be built up through properly trained people to, “**Equip his people for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up.**” As one generation is equipped, they will equip the next and so forth. Then finally we are all perfectly fitted together into that beautiful patchwork quilt type of body. Most likely we will not play a dominant part but, even if our destiny is to be as lowly as a hair of the head, let us strive to be a hair that will not fall out at the first sign of stress.

I could go on and on but the further I go the more my picture will become blurred. But this I do know, **1 Corinthians 2:9,**

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⁹ However, as it is written: “What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived”^[a]—the things God has prepared for those who love him—

So do not let us get too far ahead of ourselves and patiently wait for God to show us the real thing.

Meanwhile Christ is at the right hand of God also acting as our High Priest, holding the door open so that at all times we have instant access to the ear of our father. What a far cry from the rigmarole of Old Testament times. Because there was an ascension such things have become a reality.

The ascension is not an earth shattering event as were the crucifixion and resurrection, but like them it did forever; change the direction of human destiny. It might not have the spectacular appeal of a glorious Second Coming but it should nevertheless be understood and appreciated as an integral and indispensable stage in the plan of God for the salvation of mankind.

Wonderful times are ahead! Let us give thanks!