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KNOWING
CHRISTIANITY

THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH
AND HOW THEY SHAPE DAILY LIFE

New Edition



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HIS ASCENSION, OUR FUTURE HOPE

THE PRESENTATION OF CHRIST today by Christian preachers and teachers tends to move straight from the historical fact of the resurrection to the contemporary encounter with the risen Lord. This sequence of themes is meant partly to challenge skeptics who deny miracles and partly to engage liberals, formalists, moralists, Jews, New Agers and adherents of other religions for whom the Jesus of history is a great teacher and a wonderful example but not a living Savior. Let us by all means go on telling people that Jesus' resurrection is one of the best-attested facts of history, for indeed it is. Let us also continue to tell them that Jesus is alive, well, accessible and present with every believer as guide and counselor, master and friend, for that is true too. But let us not lose sight of the fact that the resurrection was the prelude to the ascension. We should never forget that from the moment Jesus left the tomb, he was heading for the heavenly throne. The forty days on earth should be seen as a stopover en route.

RESURRECTION AND ASCENSION

The Apostles' Creed ties Christ's resurrection directly to his ascension and heavenly reign. "The third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven and sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty." The resurrection began and the ascension completed his return to the glory he knew before.



Jesus' first conversation after being raised from death showed this clearly. Mary of Magdala, meeting him alive again, wanted to embrace him. Matthew 28:9 says that she and the other Mary did what one did in those days to show affection to a superior: they got down and grasped his feet. But Jesus said to them, "Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brethren, and say to them, 'I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God'" (Jn 20:17, NASB). Jesus' words were not a cold-hearted brushoff but a compassionate reeducation. The Marys, and the rest of his disciples with them, had to get used to practicing fellowship with a Savior whom they could not touch or even see, for he would shortly ascend to heaven and so withdraw from human sight till his second coming.

INCARNATION AND MYSTERY

The resurrection and ascension involve mystery—basically, the mystery of incarnation itself. What immediate changes in the human body of the Son of God did his resurrection bring? Continuity was evident: the risen Lord looked and sounded the same as before; he was solid flesh and bone, ate food (Lk 24:39-43), and could be touched and held (Mt 28:9; Jn 20:27). But change was evident too: he could vanish and appear as it were from nowhere, even passing through locked doors (Lk 24:31, 36; Jn 20:19, 26). Some guess that Jesus' body became immaterial and invisible at the moment of the resurrection but rematerialized in some way for each of his postresurrection encounters. That certainly goes beyond the biblical evidence and arguably raises more problems than it removes. It is soberer and probably sounder to think of the resurrection as the reanimating, with enhanced powers, of a visible, material, physical organism that was destined for further transformation when the Savior, whose body it was, ascended to his Father's throne.



What exactly happened to Jesus in the ascension? The disciples' perception of this was that after he commissioned and blessed them (Lk 24:50; Acts 1:8), a cloud came down (a sign of the Father being present to act, as at the transfiguration, Luke 9:34-36), and Jesus went up—up into the cloud, leaving them staring skyward (Acts 1:9-10). That upward movement signified not only that the Father was withdrawing the Son from this world order and taking him home but also that he was advancing the Son to new dignity (as when we speak of someone's "going up in the world"). So Christ's ascension implies Christ's ascendancy; it is as if, having traveled successfully in the firm's interest, the Son was now recalled to headquarters to become managing director.

Thus the risen Lamb returned to glory to be enthroned at the Father's right hand, in the Grand Vizier position at the ancient Persian court, the place of executive government in the monarch's name. And there he reigns today, as Lord of the entire universe. As Jesus said himself, the Father has committed all authority in heaven and on earth into his hand (Mt 28:18; Jn 5:20-23, 26-27). And "he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet" (1 Cor 15:25).

But what should we make of Jesus' bodily exit in the cloud? It was certainly miraculous, involving a unique exercise of divine power, just as his entry into the world by virgin birth had done, but what sort of miracle was it? We should not think of Jesus as the first space traveler, zooming instantaneously through light years of distance away from us. We should find our clue, rather, in the realization that after his resurrection the three dimensions of space that confine us confined him no more. C. S. Lewis spoke of the Son being withdrawn through a "fold" in space, like an actor who, having taken his bow, appears to vanish into a fold in the stage curtain (actually, of course, stepping into the gap between the two curtains). This image gives us perhaps the best idea we can form of the mystery involved here.



The fact to be grasped is that though Jesus' *personal* presence is now available through the Holy Spirit to all who call on him everywhere, his *bodily* presence is gone. Physically, Jesus has returned to heaven, there to serve as his Father's right-hand man (how apt that phrase!) until he reappears to bring judgment.

No doubt Jesus' body in heaven is now "glorious" (Phil 3:21), shining as it did at the transfiguration. Something more has happened to it through the ascension, though we will have to wait till we ourselves get to heaven to find out just what.

REIGN AND INTERCESSION

The key to understanding Jesus' present life in heaven, and with it his precious life on earth, is to grasp that he is there, as once he was here, to intercede for us. *Us* in this phrase, as always in the New Testament, means not the human race as such but past, present and future believers, all whom God has chosen to save. He intercedes in our interest in a way that guarantees our welfare by ensuring that what he died to secure for us actually becomes ours. The Son does not supplicate the Father on our behalf in uncertainty as to whether his requests will be granted. He speaks to the Father from the throne on which the Father has set him, fully aware that his will for our good is the Father's will also. Jesus' ongoing intercession for his people is therefore sovereignly efficacious.

What benefits does his intercession bring us? Quite simply, every benefit that relates to our relationship with our triune God, from every standpoint, at every level. On the one hand, Jesus' intercession maintains our justified status (Rom 8:34). On the other hand, Jesus' intercession ensures that when we approach his throne in our weakness and inadequacy, we find it to be a "throne of grace" where we "receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Heb 4:16). No spiritual benefit of any kind comes to any



child of God apart from the mediatorial intercession of Jesus the Lord.

Because Jesus has ascended to heaven, we can be sure that we too have a hope of heaven. On this Jesus was explicit and the whole New Testament is emphatic. “Father,” prayed Jesus, “I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory” (Jn 17:24). “We shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is,” declares John (1 Jn 3:2). For Christians the life to come will be the fullest enjoyment of the covenant-care relationship proclaimed in the precious words “The LORD is my shepherd” (Ps 23:1), for “the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Rev 7:17). This hope, which brings joy at all times and in all circumstances, allows us to approach our own mortality with a forthright boldness that is unique to Christian believers and stands in stark contrast to the common attitude in Western society.

FACING DEATH

In today’s world death is the great unmentionable, just as sex was a hundred years ago. Apart from cynical parading of a sense of life’s triviality (the Grateful Dead: “he who dies with the most toys wins”) and egoistic expressions of belief in reincarnation (the New Age), death is not ordinarily spoken of outside of medical circles. To invite discussion of it is felt to be bad form. It has become conventional to think as if we are all going to live in this world forever and to view every case of bereavement as a reason for doubting the goodness of God. We must all know, deep down, that this is ridiculous, but we do it all the same. And in doing it we part company with the Bible and with a basic principle of right living, namely, that only when you know how to die can you know how to live. To recover Christian consistency here is an urgent need.



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