

May 17, 2015 – Acts 1:1-11 (Epistle: Ephesians 1:15-23 Gospel: John 17:11b-19)

Jesus' Ascension Puts Heaven and Earth in Proper Perspective

- *Don't set your hearts on things of this earth*
- *Don't fix your eyes only on what's in heaven*

We read in Acts 1:2-3 that Jesus was seen by His disciples over the course of forty days after His resurrection and that at the end of these forty days He was taken up into heaven. This past Thursday was the fortieth day after Easter and was the day that commemorates Jesus' ascension into heaven. Compared to Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, and even Pentecost, which we celebrate next Sunday, the day of ascension often passes without much thought.

But Jesus' ascension is important. The account of Jesus' return to heaven has a lot to teach us. It puts heaven and earth in proper perspective. It reminds us that we are not to set our hearts on things of this earth and that we are not to fix our eyes only on what's in heaven.

Jesus appeared to the apostles after His resurrection, and "*presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God*" (v. 3). At the end of these days, "*when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, 'Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?'*" (v. 6). Did you catch the difference between what Jesus spoke about and what the disciples asked about? Over the forty days Jesus had been "*speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God*" but the apostles asked if He was going to "*restore the kingdom to Israel*".

That may not seem like a big difference, but it is! When the disciples asked about restoring the kingdom to Israel they had in mind an earthly kingdom – one with God as its head – but still an earthy kingdom. They still had the idea that the Messiah would come and liberate Israel from the Roman oppressors and set up God's kingdom here on earth. We can see this idea in what the two disciples on the road to Emmaus told Jesus when they did not realize it was Jesus risen from the dead. They said that Jesus had been crucified, "*But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel*" (Luke 24:21). Their view of redeeming Israel meant freeing Israel from Roman control.

Others that followed Jesus didn't want Him to leave. Mary Magdalene stood outside Jesus tomb weeping on that first Easter Sunday. Jesus appeared to her and asked why she was weeping. Not expecting to see Jesus, she thought He was the gardener. When He said her name, she realized who it was and turned to Him. 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.'*" (John 20:11-17).

We may not be looking for the restoration of the kingdom to Israel nor are we able to cling to Jesus physically as He has already ascended into heaven, but how often do we wish for similar things? How often do the things of this world become our focus and we wish for blessings in this life?

The people Jesus that ministered to during His time on earth often had difficulty seeing past the here and now. After Jesus miraculously fed the five thousand from the five loaves and two fish, the people wanted to make Him king (John 6:1-15). They wanted Jesus' to rule over them and continue to provide for them as He had just done. They wanted Him to give them earthly bread.

It may not seem that we have the same problem, but when we run into difficulties in our lives don't our thoughts and prayers often center around the things of this world. When things are going well, it is easy to set our hearts and minds on things above, but when we have health problems, car problems, relationship problems or financial problems, they often consume our atten-

tion. Not that it is wrong to pray about these things. It isn't. God tells us not to be anxious about anything but to bring everything to Him in prayer (Philippians 4:6). The problem is when our focus becomes too limited. God is able to do exceedingly abundantly more than all we ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20).

Many years ago I read a book entitled *Your God is Too Small*. This book talked about how our view of God often diminishes and limits Him in our minds. We make God too small in our conception of Him. We fail to grasp how great God is. We fail to understand how wide and long and deep and high God's love for us really is (Ephesians 3:18-19).

As I mentioned before, the people Jesus interacted with while He was on earth often had difficulty seeing past His human nature. The people – and even His disciples – made Him too small. He healed the sick and people lined up to have their physical ailments removed. But Jesus came to do so much more! The disciples were looking for Jesus to redeem Israel, but He came to redeem not only Israel, but to redeem the whole world! And He came not with a temporary, earthly redemption, but an eternal redemption that leads to ever-lasting life in heaven.

Jesus came to give His life as a ransom to save us from our sin and to save us from the eternal, spiritual death that we all deserve. He came to establish the kingdom of God, not to restore the earthly kingdom of Israel. He came to bring us into God's eternal kingdom where there is no more sickness or sorrow or hunger or death. Compared to being dead in our trespasses and sins, our earthly needs and problems are small by comparison. That is why Jesus said, *“Do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear? For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.”* (Matthew 6:31-33). Jesus points us to the kingdom of God, the very thing He talked about with His apostles during the forty days after His resurrection.

When Mary Magdalene clung to Jesus, He told her not to because He had not yet ascended to His father. He told her to go tell His disciples that He was ascending to His Father and our Father, His God and our God. He pointed to His ascension because it lifts our eyes from the earthly things around us to the much greater heavenly reality that God reveals to us in His word and that He reveals to us by His Spirit.

Jesus said that it was to the disciples advantage that He was returning to the Father (John 16:6). If Jesus had remained on earth so that we could see Him and touch and they did, we probably would also see Him as less than He is. We would likely be tempted to focus on His humanity and view Him as perhaps not much more than a man with divine powers. But Jesus *“ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things”* (Ephesians 4:10) and be *“far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come”* (Ephesians 1:21) as our Epistle reading states.

Jesus' ascension encourages to see Him in His majesty – as the One who has all authority in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18). It encourages us to set our hearts and minds on *“those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God”* (Colossians 3:1).

But the two angels that appeared to the apostles as they watched Jesus ascend remind us not to fix our eyes only on what's in heaven.

The apostles watched Jesus being 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.” When I’ve read these words of the two angels, I have often paraphrased them in my mind and heard them saying: “Men of Galilee, don’t just stand there, do something!”

What these two men clothed in white said was not a harsh rebuke, but their question pointed to the fact that the apostles couldn’t just stay there gazing into heaven. These messengers also encouraged the apostles with a reminder that Jesus was not simply gone. Jesus will return again in the same manner in which they saw Him go into heaven. Here again we are told that Jesus return will be visible, not invisible (see Matthew 24:30, Mark 13:26, Luke 21:27). Those who are alive when Jesus returns will see Him “*coming in a cloud with power and great glory*” (Luke 21:27).

This is a comfort because of what Jesus told His disciples earlier. He told them: “*Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also*” (John 14:1-3). What a great promise! It tells of the great things that will be ours when Jesus returns. Jesus ascended into heaven to prepare a place for you and He will return again to take you to be with Him forever.

But there is a danger here. We may be tempted fix our eyes only on what awaits us in heaven, like the apostles standing there gazing into heaven, and neglect our work here on earth. Twice in this passage Jesus told His disciples to stay in Jerusalem until they received the promise of the Father – the Holy Spirit whom Jesus would send. Jesus explains why the coming of the Spirit is so important. He said: “*you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth*” (v. 8). The Spirit came upon them ten days later on the day of Pentecost when people from all over were gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of the harvest, which also called the day of the first fruits (Exodus 34:22-23).

This outpouring of the Spirit was the reason Jesus said it was to their advantage that He went away: “*If I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you*” (John 16:7). The apostles needed the power of the Holy Spirit to carry out their mission to be witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. The fact that we are here talking about this shows that they carried out this mission.

This same Spirit is given to us in baptism. And we need the power of the Jesus’ Spirit just as they did, as we, too, are to spread the good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection, which reconciles us to God and earns us a place in heaven. Sharing this good news is not something we can accomplish by our own efforts.

The apostles were eye-witness of “*all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up*” (v. 1). It may seem that we have a disadvantage as we are not witness as they were, but the Holy Spirit guided them to record these things for us. We have their eye-witness accounts to use as we bear witness to what God has done through Jesus Christ. And Holy Spirit works through His word to lead people to have faith and trust in Jesus’ sacrifice for their sins (Romans 10:7). Jesus promises that His Spirit will convict people of sin, righteousness and judgment (John 16:8-11).

Both Jesus and the men dressed in white told the disciples that Jesus’ ascension points to His return in glory when He will judge the living and dead. Because Jesus has paid for and taken away your sins, you can look forward to His return with out fear, knowing that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1). But His return also motivates us in our mission to share what Jesus had done. We tell others that Jesus died for them so that they too

can trust in the salvation that only Jesus provides, and look forward to and not fear Jesus' coming back in a cloud with glory.

So remember Jesus' ascension. May it lift your eyes heavenward so that you do not set your heart on the things of this world. But may it also remind you that Jesus is coming again and create in you a zeal to be His witness by the power of His Holy Spirit. May Jesus' ascension help you keep heaven and earth in proper perspective. Amen.

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