

LESSONS ON PREDESTINATION #73

"The Ascension: Philosophical Objections"
(Scriptures from NKJV)

Acts 1:9-11:

"Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, 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, 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.'"

Luke 24:50, 51:

"And He led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up His hands and blessed them. Now it came to pass, while He blessed them, that He was parted from them and carried up into heaven."

INTRODUCTION: This will be the third in a series of lessons on the topic of the Ascension of Jesus Christ. We have examined the Biblical data found in the Old Testament predicting the ascension of Christ. In the last lesson we looked at a number of references found in the New Testament. We examined those found in the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, Paul's writings, Hebrews, and Peter and John's writings.

We have defined the ascension of Christ as being the transferal of the resurrected body of Jesus from this seen world into the world of the unseen known as heaven.

We now wish to address three philosophical problems relating to the ascension. They are:

- (1) Its relation to the laws of nature;
- (2) Its location within the spiritual world;
- (3) Its relation to historical verification.

All of these objections to the idea of Christ's ascension come from those who are naturalists in that they deny the realm of the supernatural. All truth must be confined to the natural realm capable of being proven and explained by scientific observation. We begin with:

A. ITS RELATION TO THE LAWS OF NATURE.

An objection to the ascension is made on the grounds that the picture of a body ascending up off of the earth contradicts the law of gravity. This comes from those who deny the realm of the supernatural. But like Jesus' other miracles and appearances, His ascension was not limited by the laws of nature.

Perhaps the real problem is that we know so little of the makeup of the Lord's resurrection body. It was different in many capacities from the body laid in the tomb, yet it

was essentially the same. Thus the resurrected Lord could be seen, touched, handled, and recognized. He could eat and drink. He could also appear and disappear. He could enter a room with the doors being shut.

A physical ascension in a physical body presents no more of a greater problem than the physical resurrection of His body.

B. ITS LOCATION WITHIN THE SPIRITUAL WORLD.

A second objection to the ascension is that it suggests that heaven is located a short distance above the earth, and modern science or natural revelation now shows this cannot be the case. But this criticism pushes the account into a too literal sense.

While the body of Jesus was a physical body, the language describing the ascension into heaven is symbolical. We should picture Christ as transferring, not from one position to another, but from one condition to another. He had the ability in His resurrected body to appear and disappear at will. In essence, He could vanish from the visible eyesight of human beings by an act of His will. Thus our Lord withdrew Himself from a world of limitations and entered into that higher realm of existence where God dwells.

Christ disappeared from view, and no question need be raised either of distance or direction. It was a change of condition and mode of existence. The essential fact to be maintained is that He departed and disappeared.

Christ ascended in a powerful supernatural body that had overcome death and corruption. He passed through the atmosphere without the need of a space suit, neither did His body suffer any ill effects. This is because His glorified body could not be destroyed by a loss of oxygen, nor by radical temperature changes, nor by differences in air pressure. If we are to inherit a redeemed body like that of our Lord's, this gives us some insight into what life will be like in the new heavens and earth. At least our bodies will not be subject to the present laws of the natural creation.

Does our current knowledge that the earth is round make it impossible to embrace the language used to describe the ascension as given in the book of Acts and Luke? Both texts say He went **"up into heaven."** The fact that "up" at one place on our globe is "down" on the other side of the globe does not change the observations of the disciples. We still speak of the sun "rising and setting" though strictly speaking these are not true.

It was in Jerusalem that they saw Him go "up" into the sky (Acts 1:9, 11). The

primary point is not the location of heaven, but that Jesus left the visible created world. But we cannot help asking, "Where did Jesus go?" Hebrews 4:14 says that He went **"into the heavens"** or **"through the heavens."** This may mean through (1) the earth's atmosphere or the region of the clouds; (2) the cosmic heavens of the sun, moon, stars, planets, galaxies, etc.; or (3) the heaven of heavens or the transcendent abode of God.

In Ephesians 4:10 we are told, **"He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things."** He returned to the place from which He came. In John 6:62 we are told He ascended up **"where He was before."** In John 14:12 He said, **"I go unto my Father."** In Hebrews 9:24 it is said, **"Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us."**

In I Kings 8:27, we are told, **"But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You. How much less this temple which I have built!"** This tells us that the heavens, even the highest of the heavens cannot contain God, and since God is everywhere present in the universe, it is impossible to locate the Father or the Son in some particular place in time or space such as on some distant nova or galaxy. This has led some to conclude that the ascension involved not a change of place, but a change of state. This conclusion however is unwarranted in that it does not handle all the Biblical data, but merges "place and state of being" into one. However, Jesus' transformation into a glorified state of existence occurred in His resurrection. The ascension, in fact, involves a change of place - that is, a physical removal from this earthly reality into another dimension of reality superior to that of this earth.

Thus by His resurrection and ascension, He was exposed to both a change of state, and a change of place described as being at **"the right hand of God."** In Hebrews 10:12, we read, **"But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God."** The figurative expression **"right hand of God"** refers to the position of highest authority and power given by the Father over every other power in all the realms of reality.

So, is Christ's body now in heaven? The answer is yes. Is His body visible there? Yes, His body is with the Father. But its new spiritual powers or abilities, allow Him to be invisible as well as visible, much like that of the angels, and that of Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration. Since Christ could make Himself appear and disappear in His resurrected body on earth, we ought not to be surprised that none of the astronauts have visibly seen the ascended Christ while traveling in space.

C. ITS RELATION TO HISTORICAL VERIFICATION.

We now come to the problem of how we can be expected to believe something involving the supernatural, which is based on the credibility of a handful of men who lived some two thousand years ago. The New Testament is composed of the writings compiled by the Apostles. Thus the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ is first based upon the oral testimony of these men, and later handed down to future generations in written form. So just how credible are these men and their writings?

Consider first, that the New Testament writings are real historical documents traceable to the era of about 60 to 90 A.D. The whole calendar of western history is based on what is known as "the year of our Lord."

Time will only allow us to consider the writings of Luke, who was described by Paul as **"the beloved physician"** (Colossians 4:14). Luke was a doctor who traveled with Paul on parts of his missionary journeys. He was a Gentile and the only Gentile to write any of the books of the New Testament. He was not an Apostle, neither was he a follower of Jesus during His earthly life. He was highly educated and widely read. He was a research historian in his day. He received the Christian tradition from those who were eyewitnesses of the life of Jesus. He wrote the book of Luke and the book of Acts, which consists of over one-fourth of the New Testament.

The Gospel of Luke contains eyewitness accounts of the life of Jesus and His deeds while on earth. The Book of Acts contains the accounts of the life of Jesus and His deeds in His ascended state as directing His Apostles who were still on earth.

Luke's writings are throughout that of a careful historian. He verified his facts from original written sources and then from direct interrogation of eyewitnesses. In Luke 1:1-4, we read, **"Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed."**

Among these eyewitnesses were the disciples of Jesus, known also as the Apostles. These men swore they were telling the truth. One of them, named Peter, said **"For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty."** (II Peter

1:16). All of these men, with perhaps the exception of John, would later die as martyrs for what they believed to be true reality. Men do not die for something which they have made up and know to be a lie.

After assimilating all the written documents and interrogating all the available witnesses, Luke concluded that the sources were credible and trustworthy, and that Jesus had ***"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."*** (Acts 1:3). Our knowledge of the bodily appearances of the risen Lord to His disciples, through the weeks following the resurrection, is based on solid historical evidence. Likewise, it is equally dependable that those bodily appearances came to an end, when our Lord in His ascension assumed His position of supreme authority ***"at God's right hand."***