

Westminster Larger Catechism

Question 53

Halifax, 12 October 2008

Q. 53 How was Christ exalted in His ascension?

- A. Christ was exalted in His ascension, in that having, after His resurrection, often appeared unto, and conversed with His apostles, speaking to them of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God, and giving them commission to preach the gospel to all nations; forty days after His resurrection, He, in our nature, and as our head, triumphing over enemies, visibly went up into the highest heavens, there to receive gifts for men, to raise up our affections thither, and to prepare a place for us, where Himself is, and shall continue till His second coming at the end of the world.**

Introduction:

Tonight we continue our study of the exaltation of Jesus Christ.

- When we speak of His exaltation we speak of His exaltation as our Mediator...
 - As the one who is the very Son of God, He is infinite in being and perfection and so could not have been exalted any higher than He already was exalted.
 - But as Mediator, we speak of Him as the One who humbled Himself, took on human flesh, and came as a very lowly man—the son of a carpenter in Nazareth.
 - And moreover we speak of Him as Christ, coming to be the head and representative of His church, a people lost and ruined in sin.
 - And this association with us brought Him down to the very lowest place that a person could be brought to...
 - It brought Him to the place of shame and cursing before His Father in heaven...
 - On the cross, he bore all of our iniquities—even the very pains of Hell.
- And it is from the lowliest point that we speak of His exaltation...
 - It was from the death that followed that He was raised on the third day, then that He ascended into heaven, sat down at the right hand of the Father, and at last comes again to judge the living and the dead...
 - Last week we looked at the first stage of His exaltation—His resurrection...
 - And this week we look at the second—His ascension.
 - To ascend means, of course, to go up...
 - So when we speak of Christ's ascension, we speak of His going up from earth to heaven.

An account of His ascension is given to us in Acts chapter 1.

- Listen now as I read to you from Acts 1:1-11.
 - READ> Acts 1:1-11.

You can see that Luke begins the book of Acts with the ascension.

- He presents this as the great turning point of Christ's ministry—from the work that He did as mediator on earth to the work that He does as mediator in heaven.
- In the very first verse, he refers to the gospel he had written—the gospel of Luke—
 - He describes it as an account of what Jesus *began* to do and teach until the day He ascended into heaven.
 - This was His earthly work which was the subject of Luke's gospel...
 - But now Luke is going to speak of His ongoing work now that He has entered into heaven,
 - a work that He carries out through the agency of His servants on earth.
- The overall idea is that now that He has ascended, it is better for the progress of the kingdom...
 - He has finished His work of redemption, which is what He came to do on earth,
 - and now He is sending out His apostles and ministers to proclaim what He has done to the nations.
 - Jesus had already told His disciples that He would go to the Father and that it would be better for them then because the Spirit would come...
 - This is what He is recorded to have said in John's gospel,
 - **John 16:5-14: "But now I go away to Him who sent Me, and none of you asks Me, 'Where are You going?' But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you. And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: of sin, because they do not believe in Me; of righteousness, because I go to My Father and you see Me no more; of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged. I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you."**
 - In the book of Acts, Luke gives an account of the work that Jesus did through His Spirit and His apostles after He ascended—

- This is said to be a greater work—
 - not because it was greater than the work He did in redeeming us...
 - but greater in that the gospel began to powerfully spread into the hearts of many, first in Jerusalem, and then in Judea and Samaria, and then to the very ends of the earth.

- This great phase of Jesus' ministry through the Spirit and the apostles did not begin until He had ascended to the Father to take His seat...
 - He ascended in order that He might pour out His Spirit upon them to empower them to do this work and to make this work effective.
 - And so everything in the opening of Acts is focused around the ascension...
 - Luke had ended his gospel with an account of the ascension, showing how Jesus work while he was present on earth was concluded...
 - And now he begins Acts also with an account of the ascension,
 - showing the beginning of Jesus' work on earth from His seat in heaven.

TRANS> Tonight, I want to begin by looking at:

- How Jesus prepared His disciples for His ascension...(we will spend most of our time here)
- Then look at the ascension itself and what it means for us
- And finally look at the manner of our Lord's return which we may ascertain from the manner in which He ascended.

I. How Jesus prepared His disciples for His ascension...

- You can see that there was a lot that was done during the forty days between His resurrection and His ascension...
 - This forty day ministry is summarised in verse 2-3...
 - It says that He gave commandments to His apostles...
 - that He showed Himself alive after his suffering over those days...
 - and that He spoke to them of things pertaining the kingdom of God.
 - We will look at these three elements of His forty day ministry in more detail in just a moment,
 - but first I want you to consider:

A. Why the forty-day ministry of Jesus was necessary...

1. We are told in the passage I read in John 16—
 - where Jesus was speaking about the ascension—
 - about His ascending to the Father and how it would be better for Him...
 - and how the apostles' ministry would actually be enhanced rather than diminished at that time!
 - a. But it is evident that the disciples are not at all ready to hear this...
 - They still could not get their heads around the fact that Jesus was going to be crucified at Jerusalem...
 - It just did not fit into their conception of what the Messiah was supposed to do.
 - b. And so, for this reason,
 - Jesus is not able to teach them about the ministry they will have after He has returned to the Father...
 - 1) All He does is tell them that it will be better because that will be the time when the Holy Spirit will be poured out upon the church...
 - to empower them for Spirit-filled ministry...
 - And to work in those they minister to so that they might see their sin and what Christ has done to make them righteous.
 - 2) In John 16:12, He says expressly that they are not yet ready to receive the things that He has yet to tell them...
 - **John 16:12: I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.**
 - They could not bear these things now because they could not even accept the fact that He was going to be crucified for them...
 - The message of the cross—
 - the very centerpiece of what they would be preaching
 - was even at this time completely unacceptable to them.
 - Far from preparing themselves to proclaim it, they were denying that such a thing would ever happen.
2. But you see, during the forty-day period between Jesus' resurrection and His ascension,
 - the disciples' attitude was completely transformed!
 - Now they *were* ready and eager to receive this instruction about His death.
 - a. They were ready because the sufferings of Christ had now been completed.

- What they could not accept before, they now had to accept—
 - They could no longer say that it could not be...
 - They craved an explanation of why all this had happened.
 - They had been greatly humbled, even by their forsaking of Christ in His sufferings,
 - but now they are eager to hear all about it.

- b. And of course, it was much *easier* for them to accept Christ's sufferings and death now because He had also risen from the dead...
 - The sufferings were complete.
 - Jesus had finished the work the Father had given Him to do.
 - The Father had shown His acceptance of Christ's sufferings by raising Him from the dead.
 - Now the disciples, who had continually rejected the very thought that He would suffer and die,
 - could learn to rejoice in the fact that He had suffered and died because now His sufferings were over.

- c. They were well prepared now to receive an explanation of *why* all this had happened,
 - in fact, they were *eager* for an explanation...
 - Instead of being in denial, they were in a very teachable frame of mind.

TRANS> And because that was so, this forty-day ministry of Jesus between His resurrection and ascension was probably the most fruitful time of teaching He had with them.

- B. Okay, so let's look at what Jesus spoke to His disciples about during those forty days.
- Three things.
 1. First of all, we are told that He showed Himself alive to them by many infallible proofs.
 - Now of course part of this was that He appeared to them repeatedly,
 - that He showed them His wounds,
 - that He performed signs among them,
 - that He let them touch Him,
 - that He ate with them,
 - that He spoke powerful words to them such that their hearts burned within them...

- These were part of the infallible proofs that He was alive...
- But no doubt these proofs also include the testimony of Scripture...
 - the testimony that He would die and rise again on the third day.
- Luke tells us at the end of his gospel that this was one of the things that Jesus did during those forty days...
 - **Luke 24:44-45: Then He said to them, “These *are* the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and *the* Prophets and *the* Psalms concerning Me.” And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures.**
- You can imagine what it must have been like for the disciples who had been blind to the Old Testament’s teaching of things about the Messiah when they were all opened up to them!
 - How confident it must have made them to see the unity of the Scripture with the events that had just unfolded before their eyes!
 - What joy it must have given them as they were then able to see how the suffering of Christ was necessary to take away their sins!
 - To see that all that the entire Old Testament ceremonial system pointed to what Messiah was to do!
 - What joy must have flooded their hearts to grasp that the Saviour suffered and died because our iniquities were laid upon Him!
 - And that all of this had been spoken of beforehand!
 - They had not been able to bear it before Jesus suffered, but now they were able to receive it with joy.

TRANS> So the first thing Jesus did was show them that He was alive, even as the Scripture had testified beforehand.

- Now let me show you the second thing He did during the forty-day ministry...
2. The second thing Jesus did was to tell His apostles that they would be His witnesses...
- **Acts 1:8—And you shall be my witnesses.**
 - a. They would have the privilege of declaring to all what Christ had done!
 - The marvellous truth that they now fully understood!
 - That the Son of God came from heaven to die on the cross for the remission of our sins!
 - And He told them that this ministry would impact the entire world!

- Look at the end of verse 8—
 - **Acts 1:8: “And you shall be witnesses to me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”**
 - These men would be the connecting link between what Jesus had done to save sinners and the whole world!
 - It would be their testimony of what He did and what it accomplished that would be carried to the very ends of the earth.
- Praise God that even we have received this testimony!
 - How we should give thanks that we have heard the good news...
 - How we ought to pray that the Word of God will spread into all the world.

TRANS> But Jesus not only told them that they would be witnesses...

- b. He also reminded them that He would give them His Spirit—that He would pour out His Spirit upon them—that He would baptise them with the Spirit—
 - to enable them to be His witnesses...
 - You see this at the beginning of verse 8 where He says,
 - **Acts 1:8: “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses...”**
 - This is what He had told them before in John—
 - when He said that it would be better for them when He ascended to the Father...
 - That then the Spirit would come upon them and enable them to remember what He had said and done so that they could faithfully record it and pass it along to the church in all ages...
 - recording it in scripture to be preserved as a pure testimony for the entire church.
 - You see in verses 4-5 how He tells them to wait for the baptism or outpouring of the Spirit that the Father had promised...
 - **Acts 1:4-5: And being assembled together with *them*, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, “which,” *He said*, “you have heard from Me; for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”**
 - This is, of course, what happened in Acts 2, the passage we looked at last week...

- The Spirit was poured out on the disciples and they began to preach with power—
 - to testify of Christ and the glorious gospel that they had come to understand through the forty days ministry.
- c. You see, this promise of the Spirit to enable them to witness was part of their preparation for His ascension!
 - He was telling them what they would be doing by the power of the Spirit after He had ascended to the Father.

TRANS> Okay, so Jesus prepared them by:

- Showing Himself to them and explaining what He had done...
 - And by promising the baptism of the Holy Spirit to empower them...
3. And thirdly, He prepared them by giving them commandments—
- Look at Acts 1:2:
 - It says,
 - **Acts 1:2: “until the day in which He was taken up, after He through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen,”**
 - This shows that just before He ascended He gave the apostles commandments...
 - a. This was very important...
 - He instructed the disciples about how things were to be done in the church.
 - He commanded them as to their duty—we know—He commissioned them to the work...
 - But here when it says “He gave them commandments,”
 - It speaks of the commandments He gave to them to pass along to the church.
 - b. It is for this reason that the example of the apostles is normative for us...
 - Do you know what it means when something is normative?
 - It means that it carries the force of law—it is an example that is to be followed as law...
 - The way the apostles set up the churches with elders and deacons and with preaching and singing and prayers and the Lord’s Supper—
 - all this is normative for us.

- c. And of course it is not only their example, but also the commands that they give in their writings...
 - These are the commands that the Lord Jesus gave to them to give to us.
 - This is why we cheerfully look at their writings to know how our Lord desires us to conduct ourselves in the House of God.
 - We are not left to sort all these things out on our own!
 - We are to eagerly search the scriptures and cheerfully follow what is written.
 - It is our Lord's own instruction to us faithfully transmitted by the apostles He appointed.

TRANS> Oh brothers and sisters!

- You see how important this forty-day ministry of the Lord Jesus was!
 - How eager the apostles must have been to get on with their work now that they understood all that Jesus had done!
 - Now that they understood what His cross means to all those who believe!
 - The Lord Jesus prepared them well for the ministry they would have after He ascended.
- Now I want to move on to look at...

II. The ascension itself and what it means for us...

- When Jesus ascended, we know that He sat down at God's right hand to rule until all His enemies are put under His feet...
 - We will look at this in detail next week when we zero in on His sitting at the right hand of the Father...
 - But for tonight, I just want to briefly look at the actual ascension itself and what it means for us...
 - This glorious event is recorded for us at the end of Luke's gospel as well as at the beginning of Acts.
 - Look at Acts 1:9-11
 - **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.' "**
- What can we learn from this?

A. First of all, we learn that Jesus went up to heaven in our nature!

1. Our Lord Jesus not only has a divine nature,

- He also has a fully human nature—and that means that he has a human body and soul...
 - And it was that human body and soul that went up to heaven...
 - This One who took our nature in order that He might represent us and be our head and take away our sins.
 - The point is, a member of the human race—the Lord and head of the church—has gone into heaven!
 - Having a human body means that His body has to be somewhere...
 - and so His body visibly went up until it disappeared into a cloud of some sort.
- Our own flesh and blood is in heaven!
 - This was not an entirely new thing,
 - For Enoch and Elijah had been taken up into heaven instead of dying.
 - Only now it was the one who is God and man...
 - who had offered Himself a sacrifice for our sins that God accepted...
 - and had been dead and then raised up...
 - He is in heaven to rule.
- After taking all our sins and offering Himself for them,
 - He is now completely victorious over them and has entered into the presence of the Father.

2. This means that we have a true representative in heaven,

- the head of the church, standing in our own flesh and blood, to represent us before the Father's throne.
 - Because He is there,
 - all those who trust in Him can be confident in our acceptance with God the Father...
 - Jesus is not there only as the Son of God,
 - but He is there also as the Son of Man, in flesh and blood.
- Because He is there for us, as one of us, we can have confidence before the Father...

- Our own brother—our own flesh and blood is there and we are, as Ephesians puts it, seated with Him in glory...
 - The whole church now has access to the Father in Jesus' name.
 - We who were cut off by sin and death are now happily connected to the Father because of our union with Jesus.
- Therefore, as Colossians says,
 - we are to now to set our affections on the things above,
 - not on the things of the earth, because Christ is there...
 - Listen to Col 3:1-4:
 - **Col 3:1-4: If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.**
 - It is not the earthly regulations of the sanctuary, it is rejoicing in the gospel concerning Christ's finished work.
 - We look not to earth but heaven where Christ is.
- In Christ our brother,
 - we have, in a sense, already entered glory.
 - We find all our hope and all our strength from Him!
 - We look to Him for forgiveness and for grace.
 - Oh brothers and sisters, that is what you are to do when you worship!

B. We are also to realise that Christ, having visibly ascended, is no longer here--physically.

1. It is actually better for us that He has ascended because now, although we don't have a man we can go to see who can heal all our sicknesses and raise our dead,
 - as was the case when Jesus was physically present...
 - nor do we have one to whom we can go with our questions...
 - We have Him present with us by the Holy Spirit.
- That means that we can understand our sin and our need of a Saviour...
 - And that we can understand what Christ did for us when He was here...
 - And we can be empowered to serve Him by His Spirit without having to go across the world to be where He is.

- We have His Word and Spirit.
 - We do not look for new revelation upon earth now,
 - We do not look for a sacrifice for sin on earth now,
 - We look to the revelation that Christ gave us when He was here and we serve Him as our Lord who has sat down in heaven.

2. Many are tempted to seek Him physically on earth...

- There are those who make the pope the head of the church—the vicar of Christ—an anti-Christ—
 - One who represents Him on earth—who takes His place as a physical head of the church.
- But you see, we do not have Christ in this way, nor are we to look for Him on earth.
 - The angel in Acts told the disciples to stop gazing up into heaven!
 - Jesus was going to be present with them in a new way now...
 - Physically, He was in heaven...
 - Spiritually, He would be with them through the Holy Spirit.
 - It was time to get on with serving Him in the new and better way.

TRANS> But having said that we serve Jesus spiritually now instead of seeking Him physically on earth,

- I do not mean to suggest that we do not await His physical return...
 - The ascension of Jesus also teaches us the manner of His return...
 - And that is the third thing I want to show you this evening...

III. That the ascension teaches the manner of Christ's return at the last day.

A. It teaches us that Jesus will come physically—in our flesh and blood.

- Look at what the angel says in verse 11...
 - **Acts 1:11: “This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.”**
- Jesus is going to come back in the same way that He went away...
 - He is going to come in His physical body—in our flesh and blood.
 - He is going to descend from above and return to earth at the last day.
 - This is the parousia that Jesus spoke to His disciples about when He was here—

- when He would come with glory to judge the nations and come to be with us forever and ever—physically.
- The Bible says that when He does,
 - we will forever be with Him—we who believe—
 - and that the wicked will be cut off and cast from His presence into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

B. Now I mentioned before that when He is physically present—when folks could go to Him physically,

- their sicknesses were healed, Satan was cast out, their dead were raised—
 - And we are promised that when Jesus returns physically, all this will be so.
 - There will be no more sickness, no more Satan to disturb us, no more death.
 - We will enjoy full communion with Him physically forever and ever.
- And I tell you, when that day comes, the Spirit will also work in us like never before...
 - The combination of His physical presence and the Spirit's presence will be a marvellous blessing to us!
 - For the Bible says that when we see Him, we shall become like Him!
 - Like Him in every way!
 - Not only will we be forever healed of all our sickness and of death...
 - We will be holy as He is holy,
 - We will be pure as He is pure!
 - We will dwell in the communion of His perfect love,
 - and we will love as He loves...
 - We will love each other and we will live in peace.
 - And the thing that will fuel of this is that we will see the beauty and glory and perfection of our God.
 - Our Saviour will bring us physically into the presence of His glory.