

THE ACCOUNT OF CHRIST'S ASCENSION

INTRO: Our subject this morning is the ascension of Christ into heaven. The crucifixion of Christ had been a traumatic event for many believers. Their high hopes that the Messiah had come and that He would now set up the kingdom had been dashed. Surely they were disappointed like many of the followers of date setters are when that date comes and goes and what they had so set their hopes on does not happen.

But the resurrection of Christ changed all that! What would happen now? Would He now set up the kingdom that had been promised for so long? Well, after the resurrection of Christ, Jesus went to Galilee. Here He gave the great commission. He then went back to Jerusalem, and in our text, we are now 40 days after His resurrection. The number 40 is often a number indicating testing. These 40 days alive on earth after the resurrection proved His resurrection beyond logical argument. Look at Acts 1:1-3 (read).

And on this 40th day, He is on the Mount of Olives, close to the Garden of Gethsemane where just a short while ago He had suffered such intense agony. And here He instructed them to stay at Jerusalem until they were baptized with the Holy Spirit. That would happen at Pentecost, only 10 days from now. The words of our text take place 10 days before Pentecost, just as we are today 10 days before Pentecost. That day, Pentecost, marks the birth of the Church.

All of this must have caused the question the disciples will now ask in verse 6 (read). Their question, "Lord, will You at this time set up Your kingdom?" The kingdom they are talking about is the long promised reign of the Messiah on earth, which we find in the book of Revelation as that time period of 1000 years. Jesus then said it was not given to them to know the times or seasons, but that they would receive the Holy Spirit, and then they were to concentrate on getting the Gospel to the entire world, beginning at Jerusalem. Now Rick Warren uses this verse to show that a study of prophecy is not our business. It is after Jesus has instructed them to be witnesses to the entire world, that the events of our text take place.

So we want to begin by looking at heaven's reception of Christ, in verse 9, and then heaven's question of the disciples in verses 10-11.

I. HEAVEN'S RECEPTION OF CHRIST (1:9)

A. The Time

So we want to see when heaven received Christ or when He ascended. Verse 9 says it was, "When He had spoken these words..." You see, it is now 40 days after the resurrection of Christ. And now He has been questioned when He would set up the kingdom, but instead of answering that question, He instructs them to evangelize the world.

Our text further says, He was received up, "...while they watched..." Now one must wonder what must have gone through their minds as they watched. Place yourself there on the Mount of Olives overlooking that Magnificent temple, and Jesus talking with the disciples. He has just spoken to them and instructed them, and He lifts off the ground and ascends.

Now I have wondered why would God have allowed them to see His ascension? Have you thought of what it would be like if Jesus had just disappeared and they had not known what happened to Him? Are you not thankful for these words of Scripture we have before us this morning?

B. The Manner

Consider now the manner in which He went up. Our text says He was taken up. This is a passive verb. It means He did not ascend up by His own power. He was 'taken up'. Some force or power took Him up. He did not walk, or fly. He just simply lifted off the ground as some external force took Him up.

Then we are told a cloud received Him. So I would imagine that means there is a cloud up there. It is stationary and it receives Him. It lets Him in, and it receives Him out of their sight. Now, here is question for you to ponder. Did the cloud disappear as well. Did it receive Him and go

up and disappear out of sight, or did He enter the cloud, the cloud stayed and He went through it and beyond it?

Now there may be a possible answer to that. In verse 11, we are told that He will come in like manner as they have seen Him go. I have wondered, have you, whether this was a vapour cloud? I have wondered if this was not rather a cloud of white robed saints or angels. It says this cloud received Him. That means either it reached out to take Him or it accepted Him. It let Him in. Let's go for a moment to John 14 (read 1-3). In Acts, the word 'received up' is *upolambano*. In John 14:3 it is *paralambano*. Jesus said I will take you to Myself. When He returns for His saints, He will take them along with Himself. Go to 1 Thessalonians 4:17 (read). It says we will be caught up. That means we do not ascend up by ourselves but some force outside ourselves will take us up.

Turn now with me to that little book of Jude (read 14). Way, way back, the seventh from Adam, Enoch, who was raptured or caught up in the OT, says that the Lord returns with 10's of thousands of saints. If He will return as they have seen Him go, and He returns in a cloud of saints, would that not mean He left in a cloud of saints? By the way, Hebrews 12:1 speaks of those who have passed on as a 'cloud' of witnesses.

C. The Distance - Out of their sight

Now our text tells us the distance they saw Him go. It was until He was out of their sight. I can imagine how many times these disciples recounted this event. And how many times must this sight have encouraged them on in their Christian pilgrimage. In their mind, they probably saw this event over and over again.

II. HEAVEN'S QUESTION OF THE DISCIPLES

A. The Time of the Question

So, we have looked at how heaven received Christ. We want to consider now heaven's question of the disciples (read 10-11). Let us consider first the time of this question. It says it was, "...while they looked steadfastly toward

heaven..." You see, heaven, the abode of God, is referred to as being 'up'. Hell is referred to as being down. The reason is that is the actual direction of both. Paul talks about a man who was caught up into the third heaven. The first heaven is the atmospheric heaven. That is the heaven spoken of in our verses. I think the second heaven is what we refer to as outer space. The third heaven is the abode of God. That is where Jesus ultimately went because Scripture tells us He is sitting at the right hand of God.

B. The Source of The Question

Now let us consider the source of this question. I have titled this point, "Heaven's question of the disciples." You see, the disciples are captivated by the sight of Jesus ascending up into heaven. They are looking up steadfastly as Jesus ascends up. So caught up are they by this sight that they do not notice two men come to stand by them. And it is interesting to note that they are dressed in white. Did they come from that cloud that received Jesus out of their sight?

Now few would question that these men are angels. And consider what they said. First, they addressed the disciples as 'men of Galilee'. Why would they do that? By addressing them like this they show plainly that they know all about these men. There is an assurance here that godly men and godly angels are in this thing together. They knew them. Have you given consideration to the fact that there are good angels that know all about you? They know where you are from. How many angels may have assisted us already and we did not know it? You may wish to jot down Matt. 18:10 and ponder it later.

C. The Content of The Question

So, let us consider the content of their question. They said, "You men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing into heaven?" Now, just why would you ask a question like that? The disciples could have said, "Why do you ask such a strange question. You should understand we have never seen anybody just lift off the ground and leave! And He went up, and up and up and we can see Him no more." Did the angels reprove them for looking up by this question? Were

they trying to remind the disciples that Jesus had told them this was going to happen? After Jesus was resurrected, just 40 days ago, He first appeared to Mary Magdalene. And she took hold of Him, as if to never let Him go again. And He 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 to your God."

Personally, I do not think the angels are reproving these men for gazing up into heaven. They know why they are gazing into heaven. But they make their presence known by this question and arouse them to active thought by it. And by this question they introduce them to a most incredible thought. Here is what they said, "This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven."

Albert Barnes says, "We are in these verses presented with the most grand and wonderful events that this world has ever known – the ascension and return of the Lord Jesus. Here is consolation for the Christian; and here is a source of ceaseless alarm to the sinner." No doubt, Jesus ascension into heaven was a grand and wonderful event. But the fact of His resurrection and His remaining on earth for 40 days after proves this event as true as well. And Barnes says that the fact that it is declared that He will return is a matter of ceaseless alarm to the sinner.

I wonder if you are here at this service and the subject of the return of Christ alarms you? If so, it is very high time to make sure you are saved. To the saved, His return should be a consolation. To the lost it is a message of condemnation. I was amazed to read in Warren Smith's books that the New Age says we can avoid Armageddon. By saying that, they give credibility to Christ's return. But by saying that, they indicate that they believe man has the potential to stop divine prophecy from being fulfilled. In other words, they too, are afraid of the message of Christ's return.

But we have a number of things to consider in this incredible revelation. Their message begins like this, "This same Jesus..." The Greek says, 'houtos ho Jeesoos'. It literally reads, 'This, the Jesus...' The angels are going to tell the disciples that Jesus is coming back. And what they are stressing here is that it will be this same

Jesus. You cannot stop Him and you cannot replace Him. No amount of NA or new spirituality will have the power to stop His return. Nor will they have their own Messiah. Jesus will return, and it will be this same Jesus.

So, the angels said, "This same Jesus, who was taken from you..." Here is one of the reasons the disciples were gazing into heaven. Jesus was being taken away from them. He has been with them visibly and bodily. He has now been removed visibly and bodily. Just moments ago, they had asked Him a question verbally, and He had answered verbally. This was to be no more. He was taken away from them and He was taken up to heaven. Now note once more the voice of the verb, 'was taken'. It is passive. He did not ascend by His own power. He was taken away from them and He was taken up.

But we want to spend some time now on the words the angels said that Jesus, "...will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven." Our question is this: just what are the angels talking about here? To punctuate this question go with me to Revelation 1:7 (read). Here Jesus comes to earth and every eye sees Him. And all the tribes of the earth mourn. Now go with me to 1 Thessalonians 4 (read 13-18). In this passage, Jesus does not seem to come to the earth but to a meeting place in the air. And it says we are caught up to meet Him there. That word 'caught up' is the word we get the word 'rapture' from.

So, I want to give you what I see the angels are talking about when they say that Jesus will so come in like manner as they have seen Him go. In the OT it promised the coming of the Messiah many times. But the Jews failed to discern that there were two comings of the Messiah. He would come once as a suffering servant and once as the ruling Messiah. Because the Jews failed to see this distinction, they failed to recognize the Messiah when He came and they killed Him. Isaiah 53 showed the picture of the Suffering Servant and to this very day they do not know of whom that chapter speaks.

I want to propose that we are once more in the same predicament. It is our error to think that every time the NT speaks of the return of Christ it speaks of the same event. However, as the coming of the Messiah in the OT did not always speak of the same event, so I think the return of Christ does not always speak of the same event. I want

to show you the two pictures that emerge regarding the return of Christ in the NT. I will call the one the rapture, or the catching up, and the other the second coming. The rapture is properly the first phase of the second coming. The rapture occurs, as I see it, before the tribulation. The second coming occurs at the end of the tribulation. So, let me give you these two pictures:

1. At the rapture Christ's coming is unexpected. It is life as usual (Matt. 24:36-44). At the second coming life is anything but as usual (Lk. 23:30; Rev. 6:16; Matt. 24:21-31).
2. At the rapture, the Lord comes into the clouds and air (1 Thess. 4:17). At the second coming He comes all the way down to earth (Matt. 25:31-46; Zech. 14:4).
3. At the rapture the righteous are taken to heaven (Jn. 14:3; 1 Thess. 4:13-18). At the second coming the righteous inherit the millennial kingdom on earth (Matt. 25:34).
4. At the rapture only the saved are gathered to the Lord (1 Thess. 4:13-18; 1 Cor. 15:51-52; John 14:1-6). At the second coming the righteous and the wicked are gathered before the Lord (Matt. 25:31-46).
5. At the rapture there is no judgment before the righteous reach their destination (1 Thess. 4:13-18). At the second coming the righteous are first judged (Matt. 25:34-36).
6. At the rapture the unrighteous remain on earth and go into the tribulation (Matt. 24:40, 41; Luke 17:34, 35, 36). At the second coming the unrighteous are removed from the earth and cast into hell (Matt. 25:46).
7. At the rapture the righteous are removed from the earth (Jn. 14:3), while the unrighteous are left on it (Matt. 40-41). At the second coming the righteous remain on earth while the unrighteous are removed from it and cast into hell (Matt. 25:31-46).
8. At the rapture the bodies of the righteous are changed (Phil. 3:21; 1 Cor. 15:51-52; 1 Thess. 5:13-18) and they do not reproduce any more (Matt. 22:30; Mk. 12:25; Lk. 20:35). At the second coming the bodies of the righteous are not changed and they repopulate the earth (Matt. 25:31-46).
9. At the rapture Christ comes for the Church (1 Thess. 4:13-18). At the second coming He comes from heaven with the Church (Rev. 19:6-14).
10. At the rapture, only the righteous are judged (Rom. 14:10-12; 1 Cor. 3:10-15; 2 Cor. 5:10). At the second coming the righteous and unrighteous are both judged (Matthew 25:31-46).
11. At the rapture the righteous are taken to heaven and then judged (Rom. 14:10-12; 1 Cor. 3:10-15; 2 Cor. 5:10). At the second coming, the righteous are judged and then told to come inherit the kingdom (Matt. 25:32-34).

So, when the angels told the disciples that this same Jesus who was taken from them in the cloud will come in like manner, I believe they are referring to when Jesus comes to earth at the end of the tribulation. When Jesus returns to earth He will come personally, visibly and in the clouds. He will come in the same way He left. He also comes to this very same place, the Mount of Olives.

Now I want to show you where that happens. For this we go to Revelation 19. On Pentecost, Lord willing, I will show you the chronology of the book of Revelation. I will show you the appearance, disappearance and reappearance of the Church in this book. For now, we want to look at the reappearance. So we go to Revelation 19. Chronologically we are at the end of the tribulation in chapter 19. Babylon the great has just been destroyed and Christ is getting ready in heaven to return to earth, the very event the angels mentioned in Acts 1. In chapter 20, the millennium, the kingdom the disciples had asked Jesus about would begin. But first we have the return of Christ in chapter 19.

So, let us read 19:1-6 (read). Now look at verses 7-10 (read). We are very close to the end of the tribulation. The Church and Christ are already married. Verse 7 says His wife, not His bride has made herself ready. And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright. Now let us read verses 11-16 (read). Now notice in verse 15 that Jesus treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. That is what He is about to do on earth.

Now let me take you back down to earth, to see what is happening there (read 17-19). You see, what happens on earth is most incredible. Mankind has seen Christ coming to earth in the clouds of white robed saints on white horses with Christ at the head. He comes down to the Mount of Olives, that is the same place we have here. Go with me to Zechariah 14 (read 1-4). So the Lord will come to Jerusalem and deliver it out of the death grip of her enemies. Let me quote here from the messages I did on

"Pilgrims Progress: The Journey Of The Church Age Believer".

"What will it be like in Jerusalem when Christ returns to earth with His Church? Men like Osama Bin Laden, Sadam Hussien and Yassar Arafat will have her in a death grip. Turn with me to Zechariah 14 for a description of that time by an Old Testament prophet by the name of Zechariah (read 14:1-2). As I see it, when the Lord returns with the Church, now turned into an army, He will first take care of this little matter at Jerusalem (Zech. 14:3-7). Jerusalem will be taken out of the hands of her conquerors.

"I believe that next on His agenda will be delivering the Jewish Christians who fled out of Jerusalem in the middle of the tribulation when the antichrist took over the temple (Matt. 24:15; 2 Thess. 2:3-4). It is believed that they will flee to a city called Petra. This is a city carved out of rock in Bible times. It was the Nabatean capital in the Biblical country of Edom. It is situated between present day Eilat at the Eastern tip of the Red Sea, and the Dead Sea. Just north of Petra is the Biblical city called Bozrah. It seems that somewhere in this area will be troops who keep the Jews holed up in Petra. Petra is a likely place for these Jews to flee to because it is a city carved out of rock and the only entrance is a very narrow canyon with walls 300 feet high and almost a mile long. It is a place now often visited by tourists who travel to the Middle East.

[Insert here to read Isaiah 63:1-6.]

"What I think will happen is that the world will hear of the events taking place. From Revelation 1:7 we gather that every eye will see Him ascending on the clouds. There is little doubt that His return will be televised. The Lord's work at Jerusalem and Bozrah will be worldwide news. Now something very interesting takes place. We pick it up in Revelation 16:12-16. The nations of the world now gather at Armageddon. The purpose? To conquer Jesus Christ and His army. Let us go back to Revelation 19 to pick up the following events.

"The second last battle of this world will occur at Armageddon. I have stood on the mound of Megiddo and looked over the vast valley which stretches out for many miles. It is the sight of many historical battles because it is an important cross road to many places. It is some 30 kilometers SSE of modern Haifa in Israel. This is the most likely place to be chosen for the gathering of the coalition forces of the world mentioned in Revelation 16:12-16 (read). In Revelation 19:17-21 we see the results of this battle (read). According to Revelation 14:20 horses will be in blood up to their bridles for a stretch of 200 miles. This is the final battle before the millennium.

"And then, as this battle draws to a close, the sound of warfare will hush. The evil forces of this world will have been silenced. A time period of 1000 years of peace will now envelop the earth. Today, there is a verse of Scripture found on the buildings of the United Nations. It reads like this, "...They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, Neither shall they learn war anymore" (Is. 2:4). But it will not be the UN that will usher in this time period. It will be the Lord Jesus Christ. It will be Yeshua, Hamashia."

CONCL: Well, let us conclude this Ascension Day message. Two thousand years ago, while assembled with His disciples on the Mount of Olives, Jesus ascended into heaven. He was taken up out of their sight in a cloud. And while they stand gazing up into heaven, two men stand by them in white clothing, and they 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."

And so, Albert Barnes says, "We are in these verses presented with the most grand and wonderful events that this world has ever known – the ascension and return of the Lord Jesus. Here is consolation for the Christian; and here is a source of ceaseless alarm to the sinner." So, today the NA movement speaks of how they are going to avoid Armageddon. Amazing!

But, to us, who are saved, it is a glorious message. Jesus is coming again and we are on the winning side! And this is no temporal victory, this is eternal! The Apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 2: 14-16, "Now thanks *be* to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place. For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To the one we are the aroma of death *leading* to death, and to the other the aroma of life *leading* to life."

The message we have had this morning is to the unsaved a message of death. A message of coming defeat. But to the Christian, it is a message that breaths life. It is our living hope, if you like. It is an assurance of our ultimate victory.