

Christ's Ascension.

by Edward Payson

Christ's ascension to heaven signifies his exaltation as the Son of God and his role as the Advocate and Intercessor for believers, and it affects us in nearly the same manner as if we saw it, leading to worship, prayer, and a deeper understanding of our relationship with God.

Scripture: John 20:29, Acts 1:9, 2 Corinthians 4:18, 1 Thessalonians 4:16, Hebrews 12:2, Revelation 1:7

Topics: "Christ's Ascension", "Faith And Worship"

Description

Edward Payson preaches about the ascension of Jesus to heaven, emphasizing the impact it had on his disciples and the importance of truly believing in this event as recorded in the Scriptures. He describes the scene of Jesus ascending from the Mount of Olives, blessing his disciples, and being received into heaven, highlighting the faith and worship it inspired in his followers. Payson also delves into the message delivered by the angels to the disciples, urging them to focus on their duties and prepare for Christ's second coming. He challenges the listeners to examine their faith and its effects on their lives, emphasizing the need to prioritize spiritual realities over worldly distractions.

Transcript

"And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, 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, which also said: Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven"

Acts 1:9-11

are four events in the life of our Saviour, which are peculiarly interesting to all his real disciples. They are his birth, his death, his resurrection, and his ascension to heaven. It is to this last event that our attention is now called. The description given of it in St. Luke's gospel contains some additional particulars, which, though not mentioned in the passage before us, we shall notice in the prosecution of this discourse. We are there informed, that he lifted up his hands and blessed his disciples, and that while he blessed them he was parted from them, and carried up into heaven.

In meditating on this event, so interesting to all true Christians, and so suitable to the circumstances in which we meet, let us consider, I. The ascension itself. That we may look at this scene aright, it is

desirable to view it as it appeared to his disciples. In order to this, we must, by the aid of a lively imagination, and a strong faith, place ourselves as it were, in their circles, and look at it through their eyes. Finding them assembled in Jerusalem, their Master, for the last time, calls them to follow him.

They obey, and he leads them out of the city, to the mount of olives. There, standing on an eminence, where they could all see him, he gives them his last instructions and his parting promises. Then lifting up his hands, he pronounces upon them a blessing, and while he pronounces it, they see him rise from the earth, self-moved, self-supported, and begin to ascend. Reclining as on the bosom of the air, he rises higher and higher, with a gentle, gradual motion, his countenance beaming compassion and love, still fixed on his disciples, and his hands extended still scattering blessings on them as he ascended.

Now he rises above the groves by which they were surrounded; now he mounts to the middle region of the air; now he reaches the clouds, and still they see him. But there a cloudy vehicle receives him, conceals him from their eyes, and rises with him. With eager eyes they still follow the ascending cloud, as it mounts toward the skies, lessening to their sight, till it becomes only a small speck, and at length wholly disappears, far away in the ethereal regions. But though their eyes could follow him no farther, we need not stop here.

Borrowing the glass of revelation we may see him still ascending, reaching, and entering the wide, unfolded gates of heaven, sitting down at the right hand of the throne of God, far above all principalities and powers and might and dominion, and every name which is named, not only in this world, but in the world to come; and there receiving the sceptre of universal empire, and exercising all power in heaven and on earth. Assisted by revelation, faith may also see the employments in which our ascended Saviour is engaged.

She may see him appearing in the presence of the Father, as the Advocate of his people, and continuing to make intercession for all that come unto God by him. She may see him entering with his own blood into the heavenly temple and there presenting a full atonement for the sins of all who believe in him. She may see him receiving gifts for men, and sending down those gifts to the successive generations of mankind. Finally, she may see him fulfilling his dying declaration to his disciples: In my Father's house are many mansions, I go to prepare a place for you.

Such were the purposes for which Christ ascended to heaven, such the employment in which he is now engaged, and in which those of us who are heirs of salvation shall find him engaged when we enter the mansions above. But leaving for the present the contemplation of these objects, let us return and consider, II. The manner in which his disciples were affected by this event. We may well suppose that on such an occasion, they would feel strange and various emotions. Their surprise and wonder would be raised to the utmost by so strange and unexpected a spectacle; their faith in the divine mission of their Master must have been greatly strengthened.

They could not but rejoice to see him thus honored and exalted; yet their joy must have been mingled with sorrow, when they saw one whom they so much loved, whom they had followed so long, and on whom they entirely depended, suddenly taken from them, and leaving them alone in a world like this. Under the influence of these and other powerful emotions, they stood gazing upwards, with their eyes fixed on that part of the sky where they last saw him, as if they were determined never to withdraw them, as if, after witnessing such a spectacle, there was nothing below the skies worthy of notice.

Indeed, every thing earthly must have appeared very small and contemptible, to those who had just witnessed such a sight. A vision of Christ thus entering into his glory, stained all human glory, and they probably could not refrain from earnestly desiring to follow him to that happy world whither they had seen him ascend. But this they could not as yet be permitted to do. He had told them that they could not follow him then, but that they should follow him afterward. Before that time could arrive, they had many important duties to perform; and to these duties it was necessary that their attention should now be directed.

Accordingly their ascended Master, who still saw them, though they saw not him, took measures for this purpose. While they were still gazing intently upon the heavens, their number was suddenly increased by two persons who in form, countenance, and language; appeared to be men, but whose white and shining apparel declared them to be angels. But this leads us to consider, III. The message delivered to them by these heavenly messengers. Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye here gazing up into heaven?

This language seems intended to convey a gentle reproof. It was as if the angels had said, Have you not other employment assigned you by that Master whom you earnestly follow with your eyes? Have you forgotten the commission and instructions which he gave you before his ascension? Have you forgotten that you are his witnesses, and that you are to proclaim to all nations what you have heard and seen? The time of inactive contemplation is passed, and the hour for action is arrived.

Besides, you are henceforth to walk not by sight, but by faith. Though you have known Christ after the flesh, yet in this manner you will know him no more. You are now to endure as seeing him who is invisible, to be guided, animated and supported by that faith which is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. That something like this was the import of their address, seems probable from what follows. This same Jesus whom ye have seen go into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven; shall come, as he informed you, in the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory to judge the world.

This was, in fact, reminding them that it must henceforth be their great business, not to stand gazing after their ascended Master, but to prepare themselves, and warn others to prepare, for his coming to judgment. Let us now attend, IV. To the conduct of the disciples after witnessing this event, and hearing this angelic message. In the first place, they worshipped him. We do not read that they worshipped the angels. Bright and glorious as these spirits were, they knew that it would be vain and idolatrous to worship them; nor would the angels have permitted it; for when John, some years after this, fell down at the feet of an angel, he rebuked him, saying, See thou do it not.

But though they could not worship angels, they worshipped their ascended Master; for they believed that though they could no longer see him, he still saw them; nor did any voice from heaven, nor did the angels themselves charge them with idolatry, or forbid them to worship him. Indeed, who could, who can blame them for worshipping one whom they had just seen ascending by his own power from earth to heaven? In the second place, they spent much of their time in the public worship of Jehovah.

They were daily, St. Luke informs us, in the temple, praising and blessing God. This was while they waited for the effusion of the Holy Spirit from on high. Their Master had commanded them to wait at Jerusalem, until he should send down upon them this promised blessing, and they punctually obeyed his commands. In the third place, while they spent much time in public worship, they spent still more time in private, social prayer. We are informed that, as soon as they returned from the Mount of Olives, all assembled in an upper room, and there continued with one accord in prayer and supplication.

This earnestness and union in prayer seems to have been occasioned by what they had just seen. And well might what they had seen produce such an effect. They had seen their Master, whom they knew to be most powerful, generous, and kind, and who had said, whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, I will do it, go alive into heaven. They knew, therefore, that they had in heaven a most powerful and affectionate Advocate to procure an answer to their prayers; they did, as it were, still see his hand extended to dispense blessings, and still hear him say, Ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full.

No wonder, then, that after returning from such a sight, they were fervent, constant, and united in prayer. No wonder that they persevered in such prayer for many days successively, until the day of Pentecost, when the Spirit descended on them like a rushing, mighty wind, and they experienced the truth of their Master's parting words, It is expedient for you that I go away; for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come; but if I depart, I will send him unto you. Having thus briefly considered our Saviour's ascension with its attending circumstances and effects, let us next inquire what we may learn from it.

First: We may perhaps learn from it whether we do, or do not really believe the Scriptures. In order to ascertain this, let me ask each of you whether you really believe that the events which we have been considering actually occurred? do you really believe, that a person who appeared to be only a man, but who called himself the Son of God, was seen alive for forty days successively, after he had been put to death as a malefactor? that at the expiration of this time, he was seen in open day; by a competent number of witnesses, to rise from the earth, and without any visible effort or means of support, to ascend till he reached the region of clouds; and that there a cloud received him and concealed him from the eyes of beholders?

Do you really believe that while these beholders were still gazing after him, two angels appeared to them in a human form and said, This same Jesus, whom ye have seen go into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven? Do you believe that these events actually took place in the world which we inhabit, and that they were seen by human beings like ourselves? If you do not believe this, if it appears to you more like a tale, a fiction, or a dream, than a reality, you do not believe the Bible.

Or if it appears to you like an event which took place in some other world than this, or among a different race of beings from ourselves, you do not believe the Bible. But perhaps you will say, we do believe that all these things actually took place in our world. Then surely you regard them as most interesting and important events; you read the book which contains them, and other wonderful facts, with deep interest, and you are affected by its contents, as you are affected by other important truths which you really believe.

If not, you do not believe the Scriptures, whatever you may profess. Your understandings, perhaps, assent to these truths, but in your hearts you do not believe them. These remarks, however; are too general. We must be more particular, and our text enables us to be so, for we may learn from it, Secondly: In what manner those who really believe in Christ's ascension to heaven, and its attending circumstances, will be affected by it. It is, I presume, universally acknowledged, that facts and events which we really believe, affect us in nearly the same manner, though not in the same degree, as if we saw them.

For instance, if we really believe that a parent or child, a husband or any other dear friend, has died in a distant place, it will affect us almost, though not, perhaps, quite so much, as if we actually saw him die. If, then, we really believe the events which have been described, we shall be affected in some measure as if we had seen them. How they were affected, you have just heard. They worshipped Christ. If, then, we actually believe that he ascended to heaven, there to reign till his second coming, we shall worship Him,

that is, we shall address to him prayers and thanksgivings.

They spent much time in the temple blessing and praising God. If we believe what the gospel relates of Jesus Christ, we shall do the same; for surely we cannot refrain from often praising God for providing such an Advocate and Intercessor for us, in heaven. Again: Those who witnessed our Saviour's ascension, were excited to fervent, united, and persevering prayer. And surely, if we really believe that Jesus Christ has actually ascended into heaven, there to appear in the presence of God for all who call on his name, to obtain blessings for them, and to prepare a place for their reception when they leave this world, we shall be led to call on his name with frequency and fervency, and to unite with his praying people.

Such are some of the effects which will result from a real belief of the events which have been described. If, then, these effects are not produced upon you, my hearers, it will prove that you do not believe the volume in which they are recorded. And if you, my professing hearers, who are assembled to commemorate the Lord Jesus Christ, have faith in present lively exercise, you will be affected in some measure as you would have been had you witnessed the events which have been described.

They will be presented to your minds and hearts in the vivid colors of truth and reality; this house will appear to you like the Mount of Olives, and you will almost see the Saviour, the symbols of whose body and blood are before you, rise from that table as from the grave, and re-ascend his native heaven. God grant you all faith to see this. You will then go from this house, saying to yourselves and to each other, we have seen strange things today. But this is not all. If you believe that two angels really appeared to the disciples, and foretold the second coming of Christ in the clouds of heaven, then, of course, you must believe that he certainly will come, come as he declared, to judge the world; for those heavenly messengers would not assert a falsehood.

And if it was a most wonderful and surprising thing to see him ascend alone to heaven in the form of a man, what a sight it will be to see him descending from heaven in the form of God, shining resplendent in all his Father's glories, and surrounded by thousands of thousands and ten thousand times ten thousand angels and arch angels, while at his summons all the dead arise and stand before him in judgment. This will be a spectacle indeed, such a spectacle as the world never saw.

But if the Bible is true, we shall all actually see this spectacle, for its language is, Behold he cometh with clouds, and every eye shall see him. And if you believe the Bible, then you believe that you will see it, believe that you will be actors in it, believe that you, as individuals, will stand before the judgment seat of Christ, and receive your doom from his lips. And do you believe this? Are you living as if you believed it? If you do believe it, you are surely making it your great, your chief concern to be prepared for Christ's second coming, prepared to meet your Judge in peace.

And is this your great concern? Are you living like accountable creatures, who expect to be tried by the Word of God, and to be rewarded according to your works? If not, where is your faith, and what is your belief in the Bible? Nothing but a dream, nothing but a cold, barren faith, which being without works is dead. And if God has clearly revealed truths which are thus calculated to affect you, and the only reason why they do not affect you, is that you do not believe them, then surely you are without excuse.

To conclude: subjects like those we have been considering, may be of admirable service to every Christian, if he knows how to use them aright. You are all aware, my brethren, that this world is your great enemy, that worldly-mindedness is in some form or other your besetting sin. You are also aware that this world has many scenes and objects which to our misjudging minds appear splendid, many which appear

imposing, many which appear attractive and interesting. By these scenes and objects your passions are often excited, your affections entangled, your minds thrown into a feverish state, which is exceedingly unfriendly to progress in religion.

The great question is, how shall the pernicious influence of these worldly scenes and objects be counteracted? I answer, the world to come, the unseen, spiritual and eternal world, has scenes incomparably more grand, more imposing, more interesting than any which this world can exhibit. All that is wanting then, is to bring them clearly before the mind. Let 'it be a part of your daily employment to do this. Enter your closet, open the Scriptures, and fix on some one of the many interesting objects which they reveal; the translation of Elijah for instance, or our Saviour's transfiguration, or his death, or his resurrection, or his ascension to heaven, or his second coming.

Fix the eye of your mind attentively on the object selected; spread it before you with all its attending circumstances; call in the aid of imagination, or that power which forms images of absent, or invisible things; pray for faith, and continue to meditate, if possible, till you obtain some clear, realizing apprehension of the scene before you, or till your hearts are suitably affected by it. Then when the mind is filled and the heart occupied by such an object, you may, relying on the divine protection, venture out into the world, and all its wealth, its pomp and its pleasures will appear contemptible indeed, compared with the scenes which you have been contemplating.

In this way, and in this alone, can you maintain a successful combat with the world, and finally obtain a decided victory over it; for until your minds are preoccupied by spiritual objects, the world will find them empty and rush in upon them like a flood. Let me beseech those of you who have not already done it, to make trial of this method during the month on which you have now entered. Be not discouraged, should your first attempts prove unsuccessful; but persevere, and instead of faintly remembering Christ at his table only, you will remember him almost constantly; you will feel in some measure as the apostles did, when they returned from witnessing his ascension; and fortified by the powers of the world to come, you will be enabled to tread the present world under your feet.

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