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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE FOUR GOSPELS

UNIT 16: THE ASCENSION

The gospel accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus all end with descriptions of either – or both – his ascension into heaven and the commission he gave to his disciples as he left them. In this unit we will look at the significance of this culminating event in the gospel story – one which is both wider and deeper than many realize.

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

A number of stories regarding the ascension of heroes to heaven are known from the ancient world. In ancient Sumerian (Mesopotamian) culture, for example, the Epic of Etana, king of the Mesopotamian city of Kish in the 29th century BC, tells how that heroic king ascended to heaven on an eagle. In ancient Greek mythology the hero Hercules was said to have ascended in a cloud to the gods on mount Olympus. By New Testament times, stories were quite common concerning the deification of especially noteworthy rulers (usually emperors) in Roman culture, and several were said to have ascended to heaven upon death.

The biblical evidence is less clear. In the Old Testament, the righteous Enoch is said to have been “taken” by God (Genesis 5:24), and the New Testament book of Hebrews states “He could not be found, because God had taken him away” (Hebrews 11:5) – with the expression used there literally meaning “taken him up.” This suggests to some that some kind of ascension was involved, but that is not clear in the story itself. Similarly, the story of Elijah tells how that prophet was taken up in a whirlwind at the end of his ministry (2 Kings 2:1, 11), though the account does not specify whether this was into the sky or heaven itself, or what happened to him at that point. In fact, in the New Testament Jesus is recorded as saying “No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man” (John 3:13) – indicating that these seeming ascension stories were not full ascensions into heaven as we might presume.

In any case, there are clear and important differences between the old pagan ascension stories, and even the Old Testament stories and the ascension of Jesus as described in the gospels. A great many of the ancient ascension stories simply involve a change of location rather than a change of authority, power, or state while the gospel accounts make it clear that Jesus was received into heaven as supreme over all at the right hand of God the Father (1 Peter 3:22; etc.). No pagan story has anything like this – they tell only of humans who go into the realm of the gods but who remain far less than the great gods themselves.

Another major difference is that ascended heroes of pagan mythology are never said to have been going *back* to heaven whereas Jesus clearly said this of himself (John 6:38; 16:5, 28; etc.). The ancient stories never involve the ascending individual leaving detailed instructions or commissions for the followers or others left behind and never promise to return – both very important aspects of the gospel stories of Christ’s ascension.

Finally, pagan ascension stories always involve the good of the individual who goes to heaven – but in the gospels we see Jesus who spoke about having to go away for the good of his disciples and followers (John 16:7), and who took up specific roles in heaven to do exactly that, as we will see. The biblical story of the ascension, like that of the resurrection, is nothing like the ancient stories that may seem at first sight to be similar (see Note 1).

When we look at the accounts of the ascension in the gospels, relatively little is said about that event compared to the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus – leading some to speculate that the gospel writers were unsure if the ascension actually occurred. This speculation fails to understand the nature of the situation itself. In the case of the birth and death of Jesus there was a great deal of collateral information that could be included in the accounts. For instance, in the birth accounts, the pregnancies of Mary and Elizabeth, the story of the shepherds, the story of the Magi, and many other details could be included. In the case of the ascension of Jesus there was actually little to report in terms of the background or details of the event *as witnessed by the disciples*. When Jesus decided the time was right for his departure he simply left as he finished blessing them (Acts 1:9) and the ascension itself – as they saw it – was a relatively brief, if majestic and profound event. Given this situation, we cannot expect the gospel accounts to be fuller than what they are. More important than additional details in this case was the simple fact that the ascension occurred – as the gospels do record – and the great joy of the disciples as they now better understood the purpose of Jesus’ leaving and as they awaited the Spirit he had promised he would send to them (Acts 1:4–5).

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

The relative paucity of detail in some of the gospel accounts of the ascension means that it can be difficult to synchronize the information they do give us. We will look here at the individual accounts as found in the Synoptics and John in order to harmonize what may seem like differing accounts. Because the ascension event itself was closely tied to the commission Jesus gave his disciples before leaving them, we will also look at that aspect of the ascension story in those cases where it is present.

Matthew’s Account

Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18–20)

Notice that Matthew does not address the ascension directly – he concludes his gospel by recording the final commission Jesus gave his disciples before leaving them.

Mark’s Account

Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven ... He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well.” After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God. Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it. (Mark 16:14–20)

In Mark’s account we see that both Jesus’ final commission and his ascension are mentioned together.

Luke's Account

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God. (Luke 24:45–53)

Luke closes his gospel with this brief summary of both Jesus' commission to the disciples and his ascension. But his gospel is, of course, only the first part of the two-part work Luke-Acts, and Luke expands the story at the beginning of Acts:

In my former book, *Theophilus*, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen ... On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." (Acts 1:1–11)

Taken together, Luke's' accounts of the ascension are the most detailed that we have and contrast strongly with the very brief references found in the final gospel – that of John.

John's Account

The Gospel of John has no direct mention of the ascension event, but it contains three references to the ascension in Jesus' own words. In speaking to Nicodemus Jesus said "No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man" (John 3:13 ESV). In speaking to the disciples, he said "What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending where he was before?" (John 6:62 ESV). Finally, in speaking to Mary Magdalene, after his resurrection, Jesus said "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father" (John 20:17). Far from downplaying the resurrection as some claim, these three references show that John's Gospel takes the event for granted and therefore only mentions it in passing.

Harmonizing the Accounts

The main difficulty sometimes thought to be found in the accounts of the ascension is that Luke's Gospel seems to imply that the resurrection and the ascension took place on the same day (Luke 24:1–53), while the book of Acts plainly states that the two events occurred forty days apart (Acts 1:3). But in his gospel Luke is simply giving an abbreviated account which compresses the forty days in which Jesus taught the disciples (see Note 2). The forty days are implied in his Gospel's account when Luke writes "Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures" (Luke 24:45). For Luke to contradict himself in the two halves of his work would be unlikely, to say the least.

Another supposed difficulty in the ascension accounts is that in Matthew's version the disciples are told to go to Galilee to meet Jesus, and they immediately do so. He appears to them there and gives them final instruction, apparently before ascending to heaven. But in Luke, the disciples are not told to go to Galilee, and they apparently never leave Jerusalem where they witness the ascension. Here again the supposed difficulties are merely the result of literary compression. Matthew does not actually mention the ascension – as we saw above – or say where the disciples witnessed it. Luke, on the other hand, does not mention the disciples' journey to Galilee – but that does not mean he did not think it occurred any more than Matthew did not think the ascension occurred. Both authors compress their accounts, but in different ways.

CONCEPTS AND APPLICATIONS:

What the disciples experienced was really only the first part of Jesus' ascension.

Now that we have compared the gospel accounts of the ascension, we can expand upon them through additional information found in the Old and New Testaments. This is an important key to understanding this event. What the disciples experienced and was recorded in the gospels was really only the first part of Jesus' ascension. The second part – discussed elsewhere in the Bible – was his ascent into heaven and what happened there. The ascension of Jesus initiated or reinitiated four vitally important aspects of Jesus' nature and work and we will look at each of them.

1. Exaltation

The glory Jesus had with the Father before the world began (John 17:5) had, of course, been veiled during his physical life on earth – except for one brief and limited exception at the transfiguration (Matthew 17:1–9). The first aspect of Jesus' ascension into heaven was his exaltation by the Father (Ephesians 1:19–23). As the One with whom the Father said he was well pleased (Matthew 17:5), we are told he was received in honor and given a name above all names (Philippians 2:9). Jesus' ascension into the heavenly Jerusalem was in that sense a true triumphal entry of which the triumphal entry into the physical Jerusalem on Palm Sunday was only a foreshadowing. In this heavenly triumph Jesus not only returned to his original glory, but also ascended the throne he was given over all at the right hand of God the Father. This primary aspect of the ascension was foreseen in the book of Psalms when David wrote of God saying “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet” (Psalms 110:1).

2. Intercession

Jesus' ascension began his work as our High Priest in heaven (Hebrews 4:14-16). Under the old covenant atonement for sin was not accomplished simply by slaughtering animals – the sacrifices had to be presented at the altar by qualified priests who offered them with prayers for their acceptance. Under the new covenant, Jesus is both the sacrifice for sin and the High Priest qualified to offer in the presence of God (Hebrews 9:15). The apostle John speaks of these twin aspects of Jesus' roles – as both our sacrifice and our advocate – when he writes: “But if anybody does sin, we have *an advocate* with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is *the atoning sacrifice* for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:1–2, emphases added). The apostle Paul describes this intercessory work when he says: “Christ Jesus who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us” (Romans 8:34), as does the book of Hebrews: “Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them” (Hebrews 7:25). Notice that Psalm 110 also speaks of this priestly role of the Messiah (vs.4).

3. Evangelization

We saw earlier in this unit how the ascension was closely tied to the commissioning of the disciples to go into all the world. But Jesus did not just send them out and then leave them. At the same time he commissioned the disciples to do the work of evangelization, he promised them “surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). It is a mistake to think of evangelization as purely the work of the church and of God’s people individually. In the introduction to the book of Acts, Luke wrote: “In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach” (Acts 1:1). Luke’s first book – the Third Gospel – does indeed describe the work of Christ in his physical ministry, but notice that Luke says that was only what Jesus “began to do and to teach.” That work continued after Christ’s ascension in the form of Jesus working through his church – as recorded in the sequel to Luke’s Gospel – the book of Acts. Jesus certainly did not leave his work to others. He initiated his work of evangelization and then, at his ascension, began the work of carrying the gospel through his people – “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

4. Preparation

When Jesus ascended to heaven, it set the pattern for his eventual return. In his account of the ascension in the book of Acts, Luke tells us that:

[the disciples] were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven” (Acts 1:10–11).

The angelic messengers confirmed what Jesus himself had said in his prophecy shortly before his arrest: “then all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory” (Matthew 24:30), and at his trial before the Jewish religious authorities: “you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Matthew 26:64). Notice the two halves of what Jesus said – just as his ascension established his throne at the right hand of God, so it will lead to his return to earth in the same way he left – visibly, and in the clouds (see also Revelation 1:7; and see Note 3).

The Once and Future King

The ascension of Jesus is thus a fitting event with which the story of the gospels concludes. Just as the ascension tied together the completion of Christ’s initial earthly work and the beginning of his new heavenly work, it also tied together his leaving this world and returning to it. This double aspect of the ascension was seen in a vision recorded in the book of Daniel – a prophecy that combines the ascension of Jesus and his going before God as well as his eventual return in majesty and power:

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13–14)

Seen in full perspective, the ascension of Jesus was not simply the end of his earthly work, it was the beginning of his eternal work, and the beginning of our future.

* Note 1: It is perfectly natural that any culture having the concept of a god or gods in the sky or the heavens would be likely to produce myths and stories of heroes or others attempting, or even succeeding, to ascend to the heavenly realm. Such a naturally occurring literary phenomenon proves nothing regarding the New Testament accounts of the ascension, which differ substantially from the myths of other cultures and share nothing in common with them.

*Note 2: Compression of time periods is a common literary technique found in ancient and classical authors. Ancient writers who used this literary device include Cicero, Lucian, Quintilian, and Sallust, among Latin authors alone. Luke used the technique a number of times. For example, he omits the trip of Jesus' family to Egypt that is recorded in Matthew. The other gospel writers also use compression at times, as their purpose was not to include every detail, but to focus on the events they wished to stress.

* Note 3: The description in Acts 1:9 of Jesus ascending in a cloud (the Greek is singular) doubtless had a greater resonance for Jewish readers of the first century than it might for us. The description of the transfiguration also tells us that Jesus was received into a cloud (Matthew 17:5), and in both cases the "cloud" is reminiscent of that which the Hebrew Scriptures describe as surrounding God – for example, in Exodus where God spoke to Moses out of the cloud (Exodus 19:9; and see Exodus 40:34–35; 1 Kings 8:10–11; etc.).

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REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Basics:

Write a single paragraph summary combining the accounts of the ascension as witnessed by the disciples and recorded in the individual gospels. Write another single paragraph summary of what the rest of the Bible tells us about the ascension.

Beneath the Surface:

The resurrected Jesus told his disciples to meet him in Galilee (Matthew 28:7, 10; Mark 14:28; Mark 16:7). What reasons might he have had for meeting his disciples there rather than in Jerusalem?

Everyday Applications:

Think about how the ascended Christ's four roles (described in the "Concepts and Applications" section above) relate to you personally. What responsibility does each of Christ's present roles place on us as his followers?

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