

Christ Ascended for us – ‘I Have Gone to Prepare a Place for You’

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KEYWORDS: last words, separation, unification, Temple, presence of God, promise of Jesus, Father’s house, relationship with God, advocate, miracle, reconciliation

In this paper I am going to look at John 14 and verses 1-14. It is a passage that is meant to be an encouragement to God’s people: ‘Let not your hearts be troubled, believe in God, believe also in me’.

Thus, in looking at this passage some of these themes connected with Christ’s ascension and Christ’s continuing ministry are meant to be just that – an encouragement to us as believers to go on in the faith and to serve God faithfully wherever we are. Of course it is important to understand this passage and indeed any passage in scripture in its proper context. John 14 verses 1-14 are part of what is known as the ‘Farewell Discourse’.

Chapters 13-17 of the Gospel of John contain Jesus’ last teaching with the disciples on the evening just before he was betrayed and then crucified. We all place an added degree of importance to last words. We expect the last words of a loved one to be somehow significant and important and this is why, as families, as someone is dying, we gather at the bedside and parents desire to express their love, or children desire to hear these last words of encouragement or exhortation or blessing from a parent. We also know this from films and books. Quite frequently the melodrama centres round these last words of the hero or heroine, and I think in a very real way this is how we are supposed to read John chapters 13-17. John is setting before us these last words of teaching which the Lord Jesus wanted to impart to his disciples before he went out from them, before his death, resurrection and ascension. Indeed, in many ways these words are meant to prepare the disciples for the events that are about to occur. Interestingly, if you look through chapters 13-17, these are not just to prepare the disciples for the cross.

They were meant to prepare the disciples for their ongoing ministry after Christ’s ascension. They were meant to give the disciples a proper perspective for their continuing life and ministry together with the ascended Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit in and through them.

The Purpose of Jesus

The first thing that becomes clear from this passage is that Jesus is leaving his disciples for an express purpose. Jesus’ departure, ascension and his leaving this earth was not just

the necessary logical conclusion, what automatically had to happen following on from his death and resurrection. Rather, his departure from this earth was part of God’s plan; all part of God’s plan for the salvation of a lost humanity. This is clear in verse 1: ‘Let not your hearts be troubled, believe in God, believe also in me. In my father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you I will come again and take you to myself that where I am you may also be.’ Specifically, the Lord Jesus died, rose again and left this earth in order to prepare a place in eternity for all those who believe. The Lord died and rose again in order to prepare a place for us in eternity.

This is something worth exploring in greater detail. Jesus’ comment, ‘I go to prepare a place for you?’, seems to suggest that, in some way, heaven is not prepared nor ready to receive us. It almost conjures up some kind of image of celestial spring cleaning – getting the guest room ready for those that are to come. The thing we have to remember is that the ‘going’ that Jesus is speaking about is his departure from the disciples. It is not specifically, although it includes, the ascension. He is speaking about his departure from their midst, from their presence.

Thus, the ‘going’ and ‘coming’ which Jesus refers to must be understood in terms of the chronology of events which were still about to occur for Jesus and for the disciples who were hearing these words. Quite literally Jesus is going to go from them. He is going to be taken from them and that is why they need this word of encouragement, this exhortation. Their hearts are troubled. They have just spent three years ministering with the Lord Jesus and now he says to them, ‘Where I am going you cannot follow, you cannot come with me, but you will follow afterwards.’ Can you imagine the bombshell that must have been for them? They had spent three years in the closest and most intimate of relationships, ministering with the Lord Jesus, getting to know him very, very deeply over that period of time. Here, suddenly they know that the tension is building and then, in this last meal they celebrate together, Jesus drops another bombshell – one of them is going to betray him. We can imagine the consternation. Finally Judas leaves and John simply says, ‘And it was night’: an act of great darkness is about to occur. And this is the ‘going’ that Jesus refers to. He is going from the disciples in order to prepare a place for them.

Thus, Jesus stresses that though they will inevitably be separated for a while, the separation is purposeful and that purpose is reunification; they will be united again one day, but the only way in which such can occur in the presence of the Father is through the completion of his work on their behalf. His ‘going’ is the going to death. His ‘going’ is going out to pay the sacrificial price that had to be paid for our

sins. His 'going' is the going to the cross. His 'going' is the going to the grave. Then we see that he returns once again to his believers and then the 'going' is to his Father. The 'going' that Jesus speaks about, the going to prepare a place for us, is, thus, referring to the work he is about to complete – the work that he is about to bring to absolute conclusion in his death, resurrection and ascension – the ascension being a sign that his work is complete and acceptable to the Father. In this way Jesus does indeed prepare a room for us in heaven. Thus, Jesus speaks of heaven as yet unprepared for believers because the price has not been paid, but once that sacrifice has been made on the cross, by his resurrection and ascension heaven is indeed prepared for all believers and the Lord Jesus has in fact prepared a place for us. Derek Thomas says, 'The place to which Jesus refers already exists but it is not ready for his disciples to occupy. Jesus has to go and prepare it for them. The crucifixion, resurrection and ascension were all necessary to make heaven habitable for Jesus' disciples.'

This strongly relational aspect to Jesus' teaching is further emphasized by the fact that we are told it is in the Father's house that Jesus prepares rooms for us. This phrase is one that we should be familiar with since, for example, in John chapter 2:16 Jesus confronts the merchants and the money lenders buying and selling in the Temple and challenges them by asserting that they should not be doing such things 'in my Father's house'. Equally, when he was a young man and his parents found him in the Temple in Jerusalem he said to them, 'Did you not know that I would be in my Father's house?' This is a phrase which Jesus often uses to refer to the Temple in Jerusalem and (as we all know) the Temple is a visual symbol, the image of God's real presence on earth. There is a sense in which the High Priest when he moved from the Holy Place into the Holy of Holies once a year to make propitiation for the sins of all the people, moved into the very real presence of God. The Temple was the symbol of God's real presence on earth. God's people entered into God's presence under the old covenant by way of God's house. What, then, does Jesus imply in John 14? In the very real presence of God, through the work of Christ on the cross, in the resurrection and in the ascension the Lord Jesus goes to prepare a place for all his saints. The preparing of a place, therefore, refers to the securing of relationship with the Father through his death and resurrection and return to the Father. Christ prepares a means of access for us. He prepares a place of dwelling for us in the very real presence of God the Father.

Jesus' return is purposeful

We see this in verse 3. 'And if I go and prepare a place for you I will come again and will take you to myself that where I am you may be also.'

Again the language stresses the strongly relational aspect to the words of Jesus in the farewell discourse and is intended as a word of encouragement: he is going, but he will be back. He's going, but he's coming back for an express purpose; he'll be back for us personally. Grasp again the personal relationship of that promise. This is Jesus, the living God, who walked on earth as a man and there can be no

falsehood in him. There can be no doubt about any promise which he makes. Not only does Christ guarantee that he will come back, but in that return he promises that he will take us to be with him. There is no doubt for any who is a believer in Christ. Our final destiny is secure – one hundred per cent secure.

Let me illustrate. I'm a Glasgow boy born and bred but I now live in the 'sticks' and to get to our place is not all that easy. I frequently give people directions, but I say to them, 'Take your mobile, just in case'. I can send you an e-mail with directions and hopefully you'll make it there. You may have to call somewhere along the way and ask for more directions – 'I'm here beside this field of sheep. How do I get to where you are from where I am?' So, if I want to be absolutely 100 per cent certain that our guests are going to get to us, what do I do? I go and get them. I know the way. I'm not going to get lost on the way to my own house! It's only an illustration – OK!

So what is Jesus' promise? He will come back and get us. We can be 100 per cent certain that we're not going to miss the train. Jesus is coming back to get us. He's coming back to take us personally to where he is. The living God promises that he will come and get us and take us to the place where he is. He knows the way to the Father's house and in order to be absolutely sure that not one of his children gets lost he comes and promises that he will take us to be with him.

Believers know the Way

From what we read in verses 5-11 the disciples and the Lord Jesus are talking at cross purposes. However, the fact of the matter is that Jesus is referring to the way he has already revealed to them. They have already been told the way by which they are going to the Father's house. From the moment when God revealed to the disciples Jesus' identity as Messiah, as the promised anointed One who would pay for their sins and restore relationship with the Father, Jesus told the disciples that he was going to have to go to Jerusalem, be handed over to the authorities to die and on the third day would rise again. They knew this and should have realized that this is the way to the Father.

Nevertheless, the disciples didn't grasp this until after the resurrection – in many ways understandably. But what is clear in the following words of Jesus as recorded by John is that his death and his resurrection opens another way to the Father for the disciples and for us.

Simply, Jesus died paying the price for our sins so that we can find the way to the Father's house. Jesus' way was the Via Dolorosa – the way of suffering and he took upon himself the path of suffering, death and resurrection and opens up for us the way by which we go to the Father. Once again it is through relationship. The way in which we as Christ's disciples go to the Father is through knowledge of him and in relationship with him. Thus, he says, 'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life'. The Lord Jesus himself is our way to the Father's house and it is in relationship with him that a new route and a new way is opened up for us and relationship with Christ, entering into a relationship with Christ guarantees us a room in the Father's house. Entering into relationship, submitting ourselves in faith to Christ guaran-

tees for us a room in the presence of the living God. It guarantees for us a place before the very throne of God. If we have indeed entered into that kind of relationship by faith through God's grace then we are guaranteed a homecoming with God in heaven. It doesn't matter how you feel, what doubts you have. It doesn't matter what theology you may have with regard to the perseverance of the saints. It really doesn't matter how overwhelmed or dismayed we may feel by the sin in our own lives. It doesn't matter. That sin has been lifted from us. The righteousness of Christ has been placed upon us. And if we have a real and living relationship with the Lord Jesus then we are guaranteed a room in the Father's house. The booking has already been made and it can't be unmade.

We have an advocate

The disciples' confusion continues in verses 8-11. Jesus says, 'If you had known me you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and you have seen him'. Philip picks up on this and he says, 'Lord show us the Father and that is enough. Show us God and that is enough'. I think we can sense in these verses an element of Jesus' disappointment. These must have been heart-rending moments for the Lord Jesus, these final moments when he so needed support and didn't find any, even amidst his closest friends here.

The implication of Jesus' 'I am' statements in verse 6: 'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life', should (under normal circumstances) have been quite obvious to the disciples. Jesus' statement here (there are, of course, seven such 'I Am' statements throughout the gospel of John) is theologically poignant. Jesus is equating himself with God. However, this was quite clearly a bit too much for Philip and he didn't quite grasp this.

Thus the disciples recognized Christ's humanity and had witnessed it on a day to day basis for three years. They had also received insight into his divinity, but they hadn't quite put that mystery together yet, the mystery of the incarnation and God and man in one person. Perhaps, we shouldn't be too hard on the disciples. They were faithful Hebrews, steeped in the monotheism of the Old Testament and whilst there are indications of a multi-personal God in the Old Testament, that obviously becomes much, much clearer in the incarnation of Christ and for us who have the New Testament at our disposal. Nevertheless, Jesus' disappointment is evident; perhaps because he had had a similar discussion, days earlier with his enemies. In John 10: 22-42 he has a conversation with the religious rulers in Jerusalem. They say to him, 'Oh you're clearly claiming to be God'. Jesus says to them, 'Yes you're right. I am claiming to be God and if you don't believe my words, believe my actions, believe the deeds that I do.' What is important to us is Jesus' reply to Philip. He comments, 'Do you not believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me or else believe on account of the works themselves.' In this Jesus gives the same response to his disciples as he did to the religious leaders in Jerusalem. He says, 'If

you cannot simply believe my words look at my actions. Look at what I have been doing over the last three years. The blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, the leper is made whole.' For those who had been grounded in the Old Testament it would have been quite clear that these are deeds which are the sole remit of God himself. Only God can make the blind see. Only God can make the deaf hear and Jesus said, 'If you cannot accept it by faith, because of my words, accept it because of my deeds. The things that I do you know only God can do. Surely you must realize because of these deeds that I and the Father are one.'

He adds, 'Truly, truly I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do, and greater works than these will he do because I am going to the Father'. Because the Lord Jesus has ascended to the Father he says that his believers, his disciples will do the same work and even greater works than he has done because he is about to return to the Father. 'Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name I will do it.' Now it is difficult to imagine greater works than raising the dead but I think that gives some indication into the meaning here. The 'greater' may not necessarily be in reference to magnitude, but rather greater in terms of number and extent, greater in terms of the spread of those works through his church, through his disciples; both geographically and generationally. The works of Christ are spread through his church. The greatest miracle of all is the miracle that Christ was about to fulfil; the miracle of reconciliation with the Father; the miracle of providing this new route back to heaven. That surely is the greatest of all Christ's miracles, the miracle of reconciliation with the Father, the miracle of providing this new way, this new route back to heaven. That is surely the greatest of all Christ's miracles. That's the reason why he came and this miracle is spread by God the Holy Spirit through his church, through his people through many lands and through many generations.

Now I would hasten to add that that doesn't mean that the other acts which Christ is calling to our attention, the fact that the deaf hear and the blind see, cease to happen in generations to come. But I believe that the greater acts, the greater deeds, the miracle of the expansion of the gospel through many generations and through many peoples – reconciliation with the Father – the greatest miracle of all is primarily in view. The most important point to ask is how and why these deeds, these miraculous deeds and the miraculous spread of the gospel, the miraculous regeneration of dead people to life, occur? They occur because Jesus has ascended to the Father. They occur because Jesus has gone back to the Father.

We see in these verses 12-14 that Jesus has returned, and because he has returned our prayers become all the more efficacious. Because Jesus has gone back to the Father and because we can pray in his name our prayer for the expansion of his kingdom, our prayers for miraculous works to be done in accordance with God's sovereign will and for his glory become all the more efficacious because we have an Advocate and because we have a Great High Priest.

Hebrews 4:14-16 records, 'Since then we have a Great High Priest who has passed through the heavens Jesus the Son of God let us hold fast to our confession for we do not

have a High Priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.' The fact is that we have a Great High Priest and that should give us courage to fulfil the call he has laid upon us and to minister wherever he has placed us for his glory in sharing the gospel and doing the works that he calls us to do. 'Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to find in a time of need.' Robert Murray McCheyne said these words, 'If I could hear Christ praying for me in the next room I would not fear a million enemies'. Yet the distance makes no difference. He is praying for me,

he is now praying for us. Let this vision of the ascended Christ praying on our behalf take us from here and may he, himself, equip us for great acts of service on his behalf.

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Christ Ascended for Us – 'Jesus' Ascended Humanity and Ours'

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KEYWORDS: Incarnation, God the Son, glorified humanity, love of God, glory of Jesus, reward, our guarantee of heaven, Kingship of Christ, Sovereignty of God, glorification of humanity

The first thing I think we should be clear about is the continuing humanity of the ascended Christ. What do I mean by that? In rising from the dead and ascending to heaven Christ did not cease to be human, he did not discard his humanity like a used garment that was no longer necessary. On the contrary the Bible tells us that he rose again as a human being and he then took that human nature back into heaven. The ascended Christ is still human, he is still both God and man in one person.

Maybe we need to step back for a moment here and just remind ourselves of the doctrine of the incarnation. God became man. By God we mean specifically God the Son, the Second Person of the eternal Trinity. Not God the Father, not God the Holy Spirit but God the Son became man. Without in any way ceasing to be God he united himself with a full and true human nature. This human nature, of course, he took from his mother, the virgin Mary. Jesus Christ is therefore the God/Man fully and truly human, fully and truly divine at one and the same time in the unity of a single person, that person being God the Son. Why do I emphasize that? Well, simply because the incarnation can never be undone. The incarnation isn't some kind of temporary episode in the life of God the Son. No, having become man he remains man forever. He is eternally the God/Man. Having taken human

nature into intimate union with his divine nature, that union is, as it were, an unbreakable marriage and it is never dissolved; it never ends. Therefore, you see, when Christ rises from the dead he rises still as the God/Man, fully divine and fully human and when he ascends into heaven he ascends as the God/Man, fully divine and fully human. In the ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ into heaven there is no divesting himself of his humanity. He doesn't now stop being human and go back to being God. He never stopped being God when he was man on earth, and he doesn't stop being man when he returns to heaven. On earth he was both God and man in one person and now ascended into the heights of heaven he continues to be both God and man in one person. So the ascended Christ is indeed gloriously divine but he is equally, truly, authentically, human.

Now this is not to say that his risen, ascended humanity hasn't been glorified. It has. So there are differences between his earthly humanity and his ascended humanity, but that doesn't alter the fact that he is still human. He has a glorified humanity, not a glorified something else. We will be looking at this later. For now, I am simply underlining the point that the ascended Christ is still a human being and that he will remain a human being for all eternity – an exalted and glorified human being, yes, but a human being with a recognizable human body. Now we might ask, 'Where could we go to in Scripture to see that the ascended Christ is still a true human being?' One example might be Acts 5:30,31. 'The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree. Him God has exalted to his right hand to be prince and saviour, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sin.' Now, clearly, the one who has been