

The Ascension of Jesus and the Gift of the Holy Spirit

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The theme for this paper is 'The Ascension of Jesus and the Gift of the Holy Spirit'. I want to begin consideration of this theme by looking at Acts 2:32-33, a small part of Peter's sermon delivered in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost – the first day of what we might call the New Age of the Spirit – an Age to which we ourselves belong. On that first day of this new Era, a day on which 3000 people were added to the kingdom of God, Peter proclaimed these words in the power of the Spirit: 'God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear.'

This is one of the great Trinitarian texts of the New Testament in which we see the three persons of the Godhead – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – working together for the salvation of humanity. The title of this session highlights in particular the roles played by the second and third persons of the Godhead: the Son of God and the Spirit of God.

The Father's Key Role

But I want you to notice first of all the key role played by the other, often neglected person of the Trinity, the Father. In verse 32 it is clear that it is God the Father who raised Jesus from the dead. Verse 33 also reminds us that it was the Father who exalted Jesus to his right hand. The same Father who had sent Jesus out from his bosom of eternal love on his mission of salvation in the first place, received him back. And, having exalted Jesus, the Father then gave the promised Holy Spirit – the Holy Spirit that he the Father had promised to give – the Father gave this Spirit to the exalted Jesus. He was able, then, to pour out this Spirit upon his people and through them on the unbelieving community in which they were placed, with astonishing results and consequences, not least three thousand conversions – surely the first-fruit of that blessing with which Jesus was blessing his people in the very moment when he was taken home by the Father. When the real content of that blessing fell on these same people on the Day of Pentecost 3000 people were converted. The New Age began with the abundant blessing of the Father upon his children through his exalted Son Jesus Christ.

How we need to appreciate the primary role played by the Father not just in these events but also in the whole work of

salvation! Ultimately, it is the Father who is the source of our salvation – even as he is the ultimate source of all things. It is the Father who, in love, willed and planned the salvation of the world. It is the Father who, in love, sent his Son to redeem the world. And here we learn that it is the Father also who (surely in the same love) sent his Spirit on the Day of Pentecost to bring the blessings of redemption and of sonship to his people and to a lost world. The initiative at every stage lay with the Father. He is the personal, loving source of our salvation and sonship.

And, so too, he will also be, the goal/ end/ telos of our salvation/ our sonship – indeed, of all things. Just as, in the Ascension, the Son returned to the Father who had sent him out, so at last all who on earth receive the Spirit of sonship will also return to the Father who created them and redeemed them. We too will be taken home.

Our existence, our life, our being have come ultimately from the Father's heart of love. Our new spiritual life in Christ has come from the Father's heart of love. And to that heart of love each of us will return – both individually and also collectively as one family. In a very real sense, salvation is about our going home to the Father.

And that salvation begins here on earth, when in heart and mind and spirit – like the prodigal son in the parable – we come to our senses and return to the Father from the far country of our own rebellious and sinful idolatry. But it will be complete only when, with transformed and glorified bodies in the resurrection, we come to where the glorified body of Jesus already is – in the bosom of the Father, with the glory he had with the Father before the world was. Do you have that hope? Is this how you think of your salvation? Have you begun to come home to the Father and into the Father's loving embrace? If not, then, perhaps that's what you need to do right now: hear the Father calling you to himself; know the Father drawing you to himself through Jesus Christ his Son. And perhaps even some of you who've been Christians for many years, but have never really appreciated your sonship, need to come through to the Father's arms now as he calls you into his arms of love.

The Relationship between the Ascension of Jesus and the Gift of the Spirit

More particularly, this section deals with the relationship between what the apostle John calls the glorification of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit. Here John 7:37ff demands our consideration.

In verse 39 we read; 'Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.' These words show quite clearly that there was to be a chronological order – as well as a logical order – to these events. First

of all Christ had to be glorified, and only then could the Spirit be given. Without the glorification of Jesus the events of that first Day of Pentecost would never have happened.

Glorification of Jesus

Now, as far as John's gospel is concerned, the glorification of Jesus embraces the whole series of related events beginning with his death, continuing with his resurrection, and completed with his ascension to the right hand of the Father (see 12:23; 17:5).

Jesus is glorified, then, by going through death, resurrection and ascension. And each step of that whole process is his glorification – beginning with his death, so that the outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost is wholly dependent on the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. In particular, without the Cross there would be no Pentecost.

Let's consider, then, what this glorification of Jesus involved. And let's do so using the picture of the temple, remembering that Jesus is the New Temple of God, filled with the glory of God, and also filled with the River of the life-giving waters of the Spirit of God.

What happens to this temple on the Cross? Going back to John 2:19 we have to say that it was 'destroyed': 'Destroy this temple (said Jesus), and I will raise it again in three days'. But why was the temple of Jesus' body destroyed? We have to let our thinking about this be informed by our understanding of what had happened to the great temple that Solomon had built in Jerusalem and where Israel worshipped God for some 400 years. That temple was destroyed by the Babylonians at the time of the exile in about 586BC. But the great prophets of that time tell us that it was destroyed because of the idolatry and other, related sins of the people of God. The destruction was part of God's judgement upon that idolatry and related sin. And just immediately before its destruction we read – particularly in the Book of Ezekiel chapters 8-11 – of the way in which the presence and glory of God departed from the temple (Ezek. 10:4, 18f) – having been driven away by the idolatry and related sin of the people of God (see Ezek. 8:6).

How does that help us understand what happened in the experience of Jesus, the New Temple, on the Cross? We can say that on the cross, the New Temple became what it had never been before – polluted, unclean, unholy – a place filled with all kinds of abominations and with the most utterly detestable of things. It became the very embodiment of idolatry and its related moral sins. What had been until that moment the most holy spot on the face of the earth and indeed in all of creation – the holy of holies in which the glory of God dwelt bodily – became the most polluted place in the whole universe.

How can I say that? Because, (as we note in Isaiah 53:6), 'the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all'. The Father took all of my idolatry, corruption, wickedness and sin and he put it into the very heart of this temple, his Son Jesus Christ, on the Cross. He did the same for you, if you're a Christian, for all his people, from every nation, from all the generations of time. He took all of that vast mountain of idolatry and sin and packed it into the temple of Christ's body on the Cross and that Temple, Jesus Christ, received it all with open arms

– despite the contradiction of it all, despite its abhorrence to his very nature. That temple that had never known one unholy thought, that had never spoken one unclean or unkind word . . . embraced this enormous volume of pollution that flowed from my/ your polluted heart – such a volume that – in a sense – we can say it drove the presence and glory of the Father away. 'The Father turned his face away.'

Jesus, the New Temple of God, polluted with our idolatry, immorality, anger, selfish ambition, envy, drunkenness, or whatever our particular besetting sin is – came under the judgement of God that worked itself out in the attempts by his enemies – human and demonic – to destroy his body/ life. But surely, above all, it manifested itself in the awfully desolating experience of the departure of the presence and glory of the Father, leaving this ruined temple resounding/ reverberating with the most profound Song of Lament that has ever been heard in any temple: 'My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?' For at least three hours of hellish darkness on the Cross this temple experienced (what Paul describes as) 'everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his power'.

Consider also Jesus' experience in terms of the river of the life-giving waters of the Spirit which filled him. In John 19:28 we learn that one of the seven recorded sayings of Jesus on the cross was: 'I thirst'. How did this temple (who had earlier said (7:37): 'if anyone is thirsty let him come to me and drink'; and (4:14): 'whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life'); how could this temple now thirst?

It is as if the life-giving waters of the River of the Spirit had been completely exhausted, totally dried up within him under the fiery ordeal of the judgement of God, leaving him spiritually and morally dehydrated. And that, I think, we must insist was indeed the case. So titanic were the dimensions of the suffering of Christ on the Cross, that it took the full measure of the River of the Spirit to equip him for the ordeal. Geoff Bingham says, 'The measure of his thirst was the measure of his accomplished suffering'.

But on the third day – in the resurrection – the New Temple was built again, never again to be destroyed. And in the ascension the human temple, Jesus Christ, was taken up by the Father and exalted to the highest place of all – established on the Mountain of God, the heavenly presence of the Father. There, in answer to Jesus' High-Priestly prayer (John 17), the Father filled the temple with the eternal glory of the eternal Son of God – he glorified Jesus with the glory he had had with him before the world was. And the Father also filled him with the eternal River of the Spirit: a glory and a river not just for himself, but also for all who will yet be part of the New Temple in Christ.

That River then did what the river always does from every true temple – it flowed out/ was poured out/ cascaded out from the Temple of the exalted Christ on the Day of Pentecost – it filled all those who prior to that time had believed in Jesus, it flowed out through them, and that day itself it brought 3000 people alive spiritually and morally. And ever since that day the River of God's Spirit has been flowing – from the exalted Temple, Christ, into and through the church, the temple of God on earth, to those who are thirsty and keep coming to him – and from them into this world, bringing

everyone – and everything – it touches alive.

But that process of glorification, began for Jesus on the Cross, for as we read in John 19:34: 'one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water', the water being symbolic of the great torrents of the River of the Spirit that would begin to flow in a special way on the Day of Pentecost. There could be no Pentecost without the Cross. But because of the Cross the River of Pentecost flows still – and will for ever: through time and eternity.

The Relationship between the Bodily Ascension of Jesus and the Continuing Ministry of Jesus through the Holy Spirit

The Spirit of Christ

When the Spirit came on the Day of Pentecost he came as the Spirit of Christ not just in the sense that he was sent/ poured out by the ascended Christ, but also in the sense that he came as a 'personal representative agent' of Jesus; almost as a 'substitute' for Jesus, as One who was going to continue the ministry of Christ to his people and to the world. This, I think, is already implicit in the opening verse of the Book of Acts. There Luke, the author of Acts, reviews his earlier book, the Gospel of Luke and indicates that in that book he had recorded 'all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up into heaven'. The implication is that in Acts his second book, Luke is recording for us 'all that Jesus continued to do and teach from the Day of Pentecost onwards'. To a large extent, then, the ministry of the Spirit is to be understood as a continuation of the earthly ministry of Jesus.

This is reflected, in particular, in John's teaching about the Spirit in chapters 14ff of his gospel. For example, John 14:18 says, 'I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.' And that's exactly what happened. The ascended Jesus came to these first disciples – as he comes to his people still – through the Spirit. John 14:16 records: 'I will ask the Father and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you for ever . . . (v 17) he will be in you'.

The Greek word translated as 'Counsellor' in the NIV is a rich word which has been variously translated as Counsellor, Helper, Comforter, and Advocate. But for the moment what I want you to notice is that Paraklete is another name for the Spirit, whom Jesus promises will be not only the constant companion of his people ('with you for ever') but also will indwell them ('he will be in you'). And the Spirit indwells us as 'another Paraklete', Jesus being the first Paraklete. The Greek word translated 'another' indicates another of the same kind. Just as Jesus was present with his disciples as Paraklete throughout his earthly ministry, so now – in the person of the Spirit – we have not only present with us, but actually within us, another Paraklete of the same kind, who continues the same ministry of Jesus in us, to us and through

us; a ministry of word and deed, a prophetic, priestly and royal ministry, a ministry that enables us to witness for Jesus; that enables us to proclaim his word in power with signs following; that enables us to regard our possessions as belonging to the whole family of God; that enables us to pray and sing hymns to God in trying circumstances; that causes us to weep as we part from those we have come to love deeply in the Lord; that enables us (like Stephen) even to die in a Christ-like manner.

Through his Spirit, Jesus will always be your Shepherd-King. You will not lack anything. He will make you lie down in green pastures; and lead you beside quiet waters. He will restore your soul. He will guide you in paths of righteousness and even as you go through the valley of thick darkness – and even of the shadow of death – he will be with you to comfort you. He will prepare a table before you in the presence of your enemies. He'll anoint your head with oil and make your cup overflow.

Through his Spirit, Jesus continues his ministry to his people!

The Spirit of the Father

But there is something perhaps even more amazing and astounding that results from the ascension – your body/ my body becomes the Father's home in this world. John 14:23 declares; 'If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.' Clearly, it is not only Jesus Christ, the Son of God who comes to indwell us through his Spirit, the Father himself comes too. If you are a Christian today, then know this that the heavenly Father lives in you – and ministers to you – and works through you, by his Spirit. Thus, through his Spirit the Father loves you and pours his love into your heart (Rom. 5:5), through his Spirit he cares for you, comforts you, renews your strength so that you can mount up with wings as eagles, gives you wisdom and revelation so that you may know him better, enlightens your mind so that you come to appreciate more fully the great dignity of your sonship, and the magnificence of your hope and eternal inheritance . . .

And none of that would have been true had it not been for the ascension of Jesus Christ. That's why Jesus said to his disciples in John 16:7: 'It is for your good/ to your advantage that I am going away'. Isn't that so typical of our Saviour? Who and what is he thinking about as he contemplates his departure from his disciples via the cross and the ascension – you and me; our good! All that Jesus ever did, and will ever do – is for your good!

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