

THE ASCENSION OF JESUS CHRIST

Isaac Ambrose (1604-1664)

THE ascension of Christ was a glorious design and contains in it a great part of the salvation of our souls. In prosecution of this, I shall show,

I. That He ascended: (1) *The types prefigure it.* “Then said the LORD unto me; This gate shall be shut, it shall not be opened...It is for the prince; the prince, he shall sit in it to eat bread before the LORD; he shall enter by way of the porch of that gate, and shall go out by the way of the same” (Eze 44:2-3). As the gate of the holy of holies was shut against every man but the high priest, so was that gate of heaven shut against all, so that none could enter in by their own virtue and efficacy, but only our Prince and great High Priest, the Lord Jesus Christ; indeed, He hath opened it for us, and entered it in our place and stead. “Whether the forerunner is for us entered, even Jesus, made an high priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec” (Heb 6:20). (2) *The prophets foresaw it.* “I saw in the night visions, and behold one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him, and there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom” (Dan 7:13-14). (3) *The evangelists relate it.* “He was received up into heaven” (Mar 16:19). “He was...carried up into heaven” (Luk 24:51). (4) *The eleven witnessed it.* For “while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight” (Act 1:9). (5) *The holy angels speak it.* “And while they looked stedfastly 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, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven” (Act 1:10-11). (6) *The blessed apostles in their several epistles ratify and confirm it.* “When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men...He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens” (Eph 4:8, 10). “Who is gone into heaven, and is on the right hand of God; angels and authorities and powers being made subject unto him” (1Pe 3:22).

II. How He ascended: The manner of His ascension is discovered in these particulars: 1. He ascended, blessing His apostles. “While he blessed them, he was parted from them, and carried up into heaven”

(Luk 24:51). It is some comfort to Christ’s ministers that, though the world hates them, Christ doth bless them. Yea, He parted with them in a way of blessing; as Jacob leaving the world blessed his sons, so Christ leaving the world blessed His apostles—and all the faithful ministers of Christ unto the end of the world. Some add that in these apostles, not only ministers but all the elect to the end of the world are blessed. The apostles were then considered as common persons, receiving this blessing for all of us; and so these words uttered at the same time are usually interpreted: “Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world” (Mat 28:20). This was the last thing that Christ did on earth, to show that by His death, He had redeemed us from the curse of the Law, and that now going to heaven, He is able to bless “us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places” (Eph 1:3).

2. He ascended visibly in the view of the apostles: “While they beheld, he was taken up” (Act 1:9). He was not suddenly snatched from them, as Elijah was, nor secretly and privily taken away, as Enoch was; but in the presence of them all, both His apostles and disciples, He ascended into heaven. But why not in view of all the Jews so that they might know that He was risen again and gone to heaven? Surely this was the meaning: God would rather that the main points of faith should be learned by hearing than by seeing. However, Christ’s own disciples were taught the same by sight that they might better teach others that should not see; yet the ordinary means to come by faith is hearing: “How shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? So then faith cometh by hearings, and hearing by the word of God.” And as for the Jews, saith the apostle, “Have they not heard? Yes verily, their sound went into all the earth, and their words unto the ends of the world” (Rom 10:14, 17-18).

3. He ascended principally by the mighty power of His Godhead. Thus, never any ascended up into heaven but Jesus Christ. For though Enoch and Elijah were assumed into heaven, yet not by their own power nor by themselves; it was God’s power by which they ascended, and it was by the help and ministry of angels. “There appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire...and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven” (2Ki 2:11).

4. He ascended in a cloud: “While they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight” (Act 1:9). Hereby He shows that He is Lord of all the creatures; He had already trampled upon the earth, walked upon the sea, vanquished hell or the grave, and now the clouds received Him, and the heavens are opened to make way for this King of glory to enter in. When Christ shall come

again, it is said that He shall come “in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (Mat 24:30). “Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven” (Mat 26:64). Which verifies that saying of the angel: “This same Jesus which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven” (Act 1:11). He went up in clouds, and He shall come again in clouds.

5. He ascended with the sound of a trumpet; not on earth, sounding Hosanna, but in heaven crying Hallelujah—so the psalmist: “God is gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet” (Psa 47:5). Certainly, great joy was in heaven at Christ’s ascending thither; the very angels struck up their harps and welcomed Him thither with hymns and praises.

6. He ascended in triumph, as a Roman victor ascended to the capital, or as David ascended after his conquest up to Zion. Now we read of two triumphal acts in Christ’s ascension, whereof the first was His leading of His captives, and the second was the dispensing of His gifts. The apostle and the psalmist join both together: “When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men” (Eph 4:8; Psa 68:18). (1) *He led them captive, who had captivated us.* Death was led captive without a sting; hell was led captive as one that had lost her victory; the Law was led captive, being rent and fastened to His cross... The serpent—[his] head being bruised—was led before Him in triumph, as was Goliath’s head by David returning from the victory. This was the first act of His triumph. (2) *He gave gifts unto men.* This was as the running of conduits with wine, or as the casting abroad of new coin, or as the shutting up of Christ’s triumph in His ascension up to heaven...

III. Where He ascended: The gospel tells us into heaven. Only Paul saith, that “he ascended up far above all heavens” (Eph 4:10). But the meaning is: He went above all these visible heavens into those heavenly mansions where the angels and the spirits of the just have their abode. Or, if the highest heavens be included, I see no absurdity in it. The highest heaven we usually call the kingdom of heaven, which is either heaven material or heaven spiritual. (1) *For the material heaven:* In some sense, He may be said to ascend above that both in respect of His body because the body of Christ is more glorious than any material heaven; and in respect of His soul because the soul of Christ is more blessed than all things else whatsoever. And, (2) *for the spiritual*

¹ **triumphal** – celebrating a triumph.

heaven, i.e., all angelic or heavenly perfections. He is said to ascend above them all, both in respect of His humiliation,² because He hath [lowered] Himself below all things and is therefore worthily exalted above all things; and in respect of His perfection, because the human nature of Christ is more excellent than any creature, being joined to the Godhead by a hypostatical union.³ There are some that understand this place of Christ’s ascending “far above all heavens” not so much by a local motion, as by a spiritual mutation and exaltation of His person; as earth heightened unto a flame changeth not its place only, but form and figure; so the person of our Savior was raised to a greatness and glory vastly differing from and surmounting any image of things, visible or invisible, in this creation. So, it is fitly expressed, He was “made higher than the heavens” (Heb 7:26). He was heightened to a splendor, enlarged to a capacity, and compassed above the brightest, beyond the widest heavens! He transcended all in the spirituality of His ascension, but I will not much insist on that.

IV. Why He ascended: The reasons are, 1. On Christ’s part, that through His passion He might pass to glory. “Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory?” (Luk 24:26) ... God exalted Him above the grave in His resurrection, above the earth in His ascension, and above the heavens in placing Him at His right hand. And He ascended that all those prophecies that were foretold of Christ might be accomplished: “Thou hast ascended on high” (Psa 68:18); “And his feet shall stand in that day upon the mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem on the east” (Zec 14:4). The types of this were Enoch’s translation, Elijiah’s ascension, Samson’s transportation of the gates of Gaza into a high mountain, [and] the high priest’s going into the holy of holies. “Seeing that we have a high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God” (Heb 4:14). Why, all these prophecies, types, and figures must needs be accomplished. Therefore, on His part, it was necessary that Christ must ascend and go into heaven.

2. The reasons on our part are (1) *that in our stead, He might triumph over sin, death, and hell.* In His resurrection, He conquered; but in His ascension, He triumphed. Now it was that He led sin, death, and the devil in triumph at His chariot wheels! And this is the meaning of the

² **humiliation** – Q. Wherein did Christ’s humiliation consist? A. Christ’s humiliation consisted in His being born, and that in a low condition made under the Law, undergoing the miseries of this life, the wrath of God, and the cursed death of the cross; in being buried, and continuing under the power of death for a time. (*Spurgeon’s Catechism*, Q. 26)

³ **hypostatical union** – union of full deity and full humanity in one person, Jesus Christ.

psalmist and of the apostle: “When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive” (Eph 4:8). He vanquished and triumphed over all our enemies, He overcame the world, He bound the devil, He spoiled hell, He weakened sin, He destroyed death, and now He makes a public triumphal show of them in His own person. He led the captives bound to His chariot wheels, as the manner of the Roman triumphs⁴ was, when the conqueror went up to the capital. It is to the same purpose that the apostle speaks elsewhere: “Having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it” (Col 2:15). It is a manifest allusion to the manner of triumphs after victories amongst the Romans. First, they spoiled the enemy upon the place, ere they stirred off the field—and this was done by Christ on the cross; and then they made a public triumphal show. They rode through the streets in the greatest state and had all their spoils carried before them; and the kings and nobles, whom they had taken, they tied to their chariots, and led them as captives. Thus did Christ at His ascension: then He openly triumphed in Himself—in His own power and strength. Other conquerors do not thus; they conquer not in themselves and by themselves; but Jesus Christ conquered in Himself, and therefore He triumphed in Himself. And though He triumphed in Himself and by Himself, it was not for Himself only, but for us, which made the apostle to triumph in His triumph: “O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1Co 15:55-57). If I may speak out what I think was this victory of Christ, I believe it was that honor given to Him after His resurrection by the conversion of enemies, by the amazement of the world, by the admiration of angels, and especially by His sitting down at the right hand of the Majesty on high! For therein is contained both His exaltation and His triumph over all His enemies to the utmost. (2) *That He might lead us in the way and open to us the doors of glory.* It is a question whether ever those doors of heaven were opened to any before Christ’s ascension. Christ tells us, “In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also” (Joh 14:2-3). Some infer hence, as if there should be many outer courts and many different places or states in glory; and yet that there

⁴ Roman triumphs – (*Latin = triumphus*) spectacular civic and religious celebration parades in the city of Rome that were the highest honors bestowed upon a victorious general.

is one place whither the saints should arrive at last, which was not then ready for them and was not to be entered until the entrance of our Lord had made the preparation. Again, the apostle tells us that the fathers “received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect” (Heb 11:39-40). Whence some infer that their condition after death was a state of imperfection, and that they were placed in an outer court on this side [of] heaven called Paradise or Abraham’s bosom. Christ also went there when He died and was attended with the blessed thief... I see no ground why the souls of saints should be excluded [from] heaven, either before or after Christ. As for that text of John 14:2, Christ saith, “In my Father’s house are many mansions,” not many outer courts, not many different states; and as for the fathers mentioned, surely “they without us should not be made perfect” (Heb 11:40). And we without them shall not be made perfect, in some sense, until the Day of Judgment.⁵ But our perfection is not in respect of a more glorious place, but in respect of that perfection whereof all the faithful shall be made partakers, as well in body as in soul, at the resurrection of the just. Thus far I grant that no soul ever entered heaven but by the virtue and power of Christ’s ascension; and that no soul and body jointly ever ascended (except Christ’s types) before Christ Himself opened those doors and led the way; and in this respect, He is called “the forerunner” of His people (Heb 6:20).

3. That He might assure us that now He had run through all those offices that He was to perform here on earth for our redemption: “he that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his” (Heb 4:10). He was first to execute His office, and then to enter His rest, though He were a son. So, the inheritance was His own, “yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered; and being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him” (Heb 5:8-9). This was the argument that Christ used when He prayed to be glorified again with His Father: “I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do. And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was” (Joh 17:4-5). This was the order of the dispensation of Christ’s offices: His first work was a work of ministry and service in the office of obedience and sufferings for His church; and His next work was the work of power and majesty in the protection and exaltation of His

⁵ See FGB 210, *Day of Judgment*, available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

church. And there was a necessity in this order. (1) *In respect of God's decree*, Who had so fore-appointed it (Act 2:23-24). (2) *In respect of God's justice*, which must first be satisfied by obedience before any entrance into glory (Luk 24:26). (3) *In respect of Christ's infinite person*, which being equal with God, could not possibly be exalted without some preceding descent and humiliation: "That he ascended [saith the apostle], what is it; but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth?" (Eph 4:9). (4) *In respect of our evidence and assurance*, this is the sign that Christ hath finished the work of our redemption upon the earth: first, He was to act as our surety, and then He was to ascend as our head or advocate—as the firstfruits, the captain, the prince of life, the author of salvation, the forerunner of His people.

4. That He might thoroughly convince the world of believers of their perfect righteousness: The Spirit—"when he is come," saith Christ—"will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: of sin, because they believe not on me; of righteousness, because I go to my Father, and ye see me no more" (Joh 16:8-10). If Christ had not fulfilled all righteousness, there had been no going to heaven for Him nor remaining there. Certainly, God would have sent Him down again to have done the rest, and the disciples should have seen Him with shame sent back again. But His ascension to heaven proclaims openly (1) *that He hath completely finished the work He had to do for us here*, that no more was to be done in this world for us, that the satisfactory work to justice was in itself finished. (2) *That God was well pleased with Jesus Christ and with what He had done and suffered for us*. Yea, God was so infinitely taken with Him and His oblation⁶ after His sufferings that He thought it not fit to let Him stay above forty days longer in this world. He could not be without Him in heaven, but He took Him up into glory and gave Him a name above every name. (3) *That we have our share in heaven with Him*. He went not up as a single person, but virtually, or mystically, He carried up all the elect with Him into glory; otherwise, how should the Spirit convince the world by His ascension of their righteousness?—or otherwise how should the Son of God convince His Father of the righteousness? I look upon Jesus Christ going into heaven, as a confident debtor after payment going into a court and saying, "Who hath anything to lay to his charge? All is paid, let the Law take its course." When Jesus entered heaven, He seemed thus to challenge justice, "Make room here for Me and Mine—Who should hinder? Hath the Law anything to say to these poor souls for whom I

⁶ **oblation** – something offered to God; in this case, Jesus sacrificed His life for His people.

died? If any in heaven can make objection, here I am to answer in their behalf." Methinks, I imagine a "silence in heaven" (Rev 8:1), (as John speaks) at this speech; only mercy smiles, justice gives in the acquittance, and God sets Christ down at His right hand. (4) *That He hath a new design to be acted in heaven for us*. He is taken up into glory that He may act gloriously the second part of our righteousness; I mean that He might apply it and send down His Spirit to convince us of it. He acted one part in the flesh, in the habit of a beggar, clothed with rags; but now He is gone to act the person of a prince in robes of glory, and all this to manage our salvation in the richest way that may be! Three great things Christ acts for us now in glory. First, He is in place of an advocate for us: "He ever liveth to make intercession for [us]" (Heb 7:25). He is always begging of favor and love for us. He lies there to stop whatever plea may be brought in against us by the devil or Law; yea, He is there to get out fresh pardon for new sins. Secondly, He is the great provider and caterer for us. He is laying in a great stock and store of glory for us against we come there: "In my Father's house are many mansions...I go to prepare a place for you" (Joh 14:2). Jesus Christ went before to take up God's heart for us, and now He is drawing out the riches of love from God His Father, and laying them in bank for us, which made the apostle say, "My God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus" (Phi 4:19). Thirdly, He sends down His Spirit to convince us that Christ's righteousness is ours. Indeed, the means of procuring this was the life and death of Christ, but the means of applying this righteousness are those following acts of Christ's resurrection, ascension, session, intercession, etc. By His death He obtained righteousness for us; but by His ascension, He applies righteousness to us. Now it is that in special manner He convinceth us of righteousness because He is gone to His Father, and we shall see Him no more. (5) *That He might receive His Kingdom over us in the place appointed for it*. As kings are crowned in the chief cities of their kingdoms and keep their residence in their palaces near unto them, so it was [fitting] that our Savior should be crowned in heaven and there sit down at God's right hand, which immediately follows His ascension.

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Isaac Ambrose (1604-1664): Anglican, then Presbyterian minister; born in Ormskirk, Lancashire, England, UK.

