

WHY DID JESUS ASCEND?

John Flavel (c. 1630-1691)

Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God.—John 20:17

WHY did Christ ascend? I answer: His ascension was necessary upon many and great accounts. For, *first*, if Christ had not ascended, He could not have interceded, as now He doth in heaven for us. And do but take away Christ's intercession, and you starve the hope of the saints. For what have we to succor ourselves when under the daily surprises of sin, but this: "If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father" (1Jo 2:1). Mark that: "*with the Father*"—a friend upon the place: One that abides there on purpose to transact all our affairs and as a surety for the peace betwixt God and us.

Secondly, if Christ had not ascended, you could not have entered heaven when you die. For He went "to prepare a place for you" (Joh 14:2). He was, as I said before, the first that entered heaven directly, and in His own name; and had He not done so, we would not have entered when we die, in His name. The Forerunner made way for all that are coming on, in their several generations, after Him. Nor could your bodies have ascended after their resurrection but in the virtue of Christ's ascension. For He ascended, as was said before, in the capacity of our head and representative, to His Father and our Father: for us and Himself too.

Thirdly, if Christ had not ascended, He could not have been inaugurated and installed in the glory He now enjoys in heaven. This world is not the place where perfect felicity and glory dwell. And then, how had the promise of the Father been made good to Him? Or our glory, (which consists in being with, and conformed to Him), where had it been? "Ought not Christ to have suffered...and to enter into his glory?" (Luk 24:26).

Fourthly, if Christ had not ascended, how could we have been satisfied that His payment on the cross made full satisfaction to God, and that now God hath no more bills to bring in against us? How is it that the Spirit convinceth the world of righteousness (Joh 16:8-10), but from Christ's going to the Father and returning hither no more?

[This] gives evidence of God's full content and satisfaction, both with His person and work.

Fifthly, how should we have enjoyed the great blessings of the Spirit and ordinances if Christ had not ascended? And surely, we could not have been without either. If Christ had not gone away, the Comforter had not come (Joh 16:7). He begins where Christ had finished. For He takes of His and shows it to us (Joh 16:14). And therefore, it is said, "The Holy Ghost was not yet given; because that Jesus was not yet glorified" (Joh 7:39). He was then given as a sanctifying spirit, but not given in that measure, as afterwards He was, to furnish and qualify men with gifts for service. And indeed, by Christ's ascension, both [the Spirit's] sanctifying and ministering gifts were shed forth more commonly and more abundantly upon men. These fell from [Christ] when He ascended, as Elijah's mantle did from him, so that whatsoever good of conversion, edification, support, or comfort you receive from spiritual ordinances, He hath shed forth that which you now see and feel. It is the fruit of Christ's ascension.

Sixthly, and *lastly*, if Christ had not ascended, how had all the types and prophecies that prefigured and foretold it been fulfilled? "And the scripture cannot be broken" (Joh 10:35). So that, upon all these accounts, it was expedient that He should go away. It was for His glory and for our advantage. Though we lost the comfort of His bodily presence by it, yet if we loved Him, we would rejoice He went to the Father (Joh 14:28). We ought to have rejoiced in His advancement, though it had been to our loss; but when it is so much for our benefit, as well as His glory, it is a matter of joy on both sides that He is ascended to His Father and our Father, to His God and our God. From the several blessings flowing to us out of Christ's ascension, it was that He charged His people not to be troubled at His leaving of them (Joh 14). And hence learn,

Inference 1: Did Christ ascend into heaven? Is our Jesus, our treasure, indeed there? Where, then, should the hearts of believers be, but in heaven, where their Lord, their life, is? Surely, saints, it is not good that your love and your Lord should be in two several¹ countries, said one that is now with Him. Up, and hasten after your lover, that He and you may be together. Christians, you ascended with Him, virtually, when He ascended; you shall ascend to Him, personally, hereafter. Oh, that you would ascend to Him, spiritually, in acts of faith, love, and desires daily. "Up with your hearts" was the form used by the

¹ several—separate.

ancient church at the sacrament. How good it would be if we could say with the apostle, “Our conversation is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour” (Phi 3:20)! A heart ascendant is the best evidence of your interest in Christ’s ascension.

Inference 2: Did Christ go to heaven as a forerunner? What haste should we make to follow Him? He ran to heaven; He ran thither before us. Did He run to glory, and shall we linger? Did He flee as an eagle towards heaven, and we creep like snails? Come Christians: “Lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus” (Heb 12:1-2). The Captain of our salvation is entered within the gates of the new Jerusalem, and calls to us out of heaven to hasten to Him, proposing the greatest encouragements to them that are following after Him, saying, “To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne” (Rev 3:21). How tedious should it seem to us to live so long at a distance from our Lord Jesus!

Inference 3: Did Christ ascend so triumphantly, leading captivity captive? How little reason, then, have believers to fear their conquered enemies? Sin, Satan, and every enemy were in that day led away in triumph, dragged at Christ’s chariot wheels, brought after Him as it were in chains. It is a lovely sight to see the necks of those tyrants under the foot of our Joshua. He made, at that day, an open “shew of them” (Col 2:15). Their strength is broken forever. In this He shewed Himself more than a conqueror; for He *conquered and triumphed too*. Satan was then trod under His feet, and He hath promised to tread him under our feet also, and that shortly (Rom 16:20). Some power our enemies yet retain: the serpent may bruise our heel, but Christ hath crushed his head.

Inference 4: Did Christ ascend so munificently,² shedding forth so many mercies upon His people, mercies of inestimable value reserved on purpose to adorn that day? O then see that you abuse not those precious ascension gifts of Christ, but value and improve them as the choicest mercies. Now, the ascension gifts, as I told you, are either the ordinances and officers of the church (for He then gave them pastors and teachers) or the Spirit that furnished the church with all its gifts. Beware you abuse not either of these.

First, Abuse not the ordinances and officers of Christ. This is a sin that no nation is plunged deeper into the guilt of than this nation,

² **munificently** – liberally; generously.

and no age more than this. Surely God hath written to us the great things of His law, and we have accounted them small things. We have been loose, wanton, skeptical professors for the most part that have had nice and coy stomachs³ that could not relish plain, wholesome truths, except so and so modified to our humors. For this the Lord hath a controversy with the nation, and by a sore judgment, He hath begun to rebuke this sin already. And I doubt not, before He make an end, plain truths will down with us, and we shall bless God for them.

Secondly, but in the next place, see that you abuse not the Spirit, Whom God sent from heaven at His ascension, to supply His bodily absence among us, and is the great pledge of His care for, and tender love to His people. Now, take heed that you do not vex Him by your disobedience; nor grieve Him by your unkindnesses; nor quench Him by your sinful neglects of duty or abuse of light. Oh, deal kindly with the Spirit, and obey His voice: comply with His designs, and yield up yourselves to His guidance and conduct. Methinks, to be entreated by the love of the Spirit (Rom 15:30) should be as great an argument as to be entreated for Christ’s sake. Now, to persuade all the saints to be tender of grieving the Spirit by sin, let me urge a few considerations proper to the point under hand.

Consideration 1: *First, He was the first and principal mercy that Christ received for you at His first entrance into heaven.* It was the first thing He asked of God when He came to heaven. So He speaks, “I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you” (Joh 14:16). No sooner had He set foot upon the place, but the first thing, the great thing that was upon His heart to ask the Father for us, was that the Spirit might forthwith be dispatched and sent down to His people. So that the Spirit is *the first-born of mercies* and deserves the first place in our hearts and esteem.

Consideration 2: *Secondly, the Spirit comes not in His own name to us* (though, if so, He deserves a dear welcome for His own sake and for the benefits we receive by Him, which are inestimable), *but He comes to us in the name and in the love both of the Father and the Son*, as one authorized and delegated by them, bringing His credentials under both their hands and seals. “But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father” (Joh 15:26). Mark, [Christ] will send Him from the Father; and in John 14:26, the Father is said to send Him in Christ’s name. So that He is the messenger that comes from both these great and holy persons. And if you have any love for

³ **nice and coy stomachs** – unmanly and reluctant dispositions.

the God that made you, any kindness for the Christ that died for you, show it by your obedience to the Spirit that comes from Them both, and in both Their names to us, and Who will be offended and grieved, if you grieve Him. Oh, therefore give Him an [reception] worthy of One that comes to you in the name of the Lord: in the Father's name, and in the Son's name.

Consideration 3: *Thirdly*, but that is not the only consideration that should cause you to beware of grieving the Spirit—because He is sent in the name of such great and dear persons to you—but He deserves better [reception] than any of the saints give Him for His own sake and upon His own account, and that upon a double score, viz.⁴ of His nature and office.

First, on the account of His nature, for He is God co-equal with the Father and Son in nature and dignity. “The Spirit of the LORD spake by me, and his word was in my tongue. The God of Israel said, the Rock of Israel spake to me” (2Sa 23:2-3). So that you see He is God, the Rock of Israel; God *omnipotent*, for He created all things (Gen 1:2); God *omnipresent*, filling all things (Psa 139:7); God *omniscient*, Who knows your hearts (Rom 9:1). Beware of Him therefore, and grieve Him not, for in so doing you grieve God.

Secondly, upon the account of His office, and the benefits we receive by Him. We are obliged, even on the score of gratitude and ingenuity, to obey Him; for He is sent in the quality of an advocate to help us to pray, to indite our requests for us, to teach us what and how to ask of God (Rom 8:26). He comes to us as a Comforter (Joh 14:16), and none like Him. His work is to take of Christ's and show it to us (Joh 16:14), i.e., to take of His death, resurrection, ascension, yea, of His very present intercession in heaven and show it to us. He can be with us in a moment; He can, as one well observes, tell you what were the very last thoughts Christ was thinking in heaven about you. It was He that formed the body of Christ in the womb, and so prepared Him to be a sacrifice for us. He filled that humanity with His unexampled fullness, so fitting and anointing Him for the discharge of His office.

It is He that puts efficacy into the ordinances, and without Him they would be a dead letter. It was He that blessed them to your conviction and conversion. For if angels had been the preachers, no conversion had followed without the Spirit. It is He that is the bond of union betwixt Christ and your souls, without which you could never

⁴ viz. – from Latin *vāletter*: that is to say; namely.

have had interest in Christ or communion with Christ. It was He that so often hath helped your infirmities when you knew not what to say; comforted your hearts when they were overwhelmed within you and you knew not what to do; preserved you many thousand times from sin and ruin when you have been upon the slippery brink of it in temptations. It is He (in His sanctifying-work) that is the best evidence your souls have for heaven. It would be endless to enumerate the mercies you have by Him. And now, reader, dost thou not blush to think how unworthy thou hast treated such a friend? For which of all these His offices or benefits dost thou grieve and quench Him? Oh, grieve not the Holy Spirit Whom Christ sent as soon as ever He went to heaven, in His Father's name, and in His own name, to perform all these offices for you.

Inference 5: Is Christ ascended to the Father as our forerunner? *Then the door of salvation stands open to all believers, and by virtue of Christ's ascension, they also shall ascend after Him, far above all visible heavens.* O my friends, what place hath Christ prepared and taken up for you! What a splendid habitation hath He provided for you! God is not ashamed to be called your God; for He hath prepared for you a city (Heb 11:16). In that city Christ hath provided mansions and resting places for your everlasting abode (Joh 14:2), and keeps them for you till your coming. Oh, how august and glorious a dwelling is that, where sun, moon, and stars shall shine as much below your feet as they are now above your heads? Yea, such is the love Christ hath to the believer that, as one saith, if thou only hadst been the chosen of God, Christ would have built that house for Himself and thee. Now it is for Himself, for thee, and for many more who shall inherit with thee. God send us a joyful meeting within the veil with our Forerunner, and sweeten our passage into it with many a foresight and foretaste thereof. And, in the meantime, let the love of a Savior inflame our hearts, so that whenever we cast a look towards that place where our Forerunner is for us entered, our souls may say with melting affections, “Thanks be to God for Jesus Christ”; and again, “Blessed be God for His unspeakable gift.”

From *The Whole Works of the Reverend John Flavel*, Vol. 1, 501-513, in the public domain.

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