AKL 0516

**“UP, UP, AND AWAY”*--THE ASCENSION OF JESUS***

Do you remember the song “Up, Up and Away in my Beautiful Balloon”, written in 1967? Mankind can go “Up, Up and Away” in a hot air balloon, or an aeroplane, or even a space rocket, but today we’re going to talk about someone who went up, up and away in a manner mankind just can't match!

There were several crucial events in the life of Jesus on earth. The incarnation (birth), the temptation, the transfiguration, the crucifixion, the resurrection, and the ascension. That makes 6 events, and a 7th one is yet to come – the return (2nd coming).

The ascension took place 40 days after the resurrection, and 10 days before Pentecost. Interestingly the temptation in the wilderness, at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, lasted 40 days, and the post-resurrection period at the end of his ministry was also for 40 days, where having conquered Satan he spent time training and teaching his disciples.

The ascension is a very significant event with great meaning for our lives today.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus looked forward to it. For example:

John 6:60-62 60“On hearing it, many of His disciples said, “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?” 61Aware that His disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, “Does this offend you? 62Then what if you see the Son of Man ascend to where He was before!”

They found it hard to believe He was the true bread that came down from heaven. They didn’t see Him come down though – but if they were to see Him go up to heaven, that would be pretty amazing.

John 17:4-5 4“I have brought You glory on earth by finishing the work You gave me to do. 5And now, Father, glorify me in Your presence with the glory I had with You before the world began.” He looked forward to His ascension back to glory.

We come to the actual event of the ascension in Luke 24:50-53.

50“When He had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, He lifted up His hands and blessed them. 51While He was blessing them, He left them and was taken up into heaven. 52Then they worshiped Him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. 53And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.”

Verse 52: They really knew He was God then! After the crucifixion they had been on a low, totally depressed and disheartened. They didn’t realise He was coming back. But now, 40 days later, when He left them for the second time, it was totally different. They were prepared, encouraged, inspired and joyful.

Verse 53 is the last verse of Luke, and Luke also wrote Acts, which starts in verse 1 from the point of the ascension. So the ascension links or connects the story of Jesus with the story of the Church as it begins in the book of Acts.

Acts 1:1-3  “In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach 2until the day He was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles He had chosen. 3After His suffering, He presented Himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that He was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.”

Acts 1:9-12 describes the ascension. A fantastic miracle! 9“After He said this, He was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid Him from their sight. 10They were looking intently up into the sky as He was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. 11“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.12Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day’s walk from the city.”

This happened at Bethany, which is a small village on the other slope of the Mt of Olives from the centre of Jerusalem, so He will return in the same way and to the same place He left from.

So where is Jesus now? In heaven (verse 11). Where is heaven? Is it a place up in the sky?

No, it isn’t a physical place. If you were to go up in a spaceship looking for it, you would never find it. One of the Russian cosmonauts discovered that. He concluded God doesn’t exist because he couldn’t see heaven from his rocket. But he was looking in the wrong place, because heaven is a spiritual place, a realm or kingdom in a different dimension, or a different state of being. God lives outside time and space, outside the Universe he created, in the spirit world, a realm of utter beauty, truth, purity and holiness.

Someone wrote “the ascension involved an intersection of time and eternity”. It was the “crossover point” from this world to the spirit realm. Jesus moved from one realm into the other.

He could have done this by simply disappearing, as the angels did in verse 10—they simply appeared from nowhere! Jesus chose to do it by going up into the sky, not because heaven is up there, but it’s good for us to think of heaven in that way, because it is a higher, superior place to where we are. It is the position of authority over the Universe.

TF Torrance wrote that it is better to think of heaven in *relational* terms rather than *spatial* terms. It is the place where God’s presence dwells. The cloud that hid him from their sight in v.9 represents the *presence of God*, who often went with Israel or into the temple in a cloud.

NT Wright wrote “Heaven and earth aren’t two different locations within the same continuum of space or matter. They are two different dimensions of God’s good creation.”

If you don’t understand the intricacies of that, don’t worry. All we need to know is that Jesus went back to heaven where he came from. The rest of it is the intellectual analysing of theologians trying to grasp the greatness of a God we can't really fathom with our limited human minds.

Paul talked about the ascension in Ephesians 4:7-10

7”But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. 8This is why it says: “When He ascended on high, He took many captives and gave gifts to His people.” 9(What does “He ascended” mean except that He also descended to the lower, earthly regions? 10He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.)”

Verse 10: He descended to the earth first, for 30 years, and then ascended higher than all the heavens – “far above all things” (KJV). Not talking of a physical place, but a spiritual realm and office of authority.

He “fills the whole universe.” This proves it can’t be physical. He is in a spiritual dimension that fills the whole universe! The ascension means that He moved from the physical to the spiritual realm.

Let’s move on now to the more important question of what can we learn from the ascension – what is its significance in our lives today?

**1.** It means his mission to bring our salvation is complete, because Jesus ascended and then He sat down. Mission accomplished!

Hebrews 1:3 “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by His powerful word. After He had provided purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.”

Hebrews 12:2 “fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before Him He endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

Our sins were forgiven by the crucifixion and resurrection, but the ascension and fact that then Jesus sat down in heaven, seals the completion of the job.

Generally, we don’t sit down before a job; we do the job and then sit down. Sitting down signals the completion of the job. When Jesus washed the disciples’ feet, He then took up His towel and outer garments again and sat down at the table – picturing the ascension, and the completion of the foot washing job.

Everything is finished so that we might be saved. With all the things in the tabernacle, the altars, the laver, the table of showbread, the lamp stand, etc, there is something missing – there is no chair for the High Priest to sit on. Why? Because the High Priest never sat down in the temple, because his work was never finished. There was always another sacrifice to prepare for.

But Jesus sat down because His work of sacrificing for our salvation is finished.

**2.** Another reason the ascension is important for us is that it means Jesus Christ is now in heaven interceding for us.

Hebrews 9:24 “For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; He entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God’s presence.” (The book that says the most about the ascension and its consequences for us is the book of Hebrews.)

He now appears for us in God’s presence.

While He was on earth, He could only be in one place at one time. If He was in Nazareth, He couldn’t be in Jerusalem as well. But now He has ascended, that has changed. He can now be universally available – because He has broken free from the limitations of our earthly dimensions of time and space.

The way it is put in 1 John 2:1 is that He is our advocate.

“My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.”

He speaks up for us and lets the Father know it is difficult for us to resist sin, because of our humanness, and He has experienced that. He reminds the Father (so to speak) that He has paid the penalty for our sins, He has bought us with a price.

Hebrews 7:25 “Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. The KJV says He is able to “save to the uttermost.” Someone put it that “He is able to save from the guttermost to the uttermost!”

Romans 8:34 “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.”

Isn’t it great to have someone in heaven interceding for us!!

**3.** The third benefit of the ascension to us today: He sent the Holy Spirit and other gifts to us.

In John 16:7 He said it was for our benefit that He was going, because unless He did that, we wouldn’t receive the Holy Spirit.

Ephesians 4:7-8 7“But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. 8This is why it says: “When He ascended on high, He took many captives and gave gifts to His people.”

This of course refers to the Holy Spirit, who was given just 10 days later, on the Day of Pentecost. This includes all of the wonderful fruits that come with the Spirit, and the talents and abilities called “spiritual gifts.”

We also experience the “crossover point” from one realm to the other in that we are visited from the heavenly realm when we receive the Holy Spirit!

**4.** The 4th reason the ascension is important to us today is that now He has gone to heaven, we can go there too!

Hebrews 6:19-20 19 **“**We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, **20**where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.”(KJV)

He is the first of the human race to enter heaven, but He was our forerunner, i.e. we will follow Him. He went to prepare a place for us.

John 14:2-3 “2My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?**3**And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.”

He will come back and take us there – to be in His presence, which is what heaven means.

This is where our song “Up, Up and Away” comes back to mind.

Part of the lyrics are: “We could float among the stars together, you and I, for we can fly, up, up and away.” That is going to come true for us, but we won't need a balloon to do it! It will happen spontaneously.

The song goes on to say: “The world’s a nicer place in my beautiful balloon”. It truly will be a nicer place then!

But in fact, even better than that just happening in the future, the Bible says that we are already “in the heavenlies.”

Ephesians 1:19-20 “19and His incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength 20He exerted when He raised Christ from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly realms,”

Ephesians 2:6 ” And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus,”

When we were baptised and rose up out of the water, we received the Holy Spirit and ascended to the heavenly realms too – i.e. we understand spiritual things. We are living to some extent in the spiritual realm, in the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven.

Colossians 3:1-3 “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. 3For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.”

We were baptised into Christ, we have been resurrected with Him, and even more we have ascended with Him—our life is hidden with Him.

So Jesus Christ’s ascension into heaven means we can be with Him there as well.

**5.** His ascension means He will come again – He will return to earth.

Phil 3:20-21 20“But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21who, by the power that enables Him to bring everything under His control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body.”

Acts 1:11 “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.”

**6.** And finally, the 6th reason the ascension is important to us today is that it was the signal for us to do His work on earth, the big job He left with His disciples as He ascended. Notice in Acts 1:8 the very last thing He said to them before He went up.

**8**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.” **9**After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

That reminds us of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:

**16**Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. **17**When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. **18**Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. **19**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, **20**and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Those were the last words He spoke to them, so I guess the mountain here refers to the Mt of Olives where He ascended. Some doubted even then (v.17), but when they saw Him rise, that must have put their doubts to an end!

Acts 1:10-11 **10**They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. **11**“Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky?”

When you look again at what the angels said to them after the ascension, it seems that maybe we’re being given a message: don’t just stand there staring into space, but get about the work of spreading the gospel here on earth!

So the amazing ascension of Jesus Christ, which happened right at this time of year about 2,000 years ago, has incredible meaning for Christians. It shows us Jesus is still alive, sitting on the throne in heaven. It means:

* Jesus’ mission to provide for our salvation is complete.
* We have Jesus in heaven now interceding for us.
* Jesus can send from there the Holy Spirit and other gifts for us.
* We have been raised up to heaven with Him, spiritually speaking.
* He will return again from there.
* We have a job to do here on earth.

Hebrews 4:14 “Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.”

Jesus is now in heaven as our glorious High Priest, so we can hold firmly to our faith and confidence, thanks to the miracle of the Ascension of Jesus Christ!