



Looking to Heaven

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CHILDREN'S TIME

For years, we presented Bibles to 3rd Graders, who had completed a class on how to use the Bible. To those becoming proficient in reading, we had taught essentials like there being an Old Testament and New, Gospels as well as Letters, Chapters and Verses and so forth. This was a great celebration, because every 8 year old had their own personal Bible, signed by the Pastor, with their own name in it. After presenting the Bibles, the 3rd Grade teacher asked her class to turn to the Book Of Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 1, verse 1 to begin to read together. But one girl's hand shot up, stating she did not have the Book of Acts. The teacher came over to her, and the Publisher had bound her Bible with all of the Old Testament and the Gospels and the Letters and Revelation, but had accidentally omitted the Book of Acts. Which raised the question, what if we had the whole Bible, except the Book of Acts? We would have all the Laws and History of Israel, the Prophets and Psalms, the Gospels of Jesus Christ, the Crucifixion and Resurrection, the Letters of Paul; but not the Ascension or Coming of the Holy Spirit?

I believe Jesus of Nazareth to be real. The incarnation of God and Humanity, the Sacrifice for our sins. Jesus was able to restore sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, to cure Leprosy, to feed thousands with a few scraps of food, to tell Storms to stop, to forgive sins which is the role of God. Jesus died and was resurrected. BUT DO we believe, Jesus could fly? How far does our imagination stretch our faith?

Neil Armstrong's words at setting foot on the moon "One small step for Man, a giant leap for Mankind", were said in contrast to Krushchev's statement of what the Cosmonaut thought at being the first man to witness Earth from outer space: "I looked and I looked and looked but there was No God in Heaven". What is at stake in the Ascension of Jesus is the Reality of God, our comprehension of Heaven, the relationship of God and Jesus to us today. The ascension is vital, because Jesus' was/is the Incarnation of God and Humanity together, and that tangible very real body atoned for the sins of the world. If there were no body, what faith do we have that our sins were ever atoned/forgiven?

As both Luke and Acts are addressed to the same person, Theophilus, there is assumption these were written by the same person. However, while Luke and Acts each make a single brief reference to The Ascension, it is unnamed in Matthew, Mark or John's Gospel. As Believers, in the 21st Century, are we AS READY to dismiss Jesus being carried up into the clouds, as some are to dismiss the Virgin Birth, 3 Kings, and he alone being rescued from an Infant genocide at the beginning of Matthew? The Gospels were written more than 2000 years ago, before the development of Scientific Theory, the Enlightenment, or Technologies we take for granted; in a different time, where culture was based on Myth and Mystery, rather than economics and proof. However, recognize that the Apostles' Creed names our Vow to believe in the Bodily Resurrection, and Ascension to sit on the right hand of God. SO IN ADDITION TO THE RESURRECTION FROM DEATH TO LIFE, do we believe in Jesus' Bodily ASCENSION and to WHERE?

The theologian Karl Barth described that "there is a very thin line in the New Testament which speaks of Christ's ascent into heaven, but that very thin line reveals an ultimate unrivaled historic turning-point." The Bible narrates a 6000 year history of human experience with God, the Human History of Salvation, in which we fell from Grace, broke trust and covenant relationship with God. In that entire 6000 years, 2/3 had been before Jesus, when a primary emphasis of Scripture had been "The LORD our God is One". Distinct from all other ancient Mesopotamian, Greek and Roman Religions which believed in a universe of Heaven and Hell and a population of other gods, the 10 Commandments describes there is One God.

One of the first heresies of the Early Christian Church was our understanding of the relationship between GOD and Jesus. There were and are today, Churches which substitute Jesus as LORD, for God. That perhaps there was one God of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, the Prophets; and a different loving Savior God in the New Testament. We said earlier that this was a "heresy", because Marcionism, the belief in Jesus-without the need for the existence of God, the New Testament without

the Old, is not what Christianity believes, not the Orthodox or Reformed Christian understanding of God. Instead, Christianity believes that for 1-3 years, from the time of Jesus' Baptism by John to Resurrection, out of that 6000 year history of Scripture, Jesus was recognized as being The Messiah, the Anointed One sent from God. Jesus was both fully human and fully divine, who atoned for our salvation on the Cross, being sacrificed to death for our sins, but God redeemed him from death to eternal life.

The first thin-line-turning-point, is a shifting belief from trust in one God, to revelation of two identities of the same being of God. The truth, revealed in the Prologue of the Gospel of John, in the Nicene Creed's poetic description of God of God, light of light, very God of very God, being of one substance with the Father before all things were made, is that THROUGHOUT both Testaments, New and Old, there is trust in God as Creator still creating, as Savior, as Covenant Maker and Redeemer, ALL in One.

The Gospels of Matthew, John and Mark, conclude with Jesus in an eternal perpetual presence, as Resurrected Savior living out Eternal Life, here in this created reality. Luke's Gospel and the Creeds each emphasize not only the Resurrection but also Jesus' Ascension to sit on the right hand of God. In Luke and Acts, the Ascending Jesus blesses those who stand watching him ascend, reminiscent of Elisha watching Elijah carried up in the Flaming Chariot. Just as Elijah promised a double portion of his faith to Elisha if he stayed with him until the end, so here, the disciples by Jesus' blessing are transformed from "Fear-captivated, post-resurrection, wanna-be witnesses", to become Apostles sent with mission and faith into the world. No longer are they afraid, no longer hiding in upper rooms, or going back to fishing, but worshiping and sharing together in trust as the Church in the world.

I have struggled with the grammar of the Ascension, that "Jesus sits on the right hand of God", rather than "at God's Right Hand". The only other reference to sitting on another's hand in literature, comes when Abraham sends his most trusted servant looking for a partner suitable for his son Isaac, and Abraham places his servant's hand under his thigh. This is an extreme act of intimacy and trust, it was symbol of a sacred vow between men, as intimate as marital vows.

From this point forward in Christianity, a second thin-line tipping-point has been crossed, that Jesus' the resurrected Messiah's mission now becomes pleading with God on our behalf; while what we will describe on the Day of Pentecost is the Holy Spirit pleads with us to follow God, and the CREATION of us as "The Church". Ascension Day comes 40 Days after Easter, just as Lent marked 40 days leading up to. Forty Days in Latin is the word "Quarantine", but this is not yet the Day of Pentecost, 50 Days after Passover, two weeks from now when we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit.

For the Early Church, the Ascension marked the end of Jesus' earthly existence, completion of the First Testament, and anticipation of a time to come where we live in full communion and Spiritual baptism with God. Therefore, we have for the last 2000 years and more lived in this in-between time, Post-Jesus and yet not yet Salvation. We do not like in-between times, most of all we dislike not knowing what is next. Historians described the Enlightenment as the Modern Era an age of Industrialization, as we discovered through reason and scientific method how things worked and the Laws of the Universe. Since the 1960s we have come to recognize that old ways did not always work, following the rules did not fit for everyone the same, and we now live in Post-Modern times. Times where we know Fossil Fuels and Combustion engines are running out of effectiveness, but we do not know what is next. Where the initial crisis of this Virus has been ministered to, the number of deaths is being controlled, we live with social distancing, but we do not yet have a vaccine, the crisis is not yet ended.

I have wondered about staring into Heaven. I believe that Every time we stare at the sky, awed by the beauty of the Azure heavens, watching the clouds pass, or at night observing all the constellations, that Heaven is more than a specific location, we are invited to believe in being with God. What the two stranger are suggesting is why look up, we could know this to be Heaven on earth.