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The Ascension of Christ

by T. Austin-Sparks

Transcript of a message given in May between 1961 and 1971 (exact year unknown) at Halford House Christian Fellowship in Richmond, Surrey, England.

That we may hear Thy voice speaking to our hearts, we now open ourselves to Thee, asking that anything that would make that voice unclear, uncertain to us, may be removed, that the word may come to us with no uncertain sound, that we may know when we leave this place what the Lord desires. In the name of the Lord Jesus.

I think I should say, dear friends, that coming here today I had no thought whatever of ministering. I had just come for fellowship, to be with you, and share with you whatever the Lord is saying and doing. But our brother has put it to me that the way is unusually open and that if there is a word in my heart, I should say it.

So, without any sermon and homiletics and all that sort of thing, we just meditate together for a few minutes in the Word. I'm not sure that I will even give you the passages of Scripture, the references as to place and verse. You will know them. I have a reason for not giving them.

One is this: "And having said these things, He was taken up and a cloud received Him out of their sight." He was taken up, and a cloud received Him, out of their sight.

"Unto each one of us was the grace given according to the measure of the gift of Christ. *Wherefore...* wherefore he saith, When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men.

(Now this, He ascended, what is it but that He also *descended* into the lower parts of the earth? He that descended is the same also that ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.) And He gave some apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers... till we all attain unto... the *full* knowledge of the Son of God, unto a full-grown man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ."

It's strange that in the church calendar of Christian celebrations, Ascension Day seems to have the smallest place. We make a lot of Good Friday, we make a great deal of Easter Monday, and we certainly make a great deal of the day of Pentecost, but somehow Ascension Day has not been made very much of. It came a few days ago and you didn't take any notice of it, it just came and passed. What we have just read surely gives to it, or shows, that it contains something *immense* for the church of God.

You will have noticed in the reading perhaps, if you found the passage... (perhaps I'd better divulge why I didn't mention it. You know, if you mention the word 'Ephesians'... "Oh, there we are again!" See? So I didn't tell you it was in the fourth of Ephesians, I wanted the Word rather than the place). And here, linking these two things together, the simple, historic statement, "He was received up, He was received up out of their sight" - nothing simpler than that. And then you go over, "And *when* He ascended..." what happened? When He ascended what happened; did He just go up, or was He just received up and took His place and that's that? Oh no! Here's something tremendous!

And you will have noticed, I was going to say if you had the passage, and looked at the marginal reference, there's a quotation from the sixty eighth psalm. A few of you, do you recall the sixty eighth psalm? What a psalm! It's a psalm of David to the chief musician. To the chief musician (not the second violin!) the chief musician, the leader of all the praise. And what is the psalm? It's the psalm that sung of the returning triumphant warrior. David had been out to battle, it had been a *great* conquest, a *great* victory. He returns to Zion, the city of the great king, leading in his train a multitude of captives. As he ascends, goes up to the mountain of the Lord, he's taking with him all his captives and all the spoil of battle. And when he takes his throne, with all his own people around in festal array (Hebrews 12, remember? A multitude of angels in festal array) his own people all celebrating with a great festival this victory, then he distributes of the spoil of battle here, and there, and there.

The Holy Spirit takes up Psalm 68 and that word, "when He ascended He led captivity captive and gave gifts among men" the Holy Spirit takes hold of that and shows that there was something prophetic in that, it was not only historic, but something prophetic. And it was pointing on to the greater David who, in His ascension, was going up to the heavenly Jerusalem, to the spiritual Mount Zion in the heavenlies, did not just sit down and say, "Now, that's that! That's My victory, that's the conquest, that's the warfare over." No, He got busy! At once, in the virtue and value of His great triumph, He begins to distribute, distribute gifts among men, "And He *gave* some apostles, some prophets," and so on. The gifts of the ascended Lord. This is the tremendous thing connected with the ascension of the Lord.

Now, I have focussed upon one word. You know, I think this word (and it's so often true that one word can be a key to an immensity of Divine truth and light) and I have focussed here upon one word, it's the first word in verse 8 of chapter 4: "*Wherefore* He saith, when He ascended on high and led captivity captive and gave gifts unto men..." Wherefore... *why* for? Why for? *What* for? Ascended

on high, led captivity captive, gave gifts among men... *why?* That's the very *heart*, not only of this letter, but of the New Testament.

See the context? He ascended, yes. But when it says He ascended, who is it that ascended? He who also descended! And not only to the earth, but to the lower parts of the earth, wherever they are, it's figurative speech, down to the very depths He went. "He plunged" as the hymn says, "in His imperial strength to realms of darkness down". He fathomed the depths of all that had come in by Adam's sin. He plumbed the depths of human depravity, human sin, human helplessness. He descended into the lowest or the "lower parts" and then from depth He rose, not back to earth, but to the highest: far above all heavens, now your "wherefore, wherefore".

Next clause: *that*. In order that, for the purpose *that He might fill all things*: fill. From the depths to the highest height, to *fill* with Himself. That's the New Testament: His leaving heaven, His coming down, His taking flesh and blood, His plunging into the depths of judgment, and sin, and sorrow, and ignominy; rising triumphant, turning to the highest heaven, *that He might fill all things*. And dear friends, I don't know of *anything* outside of that as the Christian's calling.

You'll notice these conjunctures are *tremendous*, especially in this letter. "I *therefore*, I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord beseech you that you walk *worthy* of the vocation wherewith you are called." What's that? What standard are we to rise to? How are we to walk worthy, that is, of what? "That He may fill all things". That's the end, the object, the governing thing. The mind of God is set upon this and nothing outside of this, that His Son shall fill all things. You can't get outside of all things. Fill *all* things... that includes the details as well as the comprehensive whole. The details: "walk *worthily*" - conduct - conduct governed by the end: that He may come into that appointed by His Father for Him to fill all things. What a time that will be when He fills all things.

We have a time together and the Lord is present, we feel the Lord is really present abundantly, what a time it is! How our hearts are ravished, and yet we have so much else: human trial, and difficulty, and suffering, and the problems and all of it, what about if when there are no other things, but the all things filled with Him? It's a tremendous prospect. "The calling wherewith you are called;" adjust and apoise, says the Word, in the light of that, that He may fill all things.

Oh, you think I have launched out now, but what is the message, what does it really say to us? Wherefore? Wherefore? Put that word over against everything, *everything* in life. Does this minister really minister to, or provide an opportunity, and a ground for Christ to get a fuller possession, and occupation? I do wish, you know, that we all got hold of this more.

The young Christians of our time need to get hold of this: judge conduct, behaviour, manner, appearance before the world, fashions and all the rest, does this really provide ground for *Christ* to be manifested? What am I manifesting? When I come amongst people, when I go out amongst people, what am I manifesting? They look at me, what do they see? And I behave, what is my registration? You see, it's testing, isn't it?

This letter comes right down to practical things like that, it will come onto your home presently, before it's through. He'll come onto your relationships: husbands and wives, parents and children, children and parents, masters and servants, servants and masters (of course, there are none of those today, but that's disorder according to the world) but it comes right down to all these practical things, you see, of business life, social life, family life, domestic life, personal life, providing room for

Christ! What do we meet in that home? The object: that, that, that; that all this.... "Well, I see you've opened up this, here are all the gifts!" I'm not going to stop to talk about apostles, and prophets, and evangelists, pastors, and teachers and so on, these, you will see are comprehensive for the church universal and the church local; apostles, prophets for the church universal, pastors or shepherds, and teachers for the church local. But the whole is here in view, and the One who ascended on high and took His captives.

I like to think this, whether I'm quite right, exactly right in my exegesis and interpretation of it I don't know, but I have found a great deal of comfort in this, rightly or wrongly, that He took me captive as a rebel. "A rebel also," it says, the rebellious also, "in His triumph He took me captive, and the one who was a rebel, He made an apostle", or whatever else you like to call it. He turned His very captives into His servants, that they, in turn, might bring Him into His place to fill all things.

You see, the test, therefore, of all ministry is this, the test of all ministry: is it bringing Christ more fully in? What's it doing? The test of our gatherings, the test of everything, everything: is it bringing more of Christ in? Well, that's all I'll say, but I think it's enough for us to get on with.

So it says, "Wherefore, wherefore, he saith, when He ascended," He did not, other scriptures will say He sat down at the right hand of God, but that has a particular meaning, that His work, His redemptive work is finished, His atoning work is finished, that's finished and so He sits down. But other scriptures tell He's standing at the right hand of God, but this one says He's busy at the right hand of God. What's He doing? Giving, giving, appointing, in order that this whole heavenly, spiritual system might issue in His filling all things.

Make the Word a blessing, as it is a challenge, a test, perhaps a rebuke. But Thou hast said to us, preach the Word, be instant, in season and out of season, reprove, rebuke, exhort. Whatever the Word means to us this morning, may we have grace to receive and to adjust and give Thee Thy place in greater fullness, for Thy name's sake.