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The Exaltation of Christ

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There is no blacker scene in history than the death of our perfect and innocent Saviour, Jesus, the Son of God. Even the physical elements of the universe chorused their disapproval at His crucifixion. Luke tells us, "And it was now about the sixth hour, and a darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour, the sun's light failing: and the veil of the temple was rent in the midst" (Luke 23: 44, 45).

Apparently the forces of sin and unrighteousness had triumphed as Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, a Jewish ruler, hastily buried Jesus. Not only had the Son of God not had a place where to rest His living body, but now there was no place to lay His dead body except in the borrowed tomb of a friend. With the burial of Christ's dead body His humiliation was complete. Notice Paul's description of the humiliation of Christ. "Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who existing in the form of God, counted not the being on an equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness as a man, he humbled himself, becoming obedient even unto death, yea, the death of the cross" (Philippians 2: 5-8).

We are here today, talking with you, because these sorrowful events were not the final word from heaven. God had other things in mind! On the following Sunday, the first day of the new week, three days after the crucifixion, the crucified Jesus became the resurrected Christ. Peter was the first gospel preacher to announce this great truth to the world, proclaiming it to the very people who had killed our Lord. "Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly, that God hath made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom ye crucified" (Acts 2:36). Just a few minutes earlier in the same sermon, Peter emphatically declared, "This Jesus did God raise up, whereof we all are witnesses" (Acts 2:32).

Paul, writing at a later date in the same century, could not leave his description of the humiliated Christ without telling of the subsequent exaltation of his Lord. "Wherefore also God highly exalted him, and gave unto him the name which is above every name; that in the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven and things in earth and things under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:9-11).

The exaltation of Jesus Christ involves His resurrection from the dead, His ascension into heaven, His position throughout this age at the right hand of God, and His second coming to judge all men. Let us emphasize each of these elements in the vindication of God's Son.

More than any other act in Jesus' ministry the resurrection demonstrated His power and authority. He proved His control of nature in His miracles of healing. He exercised power over the minds of men by knowing their thoughts on many occasions even before they declared themselves. He forgave men's sins through His divine relationship with God, the Father. Though His miracles were undisputed, though His power to know men's minds was recognized, and though He obviously gave relief to the sin-stricken, the Lord was still rejected by many. His claim to authority was misinterpreted to be blasphemy against the very God He represented (John 10:31-33).

But the resurrection silenced these enemies for it ratified the power and expressed the authority that Christ had claimed to possess all along. "Who was declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead; even Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 1:4). As Bernard Ramm has remarked, "The Resurrection is the miracle of the New Testament."

The resurrection of Christ became a central doctrine of early Christian preaching. The Apostle Paul defined the
gospel in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4 as the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. Later in the same chapter, he emphasizes the centrality of the resurrection to the gospel message. “And if Christ hath not been raised, then is our preaching vain, your faith also is vain . . . and if Christ hath not been raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins” (1 Corinthians 15:14, 17).

Our Lord’s resurrection from the dead was the concerted effort and united accomplishment of all the Godhead. According to the first exposition of the resurrection message by Peter, God the Father was directly involved. “Whom God raised up, having loosed the pangs of death; because it was not possible that he should be holden of it” (Acts 2:24).

God, the Son also actively participated in this important event. Jesus promised during His personal ministry, “I ascended into heaven, and there sat my Father” (John 17:5). When speaking of His life on another occasion Jesus remarked, “No one taketh it away from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again” (John 10:18).

The Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit united, as they have been since before the creation of the world, to perform this mighty demonstration. Finally, let it be remarked that the resurrection performed at least two great functions. According to Colossians 1:18, Jesus Christ, the resurrection Lord, is “the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence.” The resurrection of Christ holds promise for our return to life after death and demands our steadfast obedience to the will of Christ.

But the resurrection terminated in Christ’s ascension to heaven. Jesus moved toward this return to His heavenly abode from the day of His resurrection. Early on the resurrection Sunday, He remarked to Mary Magdalene, “Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended unto the Father: but go unto my brethren, and say to them, I ascend unto my Father and your Father, and my God and your God” (John 20:17).

The fact of the ascension is no less evidenced empirically than the resurrection. No small wonder the apostles could speak so convincingly of these marvelous events—they had seen them with their own eyes. Having charged the apostles to wait in Jerusalem until they received the baptism of the Holy Spirit enabling them to preach the gospel, Jesus ascended into heaven while the apostles watched intently.

Allow Luke, the gifted historian of inspiration, to relate what occurred. “And when he had said these things, as they were looking, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight. And while they were looking steadfastly into heaven as he went, behold two men stood by them in white apparel; who also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was received up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye beheld him going into heaven” (Acts 1:9-11).

In a day when these basic truths of Christianity are so lightly regarded and even, in some quarters, ridiculed, we proclaim our faith in Christ’s bodily resurrection and ascension. Before the eyes of the apostles, Jesus ascended into heaven even as He had appeared among them on many occasions during the forty days between the resurrection and the ascension. It was on the basis of this observable event and others, that the apostles went forth to preach the gospel to the whole creation suffering untold misery, persecution, and death for what they preached. The modern, comfortable and vain critic will never explain their demonstrations of faith and conviction.

Jesus returned to heaven for at least three specific reasons. First, He had promised the Apostles that they would be miraculously guided by the Holy Spirit in their preaching to the world. But He also indicated, “It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I go, I will send him unto you” (John 16:7). The Comforter is identified as the Holy Spirit in John 14:26; “But the Comforter, even the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said unto you.” Our Lord ascended in order to make room for another member of the Godhead to work among men.

Jesus also returned to heaven so that He could prepare for His second coming to judge the world. In glory He is now making ready for that day described in Matthew 25: “But when the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the angels with him, then shall he sit on the throne of his glory; and before him shall be gathered all the nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as the shepherd separateth the sheep from the goats” (Matthew 25:31, 32).

The most familiar passage with regard to this reason for Christ’s return to heaven is John 14:1-3. “Let not your heart be troubled: believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I come again, and will receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also” (John 14:1-3).

Jesus Christ went back to heaven in full vindication of His humiliation. From His despoiled death by crucifixion, to burial in a borrowed tomb, to the right hand of God—that was the route our Lord traveled! How deeply and wonderfully it testifies to a principle He taught during His personal ministry. “Every one that exalteth himself shall be humbled; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted” (Luke 14:11). Our Lord was exalted to the same degree that He had been abased. From the lowest depths to which the forces of evil could push Him to the most glorious heights which heaven offers, our Lord made His spiritual pilgrimage. “So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken unto them, was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God” (Mark 16:19).

This position, at the right hand of God, was considered very foolish just a few days earlier. Caiaphas, the Jewish high priest, must have laughed at the Lord’s statement about His place alongside God. “But he held his peace, and answered nothing. Again the high priest asked him, and said unto him, Art thou the Christ, the Son of the Blessed? And Jesus said, I am: and ye shall see the Son of man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:61, 62).

Just one empty claim, just one unfulfilled promise, just one false word, and Christianity would never have become the mighty force Christ claimed it to be. No, Jesus’ answer to Caiaphas was not ridiculous now.

The Jews of all people should have known of this event. Their own prophets had predicted every facet of Jesus’ life. They had not left His return to heaven unnoticed. “I saw in the night visions, and, behold, there came with the clouds of heaven, one like unto a son of man, and he came even to the ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and languages should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and
his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed" (Daniel 7:13, 14).

What had qualified Christ for such an exalted position? The New Testament clearly indicates that it was the work which He accomplished that allowed His return to heaven. The writer of the Epistle To The Hebrews suggests that Christ's sacrifices for our sins made His return to glory possible. "Who being the effulgence of his glory, and the very image of his substance, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had made purification of sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Hebrews 1:3). With full provision for man's redemption provided, Christ returned to God. The same author also says that Christ, "through his own blood, entered in once for all into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption" (Hebrews 9:12).

But the exaltation of Christ will not be final and complete until He returns to judge all men. Men are still mocking the Son of God. Many deliberately ridicule His person and work. Others undermine His influence through hypocritical professions of Him. Some just ignore Him. But one day all will truly and completely honor Him. "For neither doth the Father judge any man, but he hath given all judgment unto the Son; that all may honor the Son, even as they honor the Father" (John 5:22, 23).

This is what Paul had in mind in our text when he said, "That in the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven and things on earth and things under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:10, 11).

But mind you, such a universal confession of Jesus Christ will not avail for those who have previously rejected Him. At the judgment when all honor and confess Christ, it will be to the glory of God, NOT the salvation of here­tofore rebellious souls! Someone has rightly remarked, "There will be no infidels in hell." Even those separated from the righteous and condemned to eternal punishment will confess the Lord's name and honor His Person, at Christ's coming.

Nowhere is the return of Christ so vividly pictured as in II Thessalonians 1:7-9. Watch carefully as the apostle Paul pictures the vindication of Christ's humiliation and the completion of His exaltation. "And to you that are afflicted rest with us, at the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven with the angels of his power in flaming fire, rendering vengeance to them that know not God, and to them that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus: who shall suffer punishment, even eternal destruction from the face of the Lord and from the glory of his might."

It is utter folly not to study carefully and listen intently to the gospel narratives of Christ's life of humiliation. To hear their combined voices is to believe in Christ. John said, "These are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in his name" (John 20:31).

What reason or force could keep a believer in Christ from humiliating himself as Christ was humiliated in repentance of all his wrongs. Jesus said, "He that humbleth himself shall be exalted" (Luke 14:11). Repentance is the Biblically prescribed way for such humility to become a reality in our lives.

So I give myself to Him publicly acknowledging His divinity and sovereignty. "Because if thou shalt confess with thy mouth Jesus as Lord, and shalt believe in thy heart that God raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved: for with the heart man believeth unto righteousness: and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation" (Romans 10:9, 10).

But it was in his humiliating death that He entirely gave Himself for you and me. In a small way that same death can become a part of our lives today! Paul describes how this happens. "Or are ye ignorant that all we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him through baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:3, 4).

Just think, not only can one be united with Christ in the likeness of His death, but he thereby becomes united with Him in the glory of His resurrection. "For if we have become united with him in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection" (Romans 6:5).

When we heed the commands of Christ in faith, repentance, confession, and baptism, we participate in His humiliation and exaltation. We thereby prepare ourselves for living the Christian life in anticipation of the final judgment and eternal life with God. Our Lord went back to heaven because He had fulfilled God's purpose for His life. Are you realizing God's plan in your life?