

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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What is the Truth of the Gospel? Received up into Glory

And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory. (1 Timothy 3:16)

As I sit at my desk writing this piece, the date is December 14, just a few days before Christmas, the date that most Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus. Often in study, writing, and even in preaching, many Christians rightly start their teaching of the Incarnation with the virgin birth, and they continue through the life, sufferings, and death of Jesus to His resurrection. But they stop one major step short of the conclusion. We are not finished with the doctrine of the Incarnation, the doctrine of God becoming man to accomplish our redemption and to atone for our sins, until we have fully examined His ascension. The ascension of Jesus in the gospel is no less essential than virgin birth, or even His atoning death for our sins. During the Incarnation, Jesus raised a few people from the dead, Lazarus being the most notable example. Although Scripture doesn't deal specifically with the point, we may reasonably conclude that these people at some future date again died. Jesus arose from the dead, but He didn't arise merely to return to His prior state, only to face death a second time. He arose to die no more, ever again. Based on the information we find in the gospels and the first chapter of Acts, we may conclude that He appeared to the disciples, a large number, not just the eleven, over the next forty days. We read the glorious record of His ascension in the first chapter of Acts, and then we read of that dreadful ten day hiatus between His ascension and the Day of Pentecost (fifty days after Passover) when the promised outpouring of the Holy Spirit energized the eleven and launched the powerful proclamation of the gospel and the advance of the New Testament church. Pentecost does not mark the beginning, but the launch of the New Testament church, as a fully constructed and equipped ship is launched from the dry docks into the water.

We read the record of the actual moment of Jesus' ascension back to the Father in the first chapter of Acts, but Paul's point in our study passage takes us into heaven itself and addresses His reception upon His return. A fine, but necessary point commands our thought. As God, Second Person in the Trinity, Jesus existed with the Father eternally. He didn't "leave" heaven vacant for thirty three years during the Incarnation, but He did occupy His human body for that period. John makes this point in John 3:13. The flow of the

context strongly indicates that this verse makes up part of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus. Jesus is speaking these words to Nicodemus.

And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven. (John 3:13, KJV 1900)

At the very moment when Jesus in human form is talking to Nicodemus, He is also "...in heaven." Amazing; incomprehensible, but that is the truth that the passage affirms. So we should not accept the sadly common notion that Jesus vacated heaven for the Incarnation.

What then does Paul intend by the clause, "...received up into glory"? Given the emphasis that we have observed throughout our study of this verse on the Incarnation, we should continue that focus to the end. He did not exist with a material body prior to the Incarnation, but He existed. (John 1:1-14) At the end of the forty days of His post-resurrection appearances to the disciples, Jesus, now including His resurrected human body, ascended back into the very presence of the Father.

What happened when He arrived there? Does Scripture ever say anything about that event? Yes, it does.

I beheld till the thrones were cast down, and the Ancient of days did sit, whose garment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like the pure wool: his throne was like the fiery flame, and his wheels as burning fire. (Daniel 7:9, KJV 1900)

I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came 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 people, 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, KJV 1900)

In this passage, written by Daniel under the Holy Spirit's direction over five hundred years before the Incarnation, we see first a depiction of God the Father as the "Ancient of days." The Father sits on His throne in heaven's regal glory. But Daniel sees more. The first chapter of Acts records Jesus' literal, physical, bodily disappearance from the disciples' view, into the clouds, clouds of glory, not merely clouds of vapor. Daniel tells us in advance what happened in the next moment after Jesus disappeared from the disciples' view. He appeared in heaven, still with those clouds of glory. He did not return with question marks or with the requirement that He give an account of His absence or of His conduct during His absence. Immediately, He "...came to the Ancient of days..." "...they brought him near before him." He immediately received the fruits of His victory.

Scripture says far more than most of us grasp about that world of glory that we call heaven, but, even with all it says, our comprehension is limited. There is only so much that we can perceive. A common view of heaven includes three thrones, one for the Father, one for the Son, and one for the Holy Spirit. Scripture does not make such a point at all. Quite the opposite, Scripture affirms that only one throne exists in heaven, but I'd suggest that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit jointly and gloriously occupy that one throne. Notice John's words.

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.
(Revelation 3:21, KJV 1900)

Notice Jesus' words in this verse carefully, "...even as I also overcame, and **am set down with my Father in his throne.**" Jesus and the Father sit on the same throne.

No gospel message is complete that fails to acknowledge and proclaim the glorious ascension of Jesus, and His victorious reception there. Daniel tells us the proverbial "...rest of the story" five hundred years before it occurs.

The complete truth of the gospel affirms the "Finished work of Christ," His successful and completed assignment in Incarnation. He came. He finished the work given to Him. He returned and was received in glory.

While He existed eternally and as God, fully God, He added His human body to Himself in the Incarnation, and He took that human body with Him in the ascension. Forget the abominable claim of John Dominic Crossan of Jesus Seminar fame (or infamy), actually a co-founder of that group, and his blasphemous claim that the body of Jesus was taken off the cross and thrown into the Jerusalem city dump where dogs likely ate it. I shudder at such a blasphemous comment! He arose from the grave in that same literal, physical, human body, and He also ascended into heaven in clouds of glory in that same literal, physical, human body. He

is there today, including that body. In fact that truth, including focus on His literal, physical body, is the foundation for our hope in our own bodily resurrection at the Second Coming. Take away the reality of His ascension—and of His being "...received up into glory"—and you take away every particle of our own hope of resurrection. No, there is no gospel without that final truth. Any message that stops short of His entrance, including His glorious and victorious reception into glory is no gospel at all. At best, it is a cheap pretense.

Please take note. Paul's gospel includes, not just His ascension, but the fact that He "...was received..." And Paul's gospel further affirms that His reception was "...into glory." When Jesus entered glory at the ascension, He entered, having fully completed His purpose in coming and having fully assured the eternal security of all for whom He came, lived, suffered, died, arose from death, and—yes indeed—ascended as their Surety.

Once we fully acknowledge Jesus' complete work, the work of "God...manifest in the flesh..." we cannot stop short of concluding full and uncompromised victory. Often in human activities two power groups with quite different goals will compete to gain their desired outcome. Often the two power groups must negotiate some form of compromise, some degree of give-and-take, to gain the best outcome they can attain. Our nation's government is built on the idea that three branches of government deal with three distinct responsibilities to accomplish stable governance of our country. Through most of our country's history, at least two political parties have competed in Congress and in seeking the presidency. The system only works when these competing parties and branches of government work together, negotiate viable compromise. The give-and-take process ensures a far more ideal outcome than when the sad proverb of fallen humanity is lived out, "Absolute power corrupts absolutely," with either party or branch over-reaching.

God's work and God's outcome is not the result of shared power and of negotiation and compromise. In the whole divine purpose for our redemption, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit fully and wholly worked together to accomplish their common—not divided—objective. Jesus' ascension—and, specifically, His being "...received up into glory"—stands as heaven's testimony of "Mission Accomplished." Our gospel, the precious treasure that the New Testament church is to protect and to preserve as the "...pillar and ground of the truth..." is this truth. Paul identifies this work as the primary objective of a faithful New Testament church in 1 Timothy 3:15, and he fully outlines that truth in 1 Timothy 3:16. When a church tries to justify its purpose and existence as nothing more than a social club, it has lost its way. What activities are necessary to fulfill the divinely defined function and purpose of a New Testament church—to permanently and faithfully serve as the "...pillar and

ground of the truth”? We engage in those activities. We avoid activities that fail that divinely framed filter for all that a New Testament church is to be and to do. Are we willing to stand up, tall and steadfast, for that kind of a church? Admittedly, there are many other kinds of churches in the world today. There is only one New Testament church that lives up to this inspired description. How does your church measure up to this one primary description? How does my church measure up? Are we willing to invest everything we have into this function? Are we willing to avoid everything that either fails or detracts from this function? That, in the end, shall determine if we are a New Testament church or simply a generic some-kind-of-church.

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church
16434 Woodruff
Bellflower, California

Worship service each Sunday 10:30 A. M.
Joseph R. Holder Pastor