

CHRIST IN HIS ASCENSION GREATER THAN ELIJAH

“And when He had said this, as they were looking on, He was lifted up, and a cloud took Him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as He went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said: men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw Him go into heaven”.

(Acts 1: 9-11)

As we turn now to the account in Acts concerning the ascension of our Lord, we may be reminded that the Bible also at another occasion speaks of an ascension. In II Kings 2 we read about the ascension of Elijah, a dramatic and traumatic occurrence. And the question can be asked, what is the relation and difference between these two events?

Just for the record, some Bible scholars also see a reference to an ascension in Genesis 5: 24, about Enoch, “[who] walked with God; and he was not, for God took him.” The refrain “and he died” was not applicable to Enoch. God took him home in another way than all the others described in Genesis 5. In Hebrews 11: 5 we read, “By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death; and he was not found because God had taken him.”

Since we do not receive any further particulars concerning the manner of Enoch’s “ascension,” it is best to restrict ourselves to comparing the ascension of Christ with that of Elijah. And we note that there is a vast difference between the two, which we may indicate as follows. Elijah’s ascension shows us the great distance between heaven and earth, but Christ’s ascension shows us their unity.

TARRY HERE

In the account of II Kings 2 we find Elijah and Elisha going from Gilgal to the river Jordan. It is remarkable how Elijah time and again, at Gilgal, Bethel, and Jericho, tells Elisha to stay behind, “Tarry here. . . .” Some see this as a testing of Elisha’s resolve whether he will follow Elijah to the end, but we may also conclude that Elijah wished to spare his successor the trauma of the impending departure.

Elisha, meanwhile, does get the message, also via the sons of the prophets in Jericho, that Elijah will be taken away from him. Nevertheless, he perseveres in following his master even across the Jordan.

The situation is much different in Acts 1. Our Lord does not at all seek to discourage His disciples from being with Him for this important event. In Luke 24: 50 we read that Jesus even leads His disciples as far as Bethany. The Lord wants them to be in the fullest sense witnesses of His ascension into heaven.

Moreover, whereas only one man, Elisha, witnessed the ascension of Elijah, several men witnessed the ascension of Christ. Also in this respect we may conclude that Christ is greater than Elijah. And while the “sons of the prophets” stood at a distance and were left behind when Elijah and Elisha crossed the Jordan, there was no distance between Christ and His disciples.

EVERYTHING SAID?

There is another difference which merits our attention. The ascension of Elijah takes place rather abruptly. We read in II Kings 2: 11, “And as they still went on and talked, behold a chariot of fire and horses separated the two of them.” Their conversation was cut short. Right in the middle of a sentence, perhaps, came an interruption from heaven. Suddenly, the fellowship of these two men came to an end.

Elisha may have had many things to ask. From his reaction, “My father, my father!” we may conclude that he experienced the sudden separation as traumatic. They were separated while still talking. The connection was broken and the line went dead.

In Acts 1, we find a completely different scene. In verse 9 we read, “And when He had said this, He was lifted up. . .” Christ had just given His final instructions. The disciples knew exactly what they must do. The conversation was not interrupted, but was finished. Christ had said everything that He wanted and needed to say. There were no loose ends that still needed to be tied up.

Christ had completed His work on earth and achieved all that He had set out to do. Whereas Elijah left behind much unfinished business and needed a successor, Christ’s work was finished, and no one on earth needed to continue the work that He completed.

CHARIOT OF FIRE

Perhaps the greatest difference between the two ascensions lies in the fact that Elijah was taken up in a chariot of fire and horses of fire, while Christ was simply “lifted up”. In II Kings 2: 1 we also read that the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind. So Elijah’s ascent takes place through wind and fire; he is almost violently pulled away from this earth.

We therefore find also in II Kings 11 the word “separation.” There is an instant division between Elijah and Elisha. The wind and the fire stand between them. There is a gap that can not be bridged, and this leads Elisha to cry out with anguish.

The fact that Elijah is taken up by a chariot and horses has further significance. Chariots and horses were used in battle. The negro spiritual may speak of a “sweet chariot,” but there really was nothing sweet about it. The chariot and the horses make clear that there is still a feud between God and this world, also between God and His apostate covenant people.

God comes down in power and majesty, with heavenly wind and fire, and snatches Elijah away from this earth. And the only witness, Elisha, must stand back, shaken, shattered, stunned. Elisha feels the great distance which there is between God and man, between heaven and earth. No one can go where Elijah has gone.

There are explainers who see in the appearing of “fire” (and the wind mentioned in II Kings 2: 1) the necessity of purification. Elijah must be renewed by the Holy Spirit (“wind”) and purified by fire before he can enter the glory of heaven. He can not appear before God as he is, but must undergo a transformation. The force of the wind and the heat of the fire are then seen as symbolic of the change which Elijah must undergo as He enters the presence of a holy and sovereign God.

And indeed, a transformation was required. We cannot appear before God in our sinful and mortal bodies. We are reminded of Paul’s words in I Corinthians 15: 50, “I tell you this, brethren: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.” Elijah cannot ascend as he

is. The fire and wind not only lift him up but also transform him so that he can stand before the throne of God. In that sense, also, there is an immediate separation between Elijah and Elisha. The two men are no longer alike.

BEFORE THE EYES OF HIS DISCIPLES

The ascension of our Lord, on the other hand, takes place in calmness and peace. There are no fiery chariot and horses. Christ is not suddenly swept away, but lifted up. His ascent is gradual and clearly visible. The disciples can see Him, as He ascends with outstretched arms, blessing them (Luke 24: 51). Luke notes particularly that it happened “as they were looking on” (verse 9). The Heidelberg Catechism therefore correctly states in Lord’s Day 18 that Christ “before the eyes of His disciples was taken up from earth into heaven.” The disciples have a different function than the prophet: they must see clearly what happens in order to give an exact eyewitness account.

It says, “and a cloud took Him out of their sight.” This can be taken in various ways. Some suggest that Christ was visible in His ascent until He reached the clouds high above the earth. But others are of the opinion that from the beginning of the ascension a cloud appeared, so that Jesus gradually disappeared.

The truth is probably that in the process of Christ’s ascension a cloud gradually appeared around Him. We may see this “cloud” as the presence of God. The disciples realize, when this cloud appears, that Christ is enveloped by the dimensions of heaven, taken into the glory of the Father, and so disappears from their view.

Again we are struck by the simplicity and peacefulness of the entire event. Christ ascends in His own right and glory, unassisted by chariots and horses, and so enters in the glory of the Father.

WHY THIS DIFFERENCE?

When we seek an answer to the question why these two events are so different from each other, there can really be only the one answer: whereas in Elijah’s ascension we still see the distance which exists between heaven and earth, in Christ’s ascension we may see their unity.

Christ enters into heaven in our flesh, and this is described as an almost natural course of events. The reason is that God’s great fury now has passed. For Christ has brought the one sacrifice for sin. He has broken down the wall of hostility which existed between God and men. This ascension, therefore, speaks of reconciliation.

Christ enters heaven as man. It is now for the first time that a human being, perfectly righteous and holy, enters into the presence of God. Never before has any man appeared in this manner before God. Never before has the unity between heaven and earth become so apparent as at this occasion.

God is now reconciled with His people. We may enter heaven freely. Fire and wind are no longer necessary, for we have been cleansed by the blood and Spirit

of our Lord. His ascension demonstrates that the gap between heaven and earth has been bridged on Golgotha.

Therefore the Heidelberg Catechism can rightly state in Lord's Day 18 that Christ's ascension means that "we have our flesh in heaven as a sure pledge that He, our head, will also take us, His members, up to Himself."

THE COMFORT OF THE ASCENSION

This is the basis of the comfort given in Hebrews 10: 19 and following verses: "Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which He opened for us through the curtain, that is His flesh. . .let us draw near with a true heart. . ."

In Christ the way to heaven is opened for us. We may enter the heavenly sanctuary. We do not go through the curtain which separated the holy of holies from the other parts of the temple. We have direct access to heaven through Christ's flesh.

ANGELS APPEAR

There is another remarkable difference between the account of Elijah's ascension and that of our Lord. After Elijah has ascended, the prophet Elisha stands alone. It simply says, "And he saw him no more" (II Kings 2: 12).

We read further that he took hold of his clothes and rent them into two pieces. And then he took the fallen mantel of Elijah and went back to the Jordan. He is a man who walks and stands alone. No one comes to comfort or guide him. Heaven remains closed.

But as the disciples are gazing upward, perhaps straining to see if they can yet catch a glimpse of their beloved Lord, it says, ". . . behold, two men stood by them in white robes." Again we see how the distance between heaven and earth has been bridged. For these men in white robes can only be angels, heavenly messengers who at this point must comfort and direct the disciples. There is no fallen mantel as last piece of evidence, but a message from God.

LOOK AROUND, NOT UP

These angels come with a question and a promise. First they ask, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven?" The title "men of Galilee" establishes a bond of familiarity and confidentiality. These angels know the men with whom they are speaking. Angels and disciples are no longer strangers, but united in the service of the one Lord.

The question is, "Why do you stand looking into heaven?" From this we may conclude that the disciples continued to look up, also after Jesus was taken from their sight. This may indicate that they were now at a loss as to what to do. Now the angels do not severely rebuke the disciples. The question is only a mild reprimand. They come with a promise, "This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw Him go into heaven." Jesus will

return. The disciples need not think that the farewell is permanent. Christ is coming back to this earth.

This Jesus, it says, the very same man. He will not change during His time in heaven. He will not change either in His relation to His church on earth. He will return as He left, visibly and gloriously.

ON THE CLOUDS OF HEAVEN

There will be a difference, of course, between Christ's ascension and His return. This difference is indicated by the apostle John in Revelation 1: 7: "Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, every one who pierced Him. . . ."

Only the disciples saw Him go. But all people – even Christ's sworn enemies – shall see Him return in glory. He will come "with the clouds." This means that He will come visibly from above.

John actually writes that Christ is coming already. This truth dominates the entire book of Revelation. From the very moment Christ entered heaven, He has one task to fulfill: to prepare the great day of His glory.

But Christians must not waste time looking up. Instead, we must go out to do the work to which Christ has called us. For when He does come, He wants to find us busy in the work of the Kingdom.

The promise of the angels is therefore also a challenge: continue with your apostolic mission. Christ works in heaven on your behalf, and you must work on earth in His Name. And one day He will return, for all to see, and as His coming will be terrible for those who have pierced Him, so it will be joyous for those who served Him.

Such a promise was not given to Elisha, when Elijah ascended in whirlwind, fire, and smoke. Elijah cannot return on his own steam. But Christ will come in His power and glory with all the saints – also with Elijah – to judge the living and the dead.

HEAVEN AND EARTH UNITED

The ascension shows us that heaven and earth are now forever united in Christ. Christ works in heaven; His church works on the earth. Angels and men have a common task: to work for the coming of the Kingdom of heaven.

And one day it will be true that heaven and earth will fully be one. John writes in Revelation 21: 1, 2, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God as a bride adorned for her husband."

When Christ returns, God Himself will come to live with us on a new earth. The best is yet to come. In that faith the disciples went back to Jerusalem and a new era began. Heaven and earth are already one in Christ. Soon they will be fully one, on the great day of Christ's final appearing in glory.

Then we shall reap in abundant measure the riches of Christ Jesus, our Lord and King.