

Introduction: We've been reflecting upon *our Savior's* Ascended power at God's right hand, in the events that led up to Ascension Day! But we do not forget how tenderly Christ's dead body was cared for in His burial by Joseph and Nicodemus in John 19:38-42. The reason for keeping in view the *humiliation of His death and burial* alongside our *celebration of His glory* is simple: We cannot expect to share the glory of Christ without first sharing in His sufferings on earth. As Romans 8:17 says, "If we would reign with Him, then we must suffer with Him"! We therefore turn to the humble circumstances of Christ's burial once again to start this week of notes.

Mon/Tues: read John 19:38-42 and John 3:1-7. Before Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus could stoop to care for the crucified body of the Lord, they had to be converted. As members of the Sanhedrin, and of the proud sect of the Pharisees, the dramatic scale of such a conversion is measured by the worldly status they had to give up in order to claim the corpse of the crucified 'criminal' Jesus, (John 19:38). Something of the power of being a Pharisee is seen by Jesus' earlier interaction with Nicodemus in John 3. Listen to Tim Keller in his book, *Encounters with Jesus*, (pp. 33ff.), as he sums up Jesus' words exposing Nicodemus in his pride and sin:

In His encounter with Nicodemus, Jesus is forceful and direct. Nicodemus begins with courtesy: "Ah, Rabbi, I've heard many wonderful things about you. People say that you have a lot of wisdom that God has given you." But Jesus confronts Nicodemus right up front, saying, "You must be born again." I suppose Nicodemus, who has spent his life worshiping God according to strict Jewish tradition, must have been offended by this strange pronouncement.

Born again. That's where this loaded term comes from. Who are born-again people anyway? Its common nowadays to believe that born-again people are different from most of us – more emotional or more broken, like drug addicts or emotionally unstable people – and they need a dramatic turnaround to get them on the right path... they have done something so bad or are so weak that only a seismic change in their lives will help them. So most people today, thinking they are being tolerant, would say that maybe being born again is for people who are weaker than the rest of us and who thus need a cathartic experience. Maybe it's for people who need authority and structure in their lives, so they join regimented, authoritarian religious movements. Being born again, in other words, is for a certain kind of person. And if that's what somebody needs, then let him or her have it.

But the problem with this view is that the biblical story doesn't allow us to hold it. Nicodemus is a civic leader, a member of the Sanhedrin ... He is prosperous. He's a devout and upstanding Pharisee; you couldn't have any more religious bona fides than that. He's not an emotional or broken type of person at all. And when he calls Jesus – a young man with no formal training – "rabbi", this shows that Nicodemus is more humble and open-minded than most of his peers. So here in Nicodemus you have an altogether admirable person – pulled together, successful, disciplined, moral, religious, yet open-minded.

And what does Jesus say? He presses him on his smug self-satisfaction ("You must be born again"). What did you have to do, Jesus is asking, with being born? Did you work hard to earn the privilege of being born? Did it happen due to your skillful planning? Not at all. You don't earn or contribute anything to being born. It is a free gift of life. And so it is with the new birth. Salvation is by grace – there are no moral efforts that earn or merit it. You must be born again. This is an astonishing thing to say to someone like Nicodemus... How dare Jesus say that?

Jesus can say it because He is working on a deeper understanding of sin than most people have... Why would Jesus tell this good man Nicodemus that he has done essentially nothing to earn a place in heaven?

Here is the surprising answer: Sin is looking to something else besides God for your salvation. It is putting yourself in the place of God, becoming your own savior and lord, as it were. That's the biblical definition of sin, the first of the Ten Commandments... (In Nicodemus' case), this sin is to act as if your good life and moral achievement will essentially require God to bless you and answer your prayers the way you want. In this case you are looking to your moral goodness and efforts to give you the significance and security that nonreligious people look to sex, money and power to give them. What is insidious about this is that religious people constantly talk about trusting in God – but if you think your goodness is even contributing to your salvation, then you are actually being your own savior. You are trusting in yourself.

This self-righteousness (instead of holding onto God by faith for undeserved grace alone), was the sin of Nicodemus, and of the sect of the Pharisees of which both he and Joseph of Arimathea were members. Along with their countrymen, they rejected Christ's imputed righteousness offered to them through the Cross because they were all about establishing *their own* righteousness – even as Romans 9:30-10:4 puts it so graphically: They would not submit to God's righteousness in Christ because they were busy establishing their own! May God save us from such a terrible, self-righteous mistake! And let us praise God that He opened the eyes of these two Pharisees, so that they could confess both their sin and the glorious righteousness of the One who died for them, whose body they buried!

Thurs/Fri: read John 20:1-18; John 16:5-24. Moving on to Easter morning in John's Gospel, we remember that it was because of His strong faith and His victory over every form of opposition through the Cross, that Christ is full of joy at the prospect of his work for us in heaven. He is so full of joy forty days prior to His ascension that He speaks of it as a *present* reality in John 20:17, where He literally says that He is “*ascending* to His Father and His disciples' Father!” Let's return to this important verse now.

The tenses of the verb “to ascend” here are to be noted. First, Christ declares to Mary with the perfect tense that He is to “ascend” and has not yet done so. This tense means that Christ's going up to Heaven refers not merely to the one-time event, but to *an abiding state* of ascended glory. Christ sees Himself entering into that exalted place from which He will pour out the Spirit, forevermore demonstrating His rule over all things for the good of His church (Acts 2:33, Ephesians 1:19-23).

Then He commissions Mary to go to His disciples to tell them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God”. Here Christ uses the present tense, meaning *not only* that the process of His ascending has already begun, but *also* that this prospect of ascending is so full of joy and expectation for Jesus that He savors it so much that He rejoices in it as a *present reality!* It is as if He says to Mary Magdalene in the resurrection garden in John 20: “Just a little while Mary! Tell my disciples that I am already looking forward to being in the place where I will most benefit them and bring glory to the Father” (John 16:7)! Let's illustrate this sense of anticipation further by looking at the 16th chapter of John's Gospel now – beginning with John 16:16-22.

At first glance Jesus could be understood as speaking in John 16:16 of His impending death, (“a little while and you will see me no more”), followed “a little while” later by His post-resurrection

appearances. But notice how the Apostles talk among themselves in John 16:17 – connecting this “little while” of Jesus’ departure and return with what Jesus has said in verse 10 about “going to His Father.” It seems most natural, then, to understand that Jesus is speaking about His ascension to the Father, and then “after a little while”, His return at His second coming and judgment. That is what the disciples seem to think they hear from Jesus. ‘But wait we may say! How can Jesus speak of the long period until His return, (which Jesus must have known would be a long time), as “just a little while”?’ The timing of all this confuses us as much as it confused the Apostles!

But, once again, we fail to appreciate the strength of Jesus’ love for us, and how His eagerness to work each day to make us His bride would make the time between our engagement to be the Lord’s and our ‘wedding supper’ upon His return just a “little while” for Him! It is much like Jacob’s 7 years of labor to win Rachel to be His wife in Genesis 29:20 – “they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her”. In the same way, how beautifully comforting for us to learn that Jesus is counting the days – and busying Himself to make all necessary preparations in heaven for us. As soon as all that work is done up there, He will return without a moment’s delay!

This is why we are not to be overly concerned that we “know not the day or the hour” according to Acts 1:7. If the date of Christ’s return is so eagerly anticipated and planned for by Him, so that He will return from heaven *as soon as His work is finished for the church’s welfare there*, then clearly we have no need to worry about times or dates!

Meditate and Pray: “Lord Jesus, thank you once again for the eagerness of your love for us, that you are making such good use of your time for us in heaven. Thank you for the promise that, “yet a little while, and you shall come and not tarry” (Hebrews 10:37)!”

Sat/Sun: read Luke 24:50-53 and Acts 1:6-11. The Ascension of our Savior is such a remarkable fulfillment of all the church’s hope, as well as an event of such great glory, that the only right response to it is worship. This is why, for example, all the disciples worship as they behold Christ’s ascent in Luke 24:52. How appropriate, then, that we end this week’s Bible notes with prayers of adoration and worship to our Ascended Lord.

“Jesus, thank you that because of your Ascension, you now exercise an all-prevailing and omniscient ministry of intercession and kingdom-rule. You ask for the nations (Psalm 2:8) – and world-wide missions are born because of your request! You ask for individual sinners to be converted, and the Spirit applies your redemptive work by working faith in each elect heart unto saving faith and repentance. You ask for sin and evil to be restrained, and revival breaks out on earth, as ‘repentance and faith are proclaimed to all nations’ (Luke 24:47). Thank you Jesus!”

“Oh, all prevailing Savior! Everything arises in our lives and in history itself because you have asked for it to be done. Oh, increase our trust in you as you ‘live to intercede for us and for the nations’ (Hebrews 7:25). Increase our gratitude as we realize anew that all good things in our lives arise because you ask for them to be given. We magnify you as our *generous and giving* heavenly Intercessor. Amen.”

“Lord Jesus, we desire to use the access to God’s throne which your Ascension provides, bringing with us prayers for each other and for the church world-wide. Please make these prayers effective in this time of global pandemic as we use words from the Apostle Paul as our own intercessions:

“We pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith. ¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, **direct our**

way to you, ¹² and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, **(1 Thessalonians 3:10-12).**”

“To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power, ¹² so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ. **(2 Thessalonians 1:11-12).**”

“But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first-fruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. ¹⁴ To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁵ So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter. ¹⁶ Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, ¹⁷ comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word. **(2 Thessalonians 2:13-17).**”

“And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command. ⁵ May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ. **(2 Thessalonians 3:4-5).**”