

THE ASCENSION

By D.B. KNOX

THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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Last Thursday was the anniversary of the ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ to His present place of power and glory. It was the culmination of His resurrection, the seal of God's sovereignty on world history. From it we realise that history is not just a meaningless succession of events but God is fulfilling His purposes and these purposes are fixed in His Son who became man in order that He might be the head of the recreated human race. His death shows what sin does, with human nature, when his contemporaries spurned and put to death the morally perfect Jesus. But His resurrection and ascension show what God is doing, triumphing over sin in the world which He made and leading on to His final purposes of judgment of sin and vindication of what is right. That future lies with Christ; He has ascended to the right hand of God, that is to say, He is now in the place of power and authority, unseen by our physical eyes but experienced in our fellowship with Him. The ascension is the prelude to the judgment of God which Jesus will execute in God's time. God will bring everything into judgment, and humanity will be judged according to its works; condemnation for those who have lived selfishly and Godlessly and vindication for those who have been forgiven through repentance and faith in Jesus. The gospel is the proclamation of this judgment and of Jesus as the judge. Do we believe the gospel, for it is a message about the future.

St. Peter, in the opening paragraph of his first letter, speaks about this future which God has prepared for Christians. The passage runs: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." This is a wonderful future. It is in accordance with God's bountiful love, He has already created the world a beautiful place and although we mar it with sin, it still remains beautiful. When sin and all things sinful are finally condemned and banished into outer darkness, the future for those who inherit it will be glorious indeed and God has given it to us in Jesus. Do we believe this future will be real? We need to pause and examine our faith. Do we believe in the God of Holy Scripture; or is our God a God without

purpose, with no future plan beyond tomorrow; or is He a god without power, unable to bring His purposes to completion? Do we believe in the ascension, that Christ is now reigning with God? Do we indeed believe in creation, namely, that the world around us is the result of God's Will. Do we believe in scripture, that we have in those pages a clear and reliable Word which God's power has brought to us? In other words, what of our faith. Is it worth the name? For if it is real faith in God then our faith must include the theme so clearly revealed in scripture and confirmed by common sense, namely that God will complete His purposes and that the wonderful world which we at present experience will be culminated by a more wonderful future where the things that mar our present life will be banished forever.

God is powerful and God is purposeful and sin, rebellion and Godless men have no future but will come into judgment but those who have been forgiven their sins through Jesus Christ will enter into God's eternity, into inheritance incorruptible and undefiled which doesn't pass away. This Christian future puts our present life into its proper perspective. What about your savings; your holidays; your house; your investments; your old age. How insignificant each of these is seen by itself when compared to God's provision for you in eternity. Of course our present duties are not unimportant, our faithful fulfilment of them will be examined and tested and vindicated on the judgment day. But we should be careful not to set our ambitions on temporal things. After all, our future in this life has only a few years to go but God's eternity stretches on forever. What a wonderful vista opens up before us!

Naturally, therefore, St. Peter begins this passage with a word of thanksgiving - "Blessed by God". Thanksgiving should characterise the Christian life, and we ought to examine ourselves as to whether it characterises our life. Thanksgiving is a form of fellowship; it is our personal response to God's goodness to us, and it increases the experiences of joy as we thank God for what we are experiencing. This is natural, because fellowship increases pleasure, sharing enjoyments increases the enjoyment, and thanksgiving is a form of

fellowship with God and sharing with Him. Thanksgiving leads on to love. As our minds are filled with the prospect of God's future our hearts fill with love to Jesus who through bitter pain made this future ours. He became one with us that we might share in His glory and reward. Love to Jesus flows over into love for all those who are His. As St. John says, if we love God we will also love all God's children. Love is practical, it expresses itself in meeting the needs of those we love. If we love Jesus (and we most certainly must if we have any sense of what He has provided for us through the forgiveness of our sins) then we must love all those who are His. What are our attitudes to our fellow Christians? Do you merely tolerate them? Perhaps the recollection that you will share with them in the future that God has provided for all those who are Christ's will motivate you to act in love towards them. This will be the test on the judgment day. Christ told the parable of the sheep and the goats to indicate that those who love Him must love their fellow Christians, and in as much as those being judged do not act in love to the least of His brothers, that is to say, to Christians, however insignificant, they are judged not to have served Christ. This parable is often taken to indicate that we are to love all men. Doubtless this is a true sentiment; but it is not what is taught in the parable. The parable speaks about acts of practical love towards the brethren of Christ. This is the touchstone as to whether we love Christ. "In as much as you did it to me" will be the verdict of the Son of man when He sits on His throne of judgment. Love of our fellow Christians will mean that we will seek out their company, especially for the purpose of sharing together in our common hope. This means we will come to church, because church is simply the gathering of Christians together on the basis of their Christian faith. We come to church primarily then for the sake of our fellow Christians and our church services should be conducted for each other's benefit. Church is really an exercise in Christian fellowship. It is a mistake, therefore, to call it an act of worship, as though the primary objective is the worship of God - this is consequential. The primary objective is each other's company. We worship God in all our daily acts and of course we worship God in church as we share our prayer and praise together.

But the assembling in church is primarily for the benefit of each other, as the writer to the Hebrews says, we come together in order to exhort one another to keep our thoughts fixed on our heavenly inheritance. God gives leaders to the gathering, that is, there will be different people who have different gifts of leadership, but the essential ministry in any church is that of teaching and exhorting. Exhortation is the characteristic ministry in church, and we all should exhort one another. But exhortation is based on knowledge, true knowledge so that the teaching is prior. If we choose one of our number to be a full time minister in church he ought to excell at least in these two areas of teaching and exhortation, for if he is full time others will not have the same opportunity of exercising the gifts of teaching and exhorting. He should especially be a teacher, for in this ministry the more time that is available the better will be the ministry and if the church meeting does not have constant, true and full teaching about our heavenly hope accompanied by teaching and exhortation to live in conformity with our calling, there is very little purpose in going to church.

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