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Brief Studies

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BRIEF STUDIES

"I GO TO THE FATHER"

The church has placed John 16:5-30 into the Gospel lections for the three Sundays before the ascension. This has led to the assumption — or perhaps it grew out of it — that our Lord refers to His ascension when He says in John 16:5 ff.: "But now I go My way to Him that sent Me. . . . 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 depart, I will send Him unto you." Similarly John 14:1-5 or John 17:13 are interpreted to refer narrowly to the Ascension. Out of this has arisen a preaching construct that the promise of everlasting life of the believer in heaven, or the gift to him of the Holy Spirit, is linked with the Savior's "return" to the Father after His birth, life, death, and resurrection. Many a preacher has been uneasy in the presence of this construct, since it seems to uncouple the redemptive work of Christ on the Cross from the promise of everlasting life or the giving of the Spirit and thus run counter to John 3:1-16 or Rom. 5:8-11 or many other portions of Scripture.

Perhaps it would help to view the phrase "I go to the Father" less anthropomorphically, as a technical term for an act, unique of its kind, undertaken alone by Jesus Christ and portraying the entire climax of the atonement. John 13:36 and 14:6 suggest that this "going" is different from any other and preliminary to all the rest; and John 17:13, coupled with v. 19, suggests that it comprises not merely coronation and exaltation but consecration to an arduous task of carrying out the Father's will. This priestly picture of the "going" is expanded by the writer to the Hebrews. When Jesus fulfilled the ancient symbols of the high-priestly office, He indeed went into the heaven, into the presence of God (9:24). But He went not just in glory, but with the shedding of blood and by means of death (9:15) and appears in heaven "for us" (9:24), bearing away the sins of the world through His offering (9:26, 28). His progress to the Father is not merely in triumph but goes "through the veil, that is to say, His flesh." (10:20)

But the priestly function is not over with the sacrifice of His life; He has more to say to the Father than is signaled on the surface in the "Eli, Eli." His offering is a one-time sacrifice, but He remains in the presence of God. "He ever liveth to make intercession" for them that come unto God by Him. (7:25; cf. Rom. 8:27, 34)

Hence the Upper Room discourses in John show Christ referring not simply to an ascension 43 days away but to that which was saddening the disciples and which had to be interpreted in its true dimension, the crucifixion (14:1-3; 15:7). Through the atonement, of which the death on the cross was the cornerstone and which receives the continued application through Christ's intercession at the right hand of God, we have indeed a place with God (John 14:2). The AV translators used "mansion" to say "place to stay"; the only man in the English village who held title to his home was the lord of the manor, all the rest were only tenants. That place with God is worked out not by some celestial carpentry but by the atonement through the blood of Christ, attested by the resurrection, applied in constant intercession of Christ for His own. The Spirit of God comes not because Christ flies through space to release the Spirit from a heavenly stronghold but (John 15:7) because through His death Jesus redeems men from bondage and thus the Spirit of God can be sent to tell men everything that Christ has done and said of Himself. (John 14:26)

Hence the "I go to the Father" passages indeed speak of the ascension, but of it as an activity which goes on till Judgment Day and in which Christ pleads with the Father that His own belong to God through His redeeming work, wrought once and for all time on the cross. His "going" was bitter, unto death; but it results in His ever being at the right hand of the Father and in His sending of His men to speak the Word of that atonement that many others might believe that God sent Him. (John 17:18-21) RICHARD R. CAEMMERER