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John Gill's

A BODY OF DOCTRINAL DIVINITY

Book 5—Chapter 7

OF THE ASCENSION OF CHRIST TO HEAVEN

The ascension of Christ to heaven was, at his death, burial, and resurrection, according to the scriptures; he himself gave hints of it to his disciples, even before his death, as well as after his resurrection; "What and if ye shall see the Son of man ascend up where he was before?" (John 6:62; 16:28; 20:17). It was pre-signified both by scripture prophecies, and by scripture types.

1. First by scripture prophecies; of which there are many; some more obscurely, others more clearly point unto it. As,

1a. First, A passage in Psalm 47:5 "God is gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet." The whole Psalm is applied, by some Jewish writers, to the times of the Messiah, and this verse particularly, who is the great King over all the earth (Ps. 47:2,7), and more manifestly appeared so at his ascension, when he was made and declared Lord and Christ; and who subdued the Gentile world (Ps. 47:3), through the ministration of his gospel; by which, after his ascension, he went into it, conquering and to conquer; and caused his ministers to triumph in it. And though it was in his human nature that he went up from earth to heaven; yet it was in that, as in union with his divine Person; so that it may be truly said, that God went up to heaven; in like sense as God is said to purchase the church with his blood; even God in our nature; God manifest in the flesh; Immanuel, God with us: and though the circumstance of his ascension, being attended with a shout, and with the sound of a trumpet, is not mentioned in the New Testament, in the account of it; yet there is no doubt to be made of it, since the angels present at it, told the disciples on the spot,

that this same Jesus should so come, in like manner as they saw him go into heaven: now it is certain, that Christ will descend from heaven with the voice of an archangel, and with the trump of God: and also, since he was attended in his ascension with the angels of God, and with some men who rose after his resurrection; there is scarce any question to be made of it, that he ascended amidst their shouts and acclamations; and the rather, since he went up as a triumphant conqueror, over all his and our enemies, leading captivity captive.

1b. Secondly, The words of the Psalmist, in Psalm 110:1. "The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand;" though they do not express, yet they plainly imply, the ascension of Christ to heaven; for unless he ascended to heaven, how could he sit down at the right hand of God there? and hence the apostle Peter thus argues and reasons upon them; "For David is not ascended into the heavens;" not in his body, and therefore the words are not spoken of him, but of one that is ascended; "But he himself saith," not of himself, but another, even of his Lord the Messiah; "The Lord said unto my Lord," &c. (Acts 2:34,35).

1c. Thirdly, The vision Daniel had of the Son of man, in Daniel 7:13,14 is thought by some to have respect to the ascension of Christ to heaven; he is undoubtedly meant by "one like unto the Son of man;" that is, really and truly man; as he is said to be "in the likeness of men," and to be "found in fashion as a man;" the same "came in the clouds of heaven;" so a cloud received Christ, and conveyed him to heaven, at his ascension; and he was "brought near to the Ancient of days," to God, who is from everlasting to everlasting; and was received with a welcome by him; and there were given him "dominion, glory, and a kingdom;" as Christ, at his ascension, was made, or made manifest, openly declared Lord and Christ, Head and King of his church. Though this vision will have a farther accomplishment at the second coming of Christ, when his glorious kingdom will commence in the personal reign; who will deliver up the kingdom until that reign is ended. Once more,

1d. Fourthly, The prophecy in Micah 2:13 may be understood as referring to this matter; "The breaker up is come up before them;" which, in the latter part of the verse, is thus explained; "And their King shall pass before them, and the Lord on the head of them;" so that a divine Person is meant, who is head and king of the church, and plainly points to Christ, who may be called Pharez, "the breaker;" as Pharez had his name from the same word, because he broke forth before his brother; as Christ, at his birth, broke forth into the world in an uncommon way, being born of a virgin; and at his death, broke through the troops of hell, and spoiled principalities and powers; broke down the middle wall of partition, that stood between Jews and Gentiles; and at his resurrection, broke the cords of death, as Samson did his withs, with which he could be no more nor longer held by them, than he with them; and at his ascension he broke up, and broke his way through the region of the air, and through legions of devils; at the head of those that were raised with him when he rose, angels and men shouting as he passed along. But,

1e. Fifthly, What most clearly foretold the ascension of Christ to heaven, is in Psalm 68:18 which is, by the apostle Paul, quoted and applied to the ascension of Christ (Eph. 4:8-10) and all the parts of it agree with him: he is spoken of in the context, in the words both before and after. He is the Lord that was among the angels in Sinai, who spoke to Moses there; and from whom he received the oracles of God, to give to Israel: and he is the God of salvation, the author of it to his people. And of him it may be truly said, that he "ascended on high," far above all heavens, the visible heavens, the airy and starry heavens, and into the third heaven, the more glorious seat of the divine Majesty: he has led "captivity captive;" either such as had been prisoners in the grave, but freed by him, and who went with him to heaven; or the enemies of his people, who have led them captive, as Satan and his principalities; the allusion is to leading captives in triumph for victories obtained. Christ "received," upon his ascension, "gifts for men;" and, as the apostle expresses it, "gave" them to men; he received them in order to give them; and he gave them, in consequence of receiving them: and even he received them for, and gave them to, "rebellious" men, as all by nature are "foolish and disobedient;" and even those be to whom he gives gifts fitting for public usefulness; and such an one was the apostle Paul, as the account of him and his own confessions show, who received a large measure of those gifts of grace; the end of bestowing which gifts was, "That the Lord God might dwell among men," gathered out of the world, through the ministry of the word, into gospel churches, which are built up for an habitation for God, through the Spirit.

2. Secondly, The ascension of Christ was pre-signified by scripture types; personal ones, as those of Enoch and Elijah. The one in the times of the patriarchs, before the flood, and before the law; the other in the times of the prophets, after the flood, and after the law was given. Enoch, a man that walked with God, and had communion with him, "was not;" he was not on earth, after he had been some time on it; "God took him" from thence up to heaven, soul and body (Gen. 5:24). Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind, in a chariot, and horses of fire; was carried up by angels, who appeared in such a form; when he and Elisha had been conversing together (2 Kings 2:11). So Christ was carried up to heaven, received by a cloud, attended by angels, while he was blessing his disciples: more especially, the high priest was a type of Christ in this respect, when he entered into the holiest of all once a year, with blood and incense; which were figures of Christ's entering into heaven with his blood, and to make intercession for men (Heb 9:23,24). The ark in which the two tables were, was a type of Christ, who is the fulfilling end of the law for righteousness; and the bringing up of the ark from the place where it was to mount Zion, which some think was the occasion of penning the twenty fourth Psalm, in which are these words, "Be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors, and the King of Glory shall come in;" and of the forty seventh Psalm, where are the above words, "God is gone up with a shout," &c. the bringing up of which ark to Zion, may be considered as an emblem of Christ's ascension to heaven, sometimes signified by mount Zion. Now as it was foretold by prophecies and types, that Christ should ascend to heaven, so it is matter of fact, that he has ascended thither; concerning which may be observed,

2a. First, The evidence of it; as the angels of God, who were witnesses of it; for as Christ went up to heaven in the sight of his apostles, "two men stood by them in white apparel," who were angels, that appeared in an human form, and thus arrayed, to denote their innocence and purity; and other angels attended him in his ascent, when it was that he was seen "of angels," who were eyewitnesses of his ascension; (see Acts 1:10; 1 Tim. 3:16). The eleven apostles were together, and others with them, when this great event was; and while he was pronouncing a blessing on them, he was parted from them, and carried up to heaven; they beheld him, and looked stedfastly towards heaven, as he went up, until a cloud received him out of their sight (Luke 24:33,50,51; Acts 1:9,10). Yea, after this, when he had ascended to heaven, and had entered into it, and was set down on the right hand of God, he was seen by Stephen the proto-martyr, and by the apostle Paul: while Stephen was suffering, looking stedfastly to heaven, he saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; and at the same time declared it to the Jews, that he saw the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God (Acts 7:55,56). Christ "appeared" to the apostle Paul at his conversion, when he was caught up into the third heaven, and heard and saw things not to be uttered; and afterwards, when in a trance in the temple, he says, "I saw him" (Acts 26:16; 22:18 see also 1 Co 15:8). Moreover, the extraordinary effusion of the Spirit, on the day of Pentecost, is a proof of Christ's ascension to heaven (Acts 2:33), for before this time, the Spirit was not given in an extraordinary manner; "Because Jesus was not yet glorified;" but when he was glorified, and having ascended to heaven, and being at the right hand of God, then the Spirit was given; and the gift of him was a proof of his ascension and glorification (John 7:39).

2b. Secondly, The time of Christ's ascension, which was forty days from his resurrection; which time he continued on earth that his disciples might have full proof, and be at a certainty of the truth of his resurrection; "to whom he showed himself alive after his passion, by many infallible proofs, being seen of them forty days;" not that he was with them all that forty days, but at several times in that interval: on the first day he appeared to many, and on that day week again to his disciples; at another time at the sea of Tiberias; and again on a mountain in Galilee. Now by these various interviews the apostles had opportunities of making strict and close observation, of looking wisely at him, of handling him, of conversing with him, of eating and drinking with him, of reasoning upon things in their own minds, and of having their doubts resolved, if they entertained any; and had upon the whole infallible proofs of the truth of his resurrection: in this space of time also he renewed their commission and enlarged it, and sent them into the whole world to preach and baptize, and further to instruct those that were taught and baptized by them; now it was he opened the understandings of his apostles, that they might more clearly understand the scriptures concerning himself, which he explained unto them, that so they might be the more fitted for their ministerial work; he also spoke to them "of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God," the gospel church state; of the nature of a gospel church, of the officers of it, of ordinances in it, and discipline to be observed therein; wherefore all that they afterwards delivered out and practiced, were according to the directions and prescriptions given by him: and as

all this required time, such a length of time was taken as that of forty days; yet longer it was not proper he should continue with them in this state, lest his apostles should think he was about to set up a temporal kingdom on earth, which their minds were running upon, and inquiring after and expecting (Acts 1:5,6), and besides, it was proper that they should be endued with the Holy Ghost in an extraordinary manner, to qualify them for the important work Christ gave them a commission to do; and which they could not receive until Christ was ascended and glorified.

2c. Thirdly, The place from whence, and the place whither Christ ascended, may next be considered.

2c1. The earth on which he was when he became incarnate, the world into which he came to save men, out of which he went when he had done his work (John 16:28), the particular spot of ground from whence he ascended was mount Olivet, as appears from Acts 1:12 a place he frequented much in the latter part of his life; and it was in a garden at the bottom of the mount where his sufferings began, where his soul was exceeding sorrowful, even unto death; and where he put up that prayer, "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me;" and where he was in such an agony, that his sweat was as drops of blood falling to the ground; and from this very spot he ascended to his God and Father, to enjoy his presence, and all the pleasures of it, and partake of the glory promised him (Luke 21:37; 22:39,44). One of the evangelists tells us, that he led his disciples as far as Bethany, and there blessed them, and was parted from them; which must not be understood of the town of Bethany, but of a part of mount Olivet near to Bethany, and which bore that name, and which signifies the house of affliction, from whence Christ went to heaven; and as it was necessary he should suffer the things he did, and enter into his glory, so his people must through many tribulations enter the kingdom (Luke 24:50,51; 21:26; Acts 14:22).

2c2. The place whither he ascended, heaven, even the third heaven; hence Christ is often said to be carried up into heaven, taken up into heaven, towards which the disciples were gazing as he went up; passed into heaven, and was received into heaven, where he remains; and which is to be understood, not merely of a glorious state, into which he passed, exchanging a mean, uncomfortable, and suffering one, for a glorious, happy, and comfortable one; which is meant by the two witnesses ascending to heaven, even a more glorious state of the church (Rev. 11:12), but a place in which he is circumscribed in his human nature, where he is, and not elsewhere, nor everywhere; which has received him, and where he is, and will be retained until the times of the restitution of all things; from whence he is expected, and from whence he will descend at the last day; he is gone to his Father there, and has taken his place at his right hand; who, though everywhere, being omnipresent, yet heaven is more especially the place where he displays his glory; and who is called "Our Father," and Christ's Father, who is "in heaven;" and of going to him at his ascension he often spoke (John 16:10,16,17,28; 20:17).

2d. Fourthly, The manner of Christ's ascension, or in what sense he might be said to ascend; not "figuratively," as God is sometimes said to go down and to go up (Gen. 11:6; 17:22) which must be understood consistent with the omnipresence of God; not of any motion from place to place, but of some exertion of his power, or display of himself; nor in appearance only, as it might seem to beholders, but in reality and truth; nor was it a "disappearance" of him merely, as in Luke 24:31 for he was seen going up, and was gazed at till a cloud received him out of sight; nor was it in a "visionary" way, as the apostle Paul was caught up into the third heaven, not knowing whether in the body or out of the body; nor in a "spiritual" manner, in mind and affections, in which sense saints ascend to heaven, when in spiritual frames of soul; but "really, visibly," and "locally": this ascension of Christ was a real motion of his human nature, which was visible to the apostles, and was by change of place, even from earth to heaven; and was sudden, swift, and glorious, in a triumphant manner: and he went up as he will come again, in a cloud, in a bright cloud, a symbol of his divine majesty, either literally taken; or if understood of the appearance of angels in the form of a bright cloud, as by Dr. Hammond, it is expressive of the same; nor does it at all affect the reality, locality, and visibility of Christ's ascension, so to understand it: nor can Luke, as an historian, be chargeable with an impropriety in his relation of it in such sense, any more than in the same account by representing angels as appearing in an human form, and in white apparel; nor than that the author of the book of Kings is, in relating the ascent of Elijah to heaven in a chariot and horses of fire, generally understood of angels in such a form (2 Kings 2:11), as the horses and chariots of fire also are in 2 Kings 6:17 which yet were really and visibly seen; and the rather it may be thought that the angels are intended in the account of Christ's ascension, since as the Lord makes the clouds his chariots (Ps. 104:3) so certain it is, the angels are the twenty thousand chariots of God among whom Christ was, and enclosed, as in a bright cloud when he ascended on high (Ps. 68:17,18), all which serve to set forth the grandeur and majesty in which Christ ascended.

2e. Fifthly, The cause or causes of Christ's ascension; it was a work of almighty power to cause a body to move upwards with such swiftness, and to such a distance; it is ascribed to the right hand of God, that is, of God the Father; to the power of God, by which he is said to be lifted up and exalted (Acts 2:33; 5:31), and therefore it is sometimes passively expressed, that he was "carried up, taken up," and "received up" into heaven; and sometimes actively, as done by himself, by his own power; so it is said, "he went up," he lifted up his own body through the union of it to his divine person, and carried it up to heaven; so "God went up with a shout;" (see Acts 1:10), and often he speaks of it as his own act, "What if the son of man ascend," &c. "I ascend to my God," &c. the "efficient" cause of it is God; and being a work "ad extra," Father, Son, and Spirit were concerned in it. The "procuring" or "meritorious" cause of it was the "blood" of Christ; by which he made full satisfaction to divine justice, and obtained eternal redemption for his people: and therefore having done the work he engaged to do, it was but fit and just that he should be, not only raised from the dead, but ascend to heaven, and be received there; hence it is said, "by his own blood," through the virtue of it, and in

consequence of what he had done by it, "he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us" (Heb. 9:12). The "instrumental" or ministering causes, were the "cloud" and the attending angels.

2f. Sixthly, The effects of Christ's Ascension, or the ends to be answered, and which have been answered, are,

2f1. To fulfil the prophecies and types concerning it, and particularly that of the high priest's entering into the holiest of all once a year, to officiate for the people; and so Christ has entered into heaven itself, figured by the most holy place, there to make, and where he ever lives to make, intercession for the saints.

2f2. To take upon him more openly the exercise of his kingly office; to this purpose is the parable of the nobleman (Luke 19:12) by the "nobleman" is meant Christ himself; (see Jer. 33:21), by the "far country" he went into, heaven, even the third heaven, which is far above the visible ones; his end in going there, was "to receive a kingdom for himself," to take possession of it, and exercise kingly power; to be made and declared Lord and Christ, as he was upon his ascension (Acts 2:36), which kingdom will be delivered up at the close of his personal reign, and not before.

2f3. To receive gifts for men, both extraordinary and ordinary; and this end has been answered, he has received them, and he has given them; extraordinary gifts he received for, and bestowed upon the apostles on the day of Pentecost; and ordinary ones, which he has given since, and still continues to give, to fit men for the work of the ministry, and for the good of his churches and interest in all succeeding ages (Eph. 4:8-13).

2f4. To open the way into heaven for his people, and to prepare a place for them there; he has by his blood entered into heaven himself, and made the way into the holiest of all manifest; and given boldness and liberty to his people through it to enter thither also, even by a new and living way, consecrated through the vail of his flesh (Heb. 9:8,12; 10:19,20), he is the forerunner for them entered, and is gone beforehand to prepare by his presence and intercession mansions of glory for them in his Father's house (Heb. 6:20; John 14:2,3).

2f5. To assure the saints of their ascension also; for it is to his God and their God, to his Father and their Father, that he is ascended; and therefore they shall ascend also, and be where he is, and be glorified together with him; and all this is to draw up their minds to heaven, to seek things above, where Jesus is; and to set their affections, not on things on earth, but on things in heaven; and to have their conversation there; and to expect and believe that they shall be with Christ for evermore.