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"WHERE HE WAS BEFORE"

– *DECEMBER 20.* – *LUKE 24:50-53; ACTS 1:1-11.* –

"What and if ye shall see the Son of Man ascend up where He was before?" – John 6:62.

THE forty days which followed our Lord's resurrection were sufficient time for the Divine purpose. The disciples had lost their first bewilderment, created by the crucifixion of the One whom they supposed was about to take the throne to rule Israel and the world. We can see the wisdom of the Divine method of communicating the facts to the disciples. They were not alarmed, as they would have been if Jesus had appeared to them in a light above the brightness of the sun, as He afterwards appeared to Saul of Tarsus. Gradually they learned that their Lord was no longer dead, but alive; and that He was no longer a human being, but now a spirit being – that He was no longer confined, therefore, to the usages of humans, but, like the angels, could come and go like the wind, appearing and disappearing at pleasure.

It was a slow lesson. After the three appearances of the first day, they looked for Him each day until the following Sabbath, when the fourth appearance, or manifestation, was made. This delay only whetted their appetite, their craving, for knowledge respecting Him. Meantime they could, and did, think over all the things which Jesus had said to them during His earthly ministry. They perceived wherein they had mistaken a Heavenly Kingdom for an earthly one – or at least mistook the time of the establishment of Messiah's Kingdom.

The lesson given on the way to Emmaus must have been very impressive. It dealt with the prophecies which related to Jesus, and explained to them how these prophecies were already in fulfilment – some of them already fulfilled, and some of them still future. Well

did they remark that their hearts burned within them when He made these explanations!

AN IMPORTANT LESSON

After the four appearances, apparently two full weeks passed without any manifestation. In that time the tension relaxed, and the affairs of earth began to assert themselves. What would the disciples do? Privately they had been thinking of the wisdom of returning to their former employment, from which Jesus had called them to be fishers of men; but none of them cared to broach the subject to the others. St. Peter, always a leader of thought and action, finally declared himself: "I go a fishing" – I am going back to the fishing business. A word was all that was necessary. The others were of the same mind, and the old firm was reorganized.

For just such a decision Jesus had delayed His ascension. He would show them that their continuance in the work of fishing for men could go on in His absence with His blessing. The Master oversaw their interests, and that night gave them "bad luck." They caught nothing. **[R5589 : page 365]** They were discouraged, but it was "good for them." As is written, "All things work together for good to those who love God" – even their financial disappointments.

In the morning Jesus stood on the shore and called to them, asking them whether they had any fish for sale. They replied that they had caught nothing. The Master said, "Cast the net on the other side of the boat." They might have said that such advice was foolish, but they were in the mood to do anything to get rid of their "bad luck." They cast the net as directed, and quickly it was filled with great fishes. Then they knew that the One on the shore must be their risen Lord, who had thus made a new manifestation of Himself to them.

The fishermen hastened to the shore. They had known only one experience like this ever, and that was when on a previous occasion the Master had given them a similar great catch. The boat moved too slowly for St. Peter. He was afraid that somehow the Master would disappear. Girding upon him his fisherman's coat, he swam to the shore. The Master did not leave, but invited St. Peter and companions to breakfast from fish already on the fire.

Here was a great lesson. Their Master could provide cooked fish when necessary, and could give them just as much success as He saw best in respect to their fishing business. He who could thus provide for their needs on this occasion could do so in the future, should He send them forth again, authorized to speak in His name. None of them asked the Stranger His name; for, although His features and His clothing were different, they knew that it was another manifestation of their Lord, who was no longer a human being and who was able to appear in various forms, as He had done.

The lesson taught, Jesus vanished. He had one other meeting with His followers in Galilee. It was a prearranged meeting. Jesus had sent word that He would meet His followers there. St. Paul says that about five hundred brethren saw Him, and were witnesses of the resurrection. – 1 Corinthians 15:6.

OUR LORD'S PARTING INSTRUCTIONS

Our lesson today relates especially to the ascension of Jesus. This took place near Jerusalem – at Bethany. Apparently He met with His followers in the Holy City – perhaps at a very early hour, by appointment. He led them out to Bethany, talking the while, explaining the things that would be to their advantage to know – the things they would need to be thoroughly convinced of before He would leave them, and before they would be in a proper attitude of faith to be prepared for the blessings He had yet to send.

St. Luke, who also wrote the Book of Acts, tells us that the essence of Jesus' teaching during the forty days was in respect to the Kingdom of God. Still they understood not; indeed, it was not possible for them to understand fully until they would receive the begetting of the Holy Spirit. It was toward that point, therefore, that Jesus directed their attention, saying that they should not depart from Jerusalem nor engage in any work of preaching, but should simply wait for the promise of the Father, of which He had previously told them – the gift of the Holy Spirit. He explained that John the Baptist had indeed used the water baptism, but that He intended that all His followers should receive a superior baptism and qualification – the baptism of the Spirit at Pentecost.

On this last occasion, which was probably the seventh manifestation, the disciples had gotten their bearing to such an extent that they asked the very significant question, "Lord, wilt thou at this time restore the Kingdom to Israel?" The Kingdom had been taken away from Israel away back in the days of Zedekiah, king of Judah. At that time Jehovah had said that He would overturn the Kingdom until Messiah would come – "until He comes whose right it is, and I will give it unto Him." – Ezekiel 21:25-27.

The disciples considered Jesus to be the Messiah, and thought that the Father's time had come for giving Him the Kingdom. But they had been witnesses to the contrary – that the Kingdom of Heaven had suffered violence at the hands of the rulers, that the rightful Heir to the throne had been slain, and that He had risen from the dead. They had regained their confidence that there would be a King, and they were now inquiring whether **[R5589 : page 366]** it would be at this time or at some future coming of the Master that His Kingdom would be established.

The Master's answer was significant: "It is not for you to know the times and the seasons, which the Father hath kept in His own hand" – in His own power. The Master had already intimated to His

disciples that at the appointed time they would know the times and the seasons, but it was not due for them to understand those things then. They must wait patiently. The development of patience would do them good, would strengthen their faith, would strengthen their character in general.

For the Father to have made known the long interval of nearly nineteen hundred years before Messiah's Kingdom would be established would not have been wise – would not have been for the good of His people, who would have been discouraged in view of the long delay of their hopes. The Master therefore merely indicated that they must walk by faith and not by sight, and especially that they must not expect to understand anything respecting God's program until after they would receive the anointing of the Holy Spirit.

After receiving the Spirit, they would be fully qualified to be God's representatives and to speak the Message; and from time to time they would be given the "meat in due season." Thus they would not be in darkness with the world, and the Day of the Lord would not come upon them as a thief in the night or as a snare. The Pentecostal blessing which they received qualified them fully for the work of the ministry, even though it did not cover their natural blemishes; for it was after they had received the Holy Spirit that we read, "The people perceived that they were ignorant and unlearned men."

OUR LORD'S ASCENSION

Our Lord's ascension was a spectacular one, so far as His Church was concerned, but not in respect to the world. Of the world He had already said, "Yet a little while, and the world seeth Me no more." The world did not see our Lord during the forty days in which He manifested Himself to His disciples; for He showed Himself to none except His faithful, consecrated ones. The ocular demonstrations so helpful to His disciples culminated with an

actual ascension of the Lord into the air in the body in which He had just been with them. Because they were not yet spirit-begotten, they doubtless needed just such a manifestation to help their faith, to lead them to understand that they would see the Master no more until He would come with power and great glory to assemble all His saints to Himself and to bless the world.

Our Golden Text reminds us that Jesus spoke of this ascension beforehand. The ascending up where He was before should not, however, be understood merely to signify a return to a previous place. Rather, it should be understood to signify a return to a previous condition – a spirit condition, which the Master had left to be made flesh, that He might ransom the world.

As Jesus parted from His disciples into the clouds out of their sight, we assume that the body in which He had just appeared was dissolved, or dematerialized. The use of it was merely to help to establish the faith of the disciples and to be a means of instruction, an assurance that Jesus had gone permanently – that they need not expect to see Him further in any kind of manifestation. It was an object lesson.

MANNER OF OUR LORD'S RETURN

One of the evangelists recounts that after Jesus had disappeared angels materialized and addressed them, saying, "Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into Heaven? This same Jesus, who is taken up from you into Heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into Heaven." This statement has led some to believe that at His Second Advent Jesus will materialize and appear in the flesh; but to our understanding they are laboring under a grave misapprehension. The world is to see Jesus no more; and the Church is to see Him only with the eye of faith until that time when they shall experience their change, in the end of the Age. Then we shall see Him as he is – not as He was; for we shall be like

Him. Then we shall know even as we are now known. – 1 Corinthians 15:50-52; 1 John 3:2.

It is worthy of notice that the angels laid stress upon the *manner* of the going, and that the manner agrees with what the Bible tells us respecting our Lord's Second Coming. He went quietly, secretly, unknown to the world – He is to return as a thief in the night; and none will know of His return except those whose eyes of understanding will be opened to discern the signs of the presence of the Son of Man. These will be His loyal, saintly few. So Jesus explained, saying that at His Second Coming it would be for a time as it was in the days of Noah – mankind would be eating, drinking, planting and marrying, and would not know of His presence. – Matthew 24:37-39.

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