

THE ONLY MAN THAT EVER ASCENDED UP TO HEAVEN

A SERMON

By Mister JAMES WELLS

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“And no man has ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven.” John 3:13

IT is clear from the Holy Scriptures, that Enoch ascended to heaven, that Elijah ascended to heaven, that all the Old Testament saints ascended to heaven; and yet our text says that “no man has ascended to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven.” Is not this a proof that we ought to be careful to look after the sense of the Holy Scriptures, and to look to the Lord to give us the mind of the Spirit in the various parts of this solemn and inspired volume, which concerns us all; because it is that book that contains a description of those that are lost, and of those that are saved; and it is essential to our welfare that we be not deceived concerning the same. And you will also observe, that there is, in the first appearance thereof, an ambiguity in each clause of our text. “No man has ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven.” Now the Savior had not yet ascended to heaven, and yet he here speaks as though he had ascended to heaven. “But he that came down from heaven.” Now the Savior, as to his manhood, did not literally come down from heaven. And then the next clause says, “Even the Son of man which is in heaven.” Now he was not in heaven when he used these words. How, then, seeing there is an apparent ambiguity, are we to understand this text? I think we shall understand it, and I hope we shall understand it profitably. I hope, as we go through the subject this morning, we shall feel that each department is interesting unto us, essentially so; and I am persuaded that all ambiguity will vanish as we go along. I would just observe, before going further, that the ascension here spoken of does not refer, at least I think it does not, to his personal ascension to heaven. You will not fail to observe that it does not say, “No man has ascended up *into* heaven;” our text does not say that; it does not say, “No man has ascended up *into* heaven, but he that came down from heaven,” but “No man has ascended up *to* heaven.” There is a difference between the two forms of speech; that “no man has ascended up *to* heaven, but he that came down from heaven.” I shall, therefore, in the first place, show *the sense here intended in which the Savior ascended to heaven.* Secondly, *the fourfold respect in which he came down from heaven.* And then, lastly, *his then present position,* “which is in heaven.”

First, then, I notice *the sense as here intended in which the Savior ascended to heaven*; and you will easily recognize the fact that we have in our text a form of speech which is not at all uncommon to the Scriptures; a place is mentioned, but at the same time that which is contained in the place is meant. If you, therefore, just substitute another word for the word heaven, you will see how clear it is, that “no man has ascended to God but he that came from God, even the Son of man which is in God.” There, you see, all difficulty vanishes; if you do not see that, you will as we go along. First, then, I think by heaven we may understand, first, the claims of God’s law; that no man ever did reach the claims of God’s holy law, but Christ Jesus the Lord. Every one of the Old Testament saints looked forward to what the Savior should do in meeting the claims of the law of God. I do not say that the Lord could not have saved us without mediation; I do not say that the Lord could not have laid his law aside, have pardoned our sins, sanctified and conformed us to a pattern or order of things that seemed good in his sight, and have taken us to heaven without mediation at all. I should not like to say that he could not do it, for I do not like the doctrine of binding the Almighty to this, to that, or to the other. We have not, therefore, to do in this matter with what God could do, or what he could not do; we have to do with what he has done, what he has decided upon. Hence the apostle Paul does not say that God could not give a law so that righteousness should have been by the law; he does not say God could not have done that; but he says, if a law had been given by which we could live, then righteousness would have been by the law; but no such law was given. And there is one important matter, in order for us to understand what so far is for us to understand, that God has determined that not one jot or tittle of the law of condemnation shall ever be laid aside; that is his determination, that is his decision. And although that involves the eternal condemnation of the lost, nevertheless God has been pleased, in the exercise of his counsels, to take that position, that not one jot or tittle of that law shall fail; and he has been pleased so to order it that no person shall go to heaven contrary to that law. And therefore, he has contrived, in connection with this, a way in which that law, in all its qualities, should be met by a substitute for the people. If that law be a law of love, then the Lord Jesus Christ met that law in the perfection of it, and loved God with all his heart, and his neighbor as himself. And if that law be holy, then Christ met that law with a perfection of holiness, and he himself is unto us the end of the law. And if that law be righteous, then Jesus Christ, by his own righteousness, has met; and magnified, and established that law. And if that law be spiritual, then Jesus Christ was spiritual also, and he has met, and established, and magnified the spirituality, of that law. And if that law be infallible, which it is, the Lord has so ordered it that it shall be infallible, the dear Savior was also infallible. It was not possible for the Savior to fail in any way whatever; because, being God as well as man, why, the Savior, if I may, without irreverence, use such an illustration, the Savior had more power in his little finger than Adam had in his whole existence. Jesus Christ was God as well as man; he was never otherwise than omnipotent; and though crucified through weakness, it was our weakness that he took. Now this wonderful Person, then, has rendered all the obedience to the law that the law demands. No man ever ascended up to God as Christ did; no man ever reached the full demands of the law as Christ did. He therefore has done it. And now, then, my hearer, do you see and feel that you are by nature an enemy? Do you see and feel that you are by nature carnal and sinful? Do you see and feel that you are by nature unclean, unholy, and that your very language must be, like the leper, with the hand upon the mouth, “Unclean, unclean”? And do you feel that by nature you are unrighteous, and that by nature and practice you have sinned and come short of the glory of God, and that if you attempt to stand before God by what you are, all your sins must stand in array against you, and your soul be banished, and that eternally, from the presence of God and from the glory of his power? What is the remedy? I answer, Jesus Christ is the remedy. Let

precious faith center upon him, lay hold upon him, and boast of him, and plead him, and cleave to him, and go in the strength of the Lord God, and make mention of the Savior's righteousness, and of his only; then you are met with the delightful truth, that "justified freely by his grace." While you could not reach up to God in your obedience, your sins have reached to God, but you could do nothing that would reach to God; Christ has ascended up to the perfection of the law, he has ascended up to heaven, his righteousness reaches to heaven. And I may here, in this department, presently just observe also that as his righteousness reaches to heaven, so his atonement reaches to heaven. But before I go to that, take this, that as Jesus Christ's righteousness reaches to heaven, and you are brought to see your need of such a Person as this to meet God's law, and, through faith, lay hold of Christ's righteousness, just so sure as that righteousness, like Jacob's ladder, reaches to heaven, just so sure you shall reach there also if your hope is in his righteousness. Have you not noticed, brethren, that the Scriptures make almost a common practice of putting justification and glorification together? Does not the Old Testament say that "in the Lord shall all the seed of Israel be justified, and shall glory"? Does not the New Testament say, "Whom he justified, them he glorified? Does not the Old Testament say, "In your righteousness shall they be exalted, and they shall walk in the light of your countenance, and in your name shall they rejoice all the day long"? Ah! my soul loves the dear Savior. While I seem to see the words come from his sacred lips, my soul puts her seal willingly to the truth thereof, that no man has ever thus ascended to God on behalf of sinners but the God-man Mediator, but the Lord Jesus Christ, .but this Friend that loves at all times, this wonderful Person, heaven's, center, heaven's glory, angels wonder, our salvation boundless and eternal joy. And it, will not be needful now that any other man should attempt to reach to heaven by his own doings, for the work is done. Jesus is the way; we want no other way; no other name given under heaven among men whereby we must be saved. Thus, then, as he reached to heaven, and you are a believer in that righteousness, you will get there if that righteousness can take you there; you will be as welcome there as that best robe can make you; you will be as happy there as the perfection of his righteousness can make you; and you will remain there as long as his righteousness retains its glorious hue, and have all that access to God there realization of his loving-kindness, that Christ himself shall have. He is Jehovah our righteousness.

Again, as no man ever reached up to the claims of the law as Christ did, and that not for himself, but for us, and it is a wonderful mercy not to be ignorant of this righteousness, but to be acquainted with it, and to rejoice in the delightful truth that it is by this righteousness that God is just, and the justifier of him that believeth in Jesus; second, no man, except the Savior, has ever so ascended to God as to confirm the new covenant, the everlasting covenant. Now, this is a point that I shall require a little of your patience upon, that no man has ever ascended to God as Christ did to confirm the new covenant. The confirming of the new covenant was a comparatively simple affair, a comparatively, though solemn, yet simple matter. But that which I have to state connected with the new covenant so complicates it as at once to demonstrate that none but such a person as the Savior could so confirm the new covenant as to make salvation eternally sure. Let us see, then if we can make this matter plain. What is the essential to the confirming of the covenant? Death; the death of the testator. As, the apostle reasons upon the grounds of human doings to illustrate divine things, of course we cannot do better than follow his example. Now, he says, where there is a testament, that is, a will, for that is the meaning, a testamentary will, there must be the death of the testator, because, all the time the testator lives, he can change his will, he can make another will; but when the testator dies, that is, provided it be a will of force, as the apostle says, a legal will,

when the testator dies, then the will cannot be altered; so that that testator's death confirms his will. Now his will must stand just as he made it; he himself cannot alter it, and no one can legally alter it. Just so the new covenant. Thousands of years rolled away before Christ died, and God, during those thousands of years, might have altered the new covenant; he might have altered his choice; he might have changed the objects of his love; he might have put away the then existing heirs, or those that he had intended to be heirs of the inheritance; he might have put them away, and put others into their place. But then our God is not a changeable God, and, therefore, what he did before the foundation of the world remained good through all the Old Testament age, until Christ came. Still this testament, this new covenant, was not yet confirmed, not yet rendered unalterable, because the Testator had not yet died. But presently Jesus Christ dies, and death cannot be recalled, death cannot be undone, if a man die, if you bring him back again. Christ rose from the dead, but that did not undo his death; that did not alter the fact that he had died; that did not invalidate or lessen the fact that he had died; only demonstrated, as I presently have to show, the kind of death which he died. Now, then, no man could so reach to heaven as thus to confirm the will of God; so that you will see by this death of Christ as the testator the promise is made yea and amen; so that his death makes the covenant unalterable, makes the will unalterable, makes the promise unalterable. But now I come to the complicated department. I will suppose a man leaves a large estate to certain persons that he adopts as heirs. I will suppose that that estate is neither assignable nor saleable. Suppose the estate to be of such infinite value that all the treasures of the universe put together could not buy ever so small a part of it; I will suppose that. Well, say you, they must be a very happy people to whom such an estate was left. But stop, stop; we will suppose that every one of the adopted heirs, of this estate was in debt, and that they were shut up in prison for that debt, and that it was written over the door of every cell, "You shall not come out thence till you have paid the last mite." And although this great estate is left to these same persons, yet the estate, not being assignable nor being saleable, these heirs of the estate cannot make use of the estate by which to pay their debts or get out of prison; and thus they remain under their debts, they remain in prison, and the testator might just as well have left them nothing at all, because they are in prison for debt; it is written over every cell door, "You shall not come out from there till you have paid the last mite." and thus there is, between the heirs of the estate and the estate itself, an impassable barrier. They may hear of the estate, they may long after it, but get to it they cannot. Thus, you see the point. But we will suppose that this testator not only leaves this glorious estate, but that before he dies, or when he dies, he has some wealth by him by which he pays off the debts of the heirs, and by which he insures their deliverance, and so completely emancipates them; by some great price that he pays, he redeems them from their debts, from their prison, from their bondage, from their captivity. By-and-bye the year of jubilee comes, and the prison door is opened. The prisoner says, What is there for me? what is there? Why, he has taken knowledge of you; this divine Testator has taken knowledge of you; he has adopted you; there is an estate for you; your debts are paid, the prison is opened, the law is on your side, the last mite is paid; you are free, free, and free for ever, and now we are come to make it known to you. And, therefore, you that sit in darkness, show yourselves; come to Zion; come and have this estate; come and possess it, come and enjoy it, come and take that possession of it which is ordained for you. Just so Jesus Christ. All his people were in debt, spiritually; they were sinners, and by his sufferings he paid their debt, by his blood he has wrought their redemption, by his unfathomable agonies he has swallowed up the curse, swallowed up death in victory, and now there is not a single farthing to be accounted to their charge, not an adversary that is not conquered. Law is on their side, gospel is on their side, justice is on their side; and now these lawful captives shall be delivered, these far-off captives shall

be brought home. Thus, Jesus Christ has reached heaven. Not only did he confirm the new testament by his death, but in that same death he paid the price the people owed, paid the mighty debt they owed, set them free. Well might the Savior say, "If the Son make you free, you shall be free indeed." I think now, friends, you catch the idea. The inheritance we have in heaven is not assignable, it is not saleable; not all the treasures of the universe could buy one particle of that divine inheritance we have; and there was an impassable barrier between us and that inheritance. That barrier the dear Savior has removed; the way is now free; and his answer to the question is, when I ask, How shall I get there? his answer is, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Thus, it says, "By the blood of your covenant I have sent forth your prisoners out of the pit wherein there is no water." So, then, take this threefold view of Jesus. First, he reached to heaven, and met the preceptive claims of the law; second, by his wondrous death he has made the new covenant unalterable; third, that he has in that same death paid the debt we owed. Sin is pardoned, the debt remitted; the books are tied up, and cast, as with a millstone connected with them, into the sea, and they are gone down, down, and down, never again to be named. And thus, we may sing, as you sometimes do,

"You have redeemed our souls with blood,
Have set the prisoners free,
And made us kings and priests to God,
we shall reign with you."

Such, then, is the ascension of the dear Savior to God in his obedient life; such is the death that has confirmed the new testament; such is the redemption that he has wrought, redeeming us from hell, from the curse, from all iniquity, from death, from the power of the grave, redeeming us from all adversity; so that the redeemed shall return and come to Zion; everlasting joy shall be unto them, sorrow and sighing shall flee away. Let these glories of mediation, let these glories of a covenant God shine upon your mind, and if that does not make you happier than anything on earth can, then I know nothing of the matter. I do bless the Lord that it is in this way that we have a life that can never die, a peace that passes all understanding, and a strength that shall make us bold as lions, willing to live God's time, and willing to die when that happy moment with us shall arrive. I think I have said enough to prove the truth of the dear Mediator's words, I love his words, and it is no small mercy to be able to set your seal to the truth; and as it is very clear to us that he is the only Person that ever ascended to God to reach the claims of the law, the only Person that confirmed the new covenant, the only person that could or did pay the mighty debt we owed; and while we acknowledge him in this matter, and him alone, do not let us deny what he has done; let us acknowledge he has paid the uttermost mite, let us acknowledge he has magnified the law, let us acknowledge he has confirmed the New Testament. And all we want now is the reception of these things, to go on receiving them, to be receivers from time to time of his fulness, and grace for grace.

I will now hasten to notice *the fourfold respect in which he came down from heaven*; in other words, we shall want those words presently, at least I think we shall, if I have time, the fourfold respect in which he came from God, First, he came from God as a divine person. I know some have objected to a doctrine that ascribes local movement to God; they do not allow the idea of one Divine Person coming from another, and hence this point may be objected to by some. But then, if you do object to that, do you not see the difficulty you get into? Do you not believe the Holy

Spirit is God? Do you not believe that the Holy Spirit is coequal and coeternal with the Father and with Christ? And as a Christian you will say, With all my heart I do. Very well, then, the Holy Spirit is said to come from God, "Whom I will send unto you from the Father," and "He that proceeded from the Father." Now how did Jesus Christ come as God? Take the 2nd of the Hebrews, and that will help us in this matter: "He took upon him the seed," not of Adam, for that would have been the whole human race, but, "He took upon him the seed of Abraham." "Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil." Thus, "In the beginning was the Word," that is, a Divine Person, "and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things," all this new covenant, this new creation, new heaven and earth, "were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made" in the whole range of the new covenant. "In him was life, and the life was the light of men." And that same Divine Word became flesh; that is, he took flesh; that is, he became human, God manifest in the flesh. This is a Divine Person who came down and took our nature. In that one sense, then, he came down from heaven; in that one sense he came from God. It was not the presence merely of the manhood of Christ that caused John to leap for joy before he was born. When Mary entered that house, there was the greatest mystery that ever existed. There was Mary, and there was a complex Person; Mary was to be the mother of this wonderful Person. There was the presence of Jesus Christ in his unborn manhood, and in his absolute divinity, and that divinity reached the unborn babe of which Elizabeth was to be the mother, and caused the babe to rejoice before it was born. Bless the Lord! What cannot our dear Savior do? Yes, his divinity can penetrate anything, his divinity can penetrate everything. If not, it never could have penetrated my adamant heart, which it has done, and which it now sometimes does do, and melts me down, dissolves me, takes away all my difficulties, and makes me say with Thomas, under the melting rays of the intensity of this love and power divine, "My Lord and my God!" Who is this that humbles himself, that thus comes down to us? Wonder of, wonders! the Infinite of days thus to come down and unite in that babe infinity, eternity! That is one sense, then, in which he came from God. No man has ascended to meet the law, confirm the new covenant, set the prisoners free, and establish them in the final possession of this, but he that came down from heaven. The second respect in which he came from God was as to his manhood. His manhood was formed by the Father and by the Holy Ghost, and taken by the person, the divinity of Christ, into union unto himself; so that the production of the manhood of Christ was the joint work of the Father and of the Holy Ghost, "That which shall be born of you is of the Holy Ghost." While Christ took that nature, and that nature was made up of all the elements of pure nature, there, was no passion. He has been called the passionless Preacher, though, bless the Lord, he was not a powerless preacher then, and he is not powerless now, and never will be. His nature perfectly innocent. It was from God, of God, begotten of God, that is, formed of God's, creative power, and was altogether of God. Grace, and nothing but grace, was poured into his lips, Mysterious person! could neither be drawn aside nor driven aside; no. Upon this subject, of Christ being without sin, our translators in the 4th of the Hebrews have spoilt that scripture, they have spoilt it. I question whether there is a Greek scholar in existence that would set his seal to the present translation. I have the strongest feelings against it, and have had for years. I had no sooner become somewhat acquainted with the Greek language, so as to read the New Testament in the Greek language for myself, than I became offended, I became offended at that translation. The scripture to which I refer is this, that "he was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin." I was going to say that is a sinful translation. I object to it, because it is not true that he was tempted in all points as we are. He was never tempted

with the lust of the eye; he was never tempted with infidelity; he was never tempted with any internal fault, or failing, or depravity whatever. He had none in him. How say you, then, ought that scripture to read? It ought to read like this, sir, that “he was in all points tempted as we are, except sin,” except sin¹. Our sin within us tempts us, does it not? in ten thousand ways. But there was no sin in him to tempt him to anything; he could not be tempted; God cannot be tempted with evil. I mean to assert this morning, without fear of contradiction, that there was no more possibility of Christ’s manhood, from any fault in it, being tempted to wrong, than there was a possibility of his divinity being tempted to wrong. His manhood was as free from sin as was his divinity; he was sound in every part and the man that would suggest for one moment the possibility of Christ’s sinning, that man cannot be conscious of the awful blasphemy into which he is sinking. God deliver us all from such a blasphemous doctrine. Unsound indeed we are; unholy, unrighteous, ruined, undone, that is what we are; and if there be a possibility of failure in him, where would the remedy be? But, bless his dear and holy name, “tempted in all points as we are, except sin.” Never tempted from anything within him; the thing was not possible. Sin, in every shape, to his manhood was infinitely loathsome, infinitely repulsive. And though the serpent worked in a great many ways upon this Rock, one of Solomon’s mysteries, a verse which I hope someday, to take up and give a sermon from, from which I am now quoting, in the Proverbs; four things Solomon could not understand, and yet he could, and yet he could not; the way of a Serpent upon a rock; and the serpent the devil, worked in all sorts of ways to see if he could find a weak point in Christ, but never could find it. “The prince of this world,” said the sacred lips of this lovely, dearest Mediator, “the prince of this world. comes, but has nothing in me.” He has got plenty against me in his own eyes; he has got plenty of enemies against me, brings everything he can against me, but he has nothing in me. I can stand before God, always set him before me, and I always do that which pleases him. Blessed Jesus! Ah, my soul! adore him. Happy am I to exchange my old Adam image for this last Adam image; happy am I to exchange the earthly for this heavenly image; happy am I to exchange my righteousness for his righteousness, my Pharisaism for his holiness, my supposed goodness for his real goodness; happy am I to renounce the whole, and let Jesus be my all and in all.

Now I must be careful, or I shall not get halfway through my subject. Cannot help it; it is a sea I find room to swim in. No hymn could be more expressive of what my experience is at least I trust at times, and always in sentiment, than that you have been singing this morning,

“You are the sea of love,
Where all my pleasures roll,
The circle where my passions move,
And center of my soul:”

and so, he is; he is the sea of love, where all our pleasures roll. But then it is by mediation; and it was this that made the apostle say, “That I may know him.” It is only by a real acquaintance with the Savior that God becomes really endeared to us. But again, he came down from heaven as God. He was of God as man, pure, infallible. I nothing more request than to be like him. All I request, it is the highest destiny that God himself could devise, to make the heirs of the eternal inheritance

¹ The key word in the Greek is “chōris” Strong’s number 5565. It can bear the common translation of “without” but it can also mean “apart from” “besides” “independent” “separate”. I think Wells’s point is that using “without” can give the wrong impression in our English version readers. – Richard Schadle

like the one Heir himself, Christ Jesus; like the native Heir, the Heir Apparent. We are adopted; he was the Son of God directly, we indirectly, by adoption. We are to be like him, see him as he is. The third respect in which he was of God is his mission. The Savior did not go to college; his mission was not of man; not an act of parliament religion; no, no, he received not testimony from men. "The words that I speak," he says, "are not mine, but the words of him that sent me." All his words came down from heaven; his work came down from heaven. "I came not to do my own will, but the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work." Had the world have known that his mission was of God, they would not have crucified him. Said one, "Let these men alone;" and good for them, as a nation, if they had all taken that advice, "Let these men alone, for if this work be of man, it will come to nothing; but if it be of God, you cannot overthrow it." Bless the Lord! it was of God his mission was of God. "Therefore does my Father love me, because I lay down my life that I might take it again." No man takes it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father?" He felt, what you and what I dare not say we at all times feel, and that is, he felt he had divine authority for every word he ever uttered, for every miracle he ever wrought, for every deed he ever performed, in life and death, he felt he had divine authority for it all. He always felt that he was standing upon the rock of truth; he always felt that his standing was firm; he always felt that he was right, and could, when he reached the end, say, "It is finished," bow his head in sweet repose, and enter into that rest to which he will bring his followers. First, then, he came down from heaven as to his divinity, took our nature; second, he was of God as to his manhood; and third, he was of God as to his mission. One more thought, and then I suppose I must leave for the present the other clause, which is "in heaven," a clause that contains volumes. Now, my last point this morning is, that he came down from heaven as to his people, or he came from God as to his people. Do you see the Savior with the poor sinner? Lord, where did you get that poor sinner? My Father gave him to me. He indebted to man for the ingathering of his sheep! He indebted to man for the possession of a people! He indebted to man for his bride! He indebted to man for his flock! He indebted to man for the peopling of his kingdom! No, he was of God. "You have given him power over all flesh, that he should give eternal life to as many as you have given him. Yours they were, and you gave them me." If I had got them from free will, I should question whether I ought to keep them; if I had got them by human effort I should not have them by divine authority, then I should question whether I ought to keep them or not, and should almost question whether I dare take them to heaven. But as the Father gave them to me that I might redeem them, and that I might give eternal life to them, and that I might, gather them in, and might present them at the last, I know I shall at the last say, "Here am I, and all the children you have given me." He was of God, then, as to his people; he possesses them by divine authority. See how the 17th of John abounds with this again and again, "Yours they were; you gave them to me." What a mercy for us to feel that our coming into the Savior's hands originated with God! Secondly, that the way was made clear, as I have tried to show this morning, by the redemption of Christ; and third, that the Holy Spirit quickened our souls, made us sensible of what we were, and has now so enlightened us as to make us see that the song of ascription of praise, from first to last, must be, "Not unto us, not unto us, but unto your name be all the glory." Is it not our glory to be of God? Certainly, it is, to be born of God, for our salvation to be of God, for our authority, authority for our faith, and for our hope, and for our expectation, our authority for standing out for these things to be of God. And if we have divine authority for our religion, divine authority for that for which we stand out, then the Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge, and will be our portion forever. Amen and Amen.