

## The Ascension of Christ

The most important event in all history is God Himself coming to earth in the Person of Christ Jesus. That event includes the Incarnation and His 3-years long ministry of righteousness and teaching, the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, His ascension to heaven, and then at the end of the Church Age, His Return to earth to establish the millennial Kingdom. Reformation theology and most modern Bible preaching focuses mainly on His death on the cross because that's how we obtain forgiveness of sin. In the preaching and teaching of most churches, the resurrection surfaces only at Easter-time, which is a sad irony because it's the resurrection and ascension that are the most important to believers. In most churches today, the Return of Christ, also called in the Scriptures the "Day of the Lord," is essentially absent.

Why the Ascension is ignored today isn't only because the cross gets all the attention. The modern, Enlightenment, scientific, naturalistic worldview declares that there is no such thing as a heaven. To claim Jesus ascended to heaven is an embarrassment for many moderns in the Church. An earthly Jesus, who teaches and sacrifices Himself – not a problem! But with astronomers' telescopes showing billions of light-years of space and stars and galaxies . . . hey, "heaven" has to be just wishful thinking. Another reason the Ascension is ignored may be that church leaders and theologians don't fully realize the importance of it in the scope of salvation history, both to believers and to Christ.

Genesis 1:1 says that in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. In Scripture there are three heavens: one for the birds to fly in, a second one for the sun, moon and stars, and a third heaven for the eternal God to dwell in. The rest of Genesis 1 documents the creation of the earth, a place for man to dwell in. That 3<sup>rd</sup> heaven is invisible, but it's a real, created space where real events occur in real time. In Job Chapters 1 and 2, for example, God and Satan dialogue with each other in that space. In Revelation Chapters 4 and 5, the future judgments upon earth are initiated there. Heaven is the place where, after death, believers go to be in the presence of God.

The Son came from heaven, carried out His redemptive mission, and then returned to God's dwelling place. So in one brief phrase, the Ascension of Christ is the Son, having assumed a human nature with a human body, and having completed His initial mission on earth, returned in bodily form to the Father. In the incarnation, He emptied Himself of the independent expression of the prerogatives of deity. This is called in theology, *kenosis*. In the Ascension, that *kenosis* ended and the Son re-assumed the glory, authority and prerogatives that are His as deity – while remaining in a body and retaining a human nature. (Some theologians refer to His incarnation, ministry, suffering, death and burial as His period of humiliation, and then His resurrection, ascension, exaltation, session, and return in glory as His exaltation.) But there's more to Christ's Ascension, much more. In other Sunday School lessons, we've focused on the resurrection and all that it means to us. In this lesson, I discuss all that the Ascension involves and why it's so *exceedingly* important.

The ascension is so important it's anticipated in Scripture. In Genesis 5:21-24, Enoch was taken up to heaven, as a type of the future Ascension of Christ. Elijah was certainly a type of Christ (although not explicitly mentioned as a type in the N.T.), and he too was taken up into heaven (2 Kings 2:1) as a type of Christ's Ascension. The supposed death of Moses was highly disputed by 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple rabbis. His grave was never found. Rabbis believed that Moses didn't die but was taken up to heaven, and that too would be a type of the Ascension. Jesus, after all, is depicted in Matthew's Gospel as a second Moses.

A number of Psalms anticipate the Ascension. Psalm 24, for example, speaks of the vindication Christ received by His being taken back into heaven. Yes, the resurrection vindicated His Person, suffering and sacrificial death, but more so His ascension to heaven. Psalm 8 marvelously speaks of the rule of Christ over all creation: as God He rules even though He retains His human nature and is embodied. What an amazing Psalm that is! Psalm 110 speaks boldly of Christ's presence in heaven with the Father both ruling and interceding, and awaiting the day for His return to earth in triumph.

There's also the use of the term, "cloud." At certain critical places in the O.T., a "cloud" refers to God's presence, having a majesty and glory not ever to be seen by mortals. See Exodus 13:21, 19:9, and 24:15-18; Daniel 7:13; Ezekiel 1 (twice, vv. 4 and 28, as bookends), and 1 Kings 8:10. In Acts 1:9 a cloud was involved in Jesus' being taken up, indicating that the Father initiated His ascent, that is, Jesus was passive, the Father took Him up. And in Revelation 1:7, Jesus' return is associated with clouds. The O.T. figures taken up bodily, the prophetic Psalms, and the cloud at Jesus' ascent to heaven means that that event had been anticipated all thru Scripture history.

At the Transfiguration, which is proleptic of the Ascension, Elijah and Moses are there to meet with Jesus. These two figures highlight the fact that Jesus will be returning to heaven after His passion, that is, the cross and resurrection. The

“cloud” is there at the Transfiguration as well. The glory of Christ visible at the Transfiguration anticipates His exaltation on arrival in heaven. That exaltation was dramatically evident in Acts 9:1-19 when He appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus, and in Revelation 1:9-20, when He appeared to John.

Now, let’s think deeply. Why did God create? Three reasons come to mind: To bless created beings with His ineffable Person; to exalt the son; and to deal with evil. We need briefly to discuss each of these.

(1) God is an infinitely good and loving Being, so He created the cosmos to share His glorious Person with others who are made to be able to relate to Him, to bless or enrich them. So God created the cosmos with the intent that humans would know Him and enjoy being in His presence forever. Why “forever”? Because God is an infinite Being, which means an eternity can be spent enjoying Him. Our purpose in being alive is to know God and be in relationship with Him. The problem, though, is sin. It is sin that blocks us from being in God’s holy presence. So the Son came to earth first to deal with sin and then to take us to God. Athanasius, one of the early Church theologians, understood that Christ’s role was to become human so that He could take humanity to God. Let’s now add to that: It’s the Ascension of Christ that takes us to God! I need to elaborate.

The Son came to earth to reveal the Father (Hebrews 1:3). God cannot be seen by human eyes. He can be known in the Scriptures, which is how He reveals Himself to us. But the Son, by His wise teachings and righteous deeds, and by His selflessness, loveliness and humility, perfectly revealed to us the invisible Father. The Son came to earth to gather to Himself those who want to be with God in heaven. The Gospels and Acts document this. The Son came to steal away from Satan’s iron grip those who want to be in God’s presence (Hebrews 2:15b) to experience the peace, love and joy of the Godhead. By trusting in Christ and what He did for us, we are placed *in Christ*, which means we are united to Him. So where He is, we are too. When He ascended to heaven, we who are in Christ ascended with Him. The Ascension of Christ takes us to the Father. Now, of course, we’re still here physically; it’s when we die and are raised that we go to heaven, but that is only the fulfillment of what already occurred in God’s mind or in the cosmic sphere at Christ’s ascension.

Paul understood this. If we’re *in Christ*, we participated with Him in His crucifixion, His resurrection, *and His ascension*. God raised us, believers in Christ, members of His body, with Christ, and **“seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus”** (Eph 2:6). Positionally, we’re with Christ in an invisible realm. And we experience it by being immersed in the Word of God.

(2) A second reason God created is to exalt the Son. All creation exists for the benefit of the Son. Christ went to the cross as an obedient Son, and He suffered and died for the joy of the promised exaltation. Of course, in love He did it to obtain salvation for an alienated and condemned humanity. But Christ knew there’d be a reward waiting on the other side of death. The author of Hebrews wrote, **“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God”** (12:2).

So forty days after the resurrection, Jesus was taken up to heaven, bodily (although it was a resurrection body). He retains a human nature. He was “exalted,” which probably means more than that the majesty and glory due Him as deity returned. **“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father”** (Philippians 2:9-11). The Son glorifies the Father, and the Father exalts the Son. The verse suggests that the Son is more glorious from His Ascension than prior to His Advent.

(3) The Letter to the Ephesians is said to be a discourse on the Ascension. It certainly has the Ascension in view in all it says. And the climax of that Letter is Chapter 6, verses 10 to 18, which have to do with our warfare with Satan, the embodiment of evil. The Ascension means evil is overcome so that only good, the goodness of God, remains. Because of our position with Christ in the heavenlies, and our being indwelt by the Spirit, we can defeat Satan! Psalm 110 states that Christ is in heaven overcoming His enemies. The exaltation of Christ, placing Him in total sovereign authority over all, strips Satan of the ability to control those of us who are in Christ.

So in large part, the Ascension fulfills God’s purposes in creation. There’s more to discuss about the Ascension, though.

When Christ was here at His first advent, His true identity was obscure. Even His closest followers had trouble knowing exactly who this unique Person really was. Perhaps the Son deliberately hid His identity so that Satan wouldn’t be alarmed. It wasn’t until the resurrection and then seeing Him bodily ascend to heaven that those early followers fully

understood who He was. By that time, Satan's goose was cooked, he was defeated. He may have had a human body, but as nothing else could have done more dramatically, the ascension identified Jesus as deity. He came from the Father and He was returning to the Father.

Because of the Ascension, Christ was able to give the Holy Spirit to His followers. **“Exalted to the right hand of god, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear”** (Acts 2:33). This is the greatest gift anyone in the Bible can have. Certain figures in the O.T. received the Spirit for certain tasks. But now that Christ has ascended, the Spirit can be given to all who are in Christ. The Spirit places us in Christ. The Spirit also enables us to live as God intends, the Spirit endows us with certain gifts, and the Spirit imparts Christ's eternal, resurrection life to us, that is, the Spirit is the life of Christ in us. And much more; a lot of N.T. text reveals the manifold work of the Holy Spirit in the Church and in the life of the believer. It was for want of the Spirit that Israel failed to live, or to carry out the role, that God intended. The Spirit however has been given freely to the Church to enable us to do what Israel couldn't.

We need to understand this: The Gospel is not merely that Christ died so we can have forgiveness of sins. A full statement of the Gospel is in Acts Chapter 2: The Gospel is first of all that Jesus is deity come to earth, that He suffered and died, rose from the dead, ascended to heaven, and gave the Holy Spirit to all who repent and believe in Him as Lord and Christ. The Gospel we proclaim *has* to include the gift of the Spirit, for otherwise a believer has forgiveness – but nothing else.

The Ascension is at the very beginning of the Book of Acts (1:9). The rest of the Book of Acts narrates the outworking of the result of the Ascension. Because Christ is in heaven, endowed with supreme authority over all creation, He serves as King and our High Priest. Seated at the right hand of the Father, He is **“far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given . . . [with] all things under his feet”** (Ephesians 1:20-22). And He is head over the Church, which is His Body. The work of the Church is Gospel outreach. The Book of Acts documents how the early believers carried out that work, but it was Christ in heaven who, thru His Spirit, was guiding and directing the work and growing the Church.

Our participation with Christ and experiencing His life in the Spirit means that a whole new world and new life is now open before us. **“Since then you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God”** (Colossians 3:1). We can live the life of a totally new person, a person just like Christ, by the power of the Spirit and by obedience to the Word of God. The ascension of Christ means that we're different than before, we're “regenerated” or “born again.” This is why worldliness is so abhorrent to God. We're not of the world or of Satan any more. If we don't live the new life, or “put on the new man,” that is, become the new Christ-like person, we're like that initial generation of Israelites who wanted to go back to Egypt because that's where they had leeks and onions. We're saying to God something like, “I prefer what Satan puts on offer to knowing You and doing Your will.” And that offends God.

Christ's present work in heaven is called in theology His “session.” (The word used to mean, “sitting down.”) Seated in the heavenlies, Christ intercedes for us (Hebrews 7:23-26). He is constantly making intercession on our behalf, a work that is absolutely essential because we're still here on earth surrounded by demons and evil influences from our culture. And we still harbor a sin nature, which we express all too often. Yes, we have forgiveness of sins by His atoning death, that is, by His work on the cross. But we also need His continuous intercession, and we couldn't get thru life without it. Don't miss this! Christ ascended to heaven to continue ministering to us, whom He loves. Although “King of the Jews” was on the sign hung over the cross, it was a priestly work giving Himself as a sacrifice for our sins, and it is a priestly work that He is doing now.

Also because of the Ascension, Christ has the authority to give to the Church certain persons as gifts. These are listed in Ephesians 4:9-13, and include prophets, evangelists, teachers, pastors, etc. The role of these gifts is to **“prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up . . . becoming mature, attaining to . . . the fullness of Christ.”** Christ in heaven wants us, His Body that is still on earth, to reflect His Person and to do His work, so that God is glorified. The Holy Spirit uniquely empowers these special persons to serve Christ as intended. But notice that it's not just these special people in special roles that serve Christ. What a colossal error we've made in the churches, leaving the work of Christ to paid professionals. It's explicit: We're all, *all* believers, to be serving Christ according to His will. Those special persons are to prepare us all to be and to do as God intends. In the O.T. after Elijah was taken up to

heaven, Elisha continued the prophet's ministry, at an amplified level. That sequence anticipates the plan unfolded in the N.T., where Elijah is a type of Christ, and Elisha is a type of the Church.

In the future, when the Church's work is done, the Church also will experience an ascension. It's called The Rapture and it's discussed in 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians. Whereas it was the Father who took Jesus up to heaven, it will be the Lord who will take His Church up to heaven. Enoch, the Genesis Chapter 5 figure who "was taken away" so he would not have to experience the horrible judgment of the Flood, is a type of the Church being taken up so it does not have to experience the horrible judgments of The Great Tribulation (in the Book of Revelation). Many theologians and church leaders today deny such an event, but it's there in the text. The coming Day of the Lord is a period of fierce judgment. But believers in Christ have already been judged – at the cross! It would be unjust ("double jeopardy" in legal terms), if the Church had to experience God's wrath again. So, yes, the Church absolutely will be taken up to heaven, and it will be prior to God's wrath being released upon a rebellious and unbelieving world.

One other reason Jesus ascended to heaven is to have a place ready for His followers to dwell in when they die (John 14:1-4). When we die, we go there to be with Him (Phil 1:21-23; 2 Corinth 5:6-7; 1 Thess 4:13-18; and 1 Corinth 15:2). Paul states in two of these verses that we go to be with Christ immediately when we die, but in the other two verses he says that we await the Rapture (the return of Christ for His Bride) for our resurrection and to be with Christ. I submit that in his mind, Paul so compressed the time element between our death and the Rapture that it didn't need to be specified. We can thus harmonize these seemingly contradictory verses. Christ's death, resurrection, ascension and exaltation is the pattern we who are in Christ also must follow: we die, then are raised and given a new body, then we're taken up to heaven and glorified. Christ's story is our story.

And another reason Jesus had to ascend to heaven is disclosed in Revelation Chapter 5. He – and *only He* – is worthy, to open the scrolls that unleash God's deserved wrath upon earth. Only He who gave His life to save humanity is ethically able to initiate judgment upon unbelievers. Just as Noah, by his preaching, offered salvation (the ark) to all who wanted it before the terrible Flood came, the cross makes salvation available to all who want it before the terrible Day of God's wrath comes. The Lamb in heaven is worthy of worship for His acts of salvation as well as judgment.

Finally, what has been almost totally lost is the importance of the Ascension to dispensationalism and pre-millennialism. I can't emphasize enough how necessary this understanding is. After all: Why was Christ taken up to heaven? Was it *only* to return to the Father for loving fellowship? And the answer is No, there's more: It was also to wait until His Return to establish the promised Kingdom, which was placed in abeyance due to His rejection by His people.

When Christ came the first time, He offered Himself to Israel as their King. Had they received Him, the Kingdom prophesied in the O.T., a literal kingdom here on earth with a king on a throne in Jerusalem, could have been realized at that time. It was a bona fide offer, something the Jews knew God had promised to them. But Christ having been rejected (He didn't look "kingly" enough to the leaders) doesn't mean that God can or would change His mind. He *cannot* do that (Romans 11:8-9). He can only postpone the Kingdom.

Some theologians argue that when Christ finished His work of redemption, He sat down at the right hand of God just as God rested when He finished His work of creating. But Christ's work is *not* finished because, if it is, He failed. He came to establish the Davidic Kingdom. Well it's not here. So, did He fail in that? Obviously not. He *must* return to earth to establish it, to finish the work He came to do. God is not arbitrary; He is faithful to His promises. The prophets spoke His truths, so those Kingdom prophecies must – *must* – become reality. God cannot renege on what He promised in the O.T. (nor in the N.T.). A future earthly, literal kingdom is coming, and that will be when Christ returns in glory.

We have no warrant to "spiritualize" those O.T. promises by claiming that the Church fulfills them, as many church leaders and theologians do. There's no basis whatsoever to argue that the Church receives the promises given to Israel, nor that the Church Age is the promised kingdom. Christ is in heaven waiting to return to His humbled and repentant people, Israel. The great issue for the Church (then in Acts Chapter 1 as well as now) is not "when" He's returning but, What are you doing in the interim (Mark Chapter 13 and Acts 1:7-8)? This is of *major* importance, because it may be that our participation in the future millennial Kingdom depends on our faithful service to Him in this present life.

This study demonstrates that the Ascension of Christ is an aspect of His life and ministry that mustn't be ignored. It has importance far beyond what we normally suppose when we recite the credal words, "He ascended." May our reflection on Jesus' life and Person lead us into a deeper love for Him and a greater commitment to Him. He is worthy.