

The Ascension: a neglected doctrine

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Acts 1:1-11

¹ In my former book, *Theophilus*, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach ² until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. ³ After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. ⁴ On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. ⁵ For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with ^[b] the Holy Spirit."

⁶ Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

⁷ He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

⁹ After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

¹⁰ They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ¹¹ "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

Luke 24:50

⁵⁰ When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. ⁵¹ While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. ⁵² Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. ⁵³ And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

Mark 16:19-20

¹⁹ After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God. ²⁰ Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it.

Introduction

We don't speak or preach much about the Ascension of Christ. If you don't follow the Christian liturgical calendar then it gets forgotten in the aftermath of Easter. But the ascension of Christ is important and we should not neglect it as it is an important event in the life of Christ and an important link in the biblical story. "With the possible exception of the Virgin Mary, I know of no topic which is more important - and less preached - than the Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a high and holy event, one which greatly shows the glory of God."

(<http://www.becomingcloser.org/acts/ascension.html>) It is a neglected doctrine today but that is not what the Apostles thought.

Many of you are familiar with the Apostle's Creed, one of the earliest statements of faith of the Christian church, going back to the first few centuries. Tradition ascribes it to the Apostles, hence the name. Let me remind you of it.

*I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.*

*I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again;
**he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.***

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church,

*the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.
Amen.*

You will notice that the ascension is at the heart of the creed, locating it between the resurrection of Christ and the second coming of Christ in judgement. How could we ever forget or neglect such an important doctrine? I'm afraid we tend to slide over it as we rush from the resurrection and the post-resurrection appearances to Pentecost. It took place 40 days after the first Easter and 10 days before Pentecost. We don't stop to think or answer the questions: where did Jesus go after the resurrection, and where is he now, what is he doing and how can he return if he hasn't gone?

The Ascension of Jesus is a vital part of the story and we read about it at the start of Acts and it is mentioned at the end of Luke's and Mark's gospel. However, there are many other references in the New Testament that assume it – whenever the Bible speaks of Jesus being 'taken up' or 'being seated at God's right hand', it is talking about the Ascension. *"The ascension is not only a great FACT of the New Testament, but a greater FACTOR in the life of Christ and Christians, and no complete view of Jesus Christ is possible unless the ascension and its consequences are included"* (ISBE, Griffith Thomas, Vol. 1, p. 263). The ascension is the link between the past ministry of Christ, when he was on earth; his present ministry in heaven; and his future ministry when he returns in glory.

It was prophesied and foretold by Jesus

In Psalm 110 we read:

¹ *The LORD says to my lord:
"Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies
a footstool for your feet."*

In John 14 v.1 and v.12 Jesus clearly teaches that he must return to the Father's house. In v. 28 Jesus says to his disciples:

²⁸ *"You heard me say, 'I am going away and I am coming back to you.' If you loved me, you would be glad that I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. ²⁹ I have told you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe. When Jesus talks about going away sometimes he refers to the resurrection but when he says he is going to the Father he is talking about the Ascension.*

In John 16 he says:

²⁸ *I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father."*

It is the final act of the atonement

In fact, we need to see the Ascension as the final act of the atonement – which started at the cross, continued in the resurrection and is finally completed when Jesus takes his rightful place at the right-hand of the Father. This place is the place of honour and when Jesus sits down it shows that the job he was sent to do has been completed. No-one else is qualified or eligible to sit in this place – it is reserved for the victorious and glorified son of God. Hebrews 6:19-20 and 8:1-2 reminds that Jesus entered the inner sanctuary on our behalf.

¹⁹ *We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, ²⁰ where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.*

And

We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, ² and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by a mere human being.

The ascension bridges the gap between the earthly work of Jesus Christ on the cross and his heavenly ministry as high priest.

²⁴ For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. ²⁵ Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. ²⁶ Otherwise Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But he has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. ²⁷ Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, ²⁸ so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him. Heb. 9:24-28

In a real sense Jesus had to ascend and return to the Father to put the final seal on his work of atonement, started at the cross, continued in the resurrection and completed when enters the presence of God in heaven.

It is necessary for Jesus' exaltation

While Jesus remained on earth, even in his resurrection body, he could not fully have the glory that he had before his incarnation. He gave this up to come to earth, taking the form of a servant, who was willing to go to the cross and die, although he was the eternal Son of God.

Phil. 2:6-11

*Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
⁷ rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
⁸ And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!
⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

One of the key words used about Jesus in the New Testament is exaltation – it is a confirmation of his status, of his achievement, of his authority, of his status. The Ascension was necessary if Jesus was to be exalted in his rightful place. It formed part of Peter's sermon on Pentecost:

³² God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it. ³³ 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 2:32-33

Jesus was exalted or raised up in several ways: he was exalted as Lord, as Messiah, as head of the church (Eph. 1:19-23), as Prince and Saviour (Acts 5:31), as our great High Priest (Hebrews 2:14:18; 4:14-15; 7:25-28), and as King.

That power is the same as the mighty strength ²⁰ he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, ²¹ far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. ²² And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way. Eph. 1:19-23

It is a confirmation of the humanity of Jesus

Jesus was not a ghost or a disembodied spirit after the Resurrection. He had a body, which was physical but also more than spiritual – he ate and drank but he also walked through walls. The resurrected Christ had a glorified body, just like the one we will get when we are resurrected (see 1 Cor. 15), but he was still a man. The disciples saw him ascend in that body and he will return through the clouds in the same way and with the same body. Our bodies, not just our souls, matter to God and he is going to raise up our bodies on the last day and transform them. If Jesus had just disappeared from view or dematerialised, this great belief would be undermined. Jesus has taken the basic stuff of human existence, our atoms and molecules, and has taken them into heaven. An early Christian, Leo Imperator, said this: *“Now dust sits at the right hand of the Father! For today our dust is taken up on the shoulders of the cherubim and being received within the inner palace is set upon the royal throne.”* The risen and ascended Jesus is the first fruits of all those who believe in him and will also be resurrected and whose bodies will be glorified in heaven. Jesus Christ has made the dust of which we are made the stuff of heaven itself.

It was essential if we were to receive the Holy Spirit

When he was on earth Jesus was limited by space and time: he could only be in one place at one time, and he had to walk from one place to another. One reason why Jesus returned to the Father is so that he could send the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, to be with each believer. The Holy Spirit is sent by Jesus from the Father to fill Jesus’ place. The Holy Spirit is not limited by space or time and through him Christ can be with every believer in every place in every age.

²⁶ *“When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father—he will testify about me.”* ²⁷ *And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning.* **John 15:26-27**

In fact Jesus says, if he does not return to his Father then the Holy Spirit, the advocate (or the comforter), cannot and will not come.

“Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.” John 16:7b

Jesus had to return to the Father, for our sake, so he could send the Holy Spirit to live in and with us.

It was needed for Christ to dispense his grace

Christ ascended back into the presence of His Father so he was in the place of authority where he could send back his grace and his gifts to equip the church. It is Christ who gives spiritual gifts through the Holy Spirit as Ephesians 4:7-12 makes clear and links the Ascension to Psalm 68:18

Ephesians 4:7-13

⁷ *But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.* ⁸ *This is why it says:*

*“When he ascended on high,
he took many captives
and gave gifts to his people.”*

⁹ *(What does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? ¹⁰ He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.)* ¹¹ *So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers,* ¹² *to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*

Charles Spurgeon describes these offices of the church as Christ’s ascension blessings to the church, his ascension gifts. (Sermon on The Ascension of Christ, 26/3/1871

www.spurgeon.org/sermons/0982.htm)

It allows the ascended Jesus to make intercession for us

Jesus is the perfect High Priest, the last in the line, who came both to complete and fulfil, and to replace the Jewish priestly system.

Hebrews 4:14-16

¹⁴ *Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.* ¹⁵ *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.* ¹⁶ *Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

Ascended into heaven is actually 'gone through the heavens' in the original. In the ascended Jesus we now have the perfect High Priest. The ascension of Jesus means that he is now the presence of God the Father, he is in the position of his authority, he is eternal and so Jesus can save completely those who come to him because his role as High Priest is permanent and eternal. Jesus intercedes for us but he does not need to make any more sacrifices for us because his sacrifice on the cross was perfect and effective and permanent in its effects.

Hebrews 7:23-28

²³ *Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office;* ²⁴ *but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood.* ²⁵ *Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.*

²⁶ *Such a high priest truly meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.* ²⁷ *Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself.* ²⁸ *For the law appoints as high priests men in all their weakness; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever.*

Unless Jesus had ascended to that place of honour and power and authority, then he could not intercede for us as he does.

³⁴ *Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.* Romans 8:34

It reinforces our hope of heaven

John 14:1-4 must be one of the most encouraging parts of Scripture.

¹ *“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me.* ² *My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?* ³ *And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.* ⁴ *You know the way to the place where I am going.”*

Jesus has gone ahead to get the rooms ready in heaven! There are plenty of rooms in heaven for all those who believe in Jesus. One reason why Jesus returned to his Father's house was prepare a place for us and he is going to come back to collect us, so we can all be together for eternity.

Unless Jesus had returned to the Father this would not have happened so this is another reason why Jesus had to be taken up from the earth. The clear statement of Jesus reinforces our hope of heaven – not just pie in the sky but a reserved room at the inn.

It is essential for the life of faith

Because Jesus has gone we must walk by faith and not by sight. We are blessed because we have not seen and yet still believe. The fact that Jesus has gone away means that we have to exercise faith – in order to be saved, to live the Christian life, and to receive God's promises. Think about the emphasis on faith in the New Testament for the believer – the fact that Jesus is no longer here means that we have to strengthen the muscle of our faith, which is essential for our salvation but also for our Christian growth and for our understanding of God.

Conclusion

Does the ascension of Christ matter? I hope I have shown you in a small way why it does matter and how important it is in our understanding of Christ and his work of salvation and sanctification. We should dust off this neglected doctrine and restore it to its rightful place, and we should remember it each year as we move from Easter to Pentecost. Let us not forget that the Ascension made the church possible, and underpins our confidence in the past, present and future work of Christ.

If we take the Ascension seriously then we will also take the Lord's return in the same vein. Remember what the angels said as the disciples as they looked in wonder and amazement into the skies as Jesus disappeared from view:
"Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." Acts 1:11
The Ascension is the prelude to the second coming; it marks the end of the first coming of Christ and his earthly ministry. It marks the start of Christ's heavenly ministry, which will continue until God decides the time is right and then Jesus will return for his own and to wrap up the whole show in the final judgement.

The Ascension is a key part of the redemption story and we should put it back in its right place. This is how Nathan Lewis put it in a sermon series on The Ascension of Jesus Christ:
"Jesus Christ ascended into heaven body and soul, taking with him the history of redemption into the very center of heaven, into the very heart of God. In heaven and in the heart of God, the history of Jesus dying on the cross, rising from the dead and ascending into heaven is of utmost value and importance. It is the business of heaven and it is the mission of God. It is our history, the history of God restoring all creation. There is a road between Bethany and Jerusalem. But there is another road, the road between earth and heaven. For epochs this road has been hidden in the mist of dimension but now, a true human being has walked it and he has opened it to us. The gates of heaven have opened wide! Lift up your heads, oh ye gates, and be lifted up ye ancient doors! That the king of glory may come in!"
(<http://nathanlewis.org/2008/04/14/the-ascension-of-jesus-christ-sermon-series-2008/>)