

HE ASCENDED INTO HEAVEN

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Resources for Christ-Centered Discipleship

A pastor who went to study at Cambridge University in England told how surprised he was the day the professor canceled class because it was Ascension Day. He was surprised that they canceled class, but he was amazed by what happened next. The choirs of St. John College went up onto the rooftop of the chapel tower to sing anthems to the exalted Christ that echoed across the skies over the city.

Ascension Day is a seldom-observed holiday in America. It falls on the fortieth day after Easter, so this year it falls on Thursday May fifth. I imagine, as May fifth approaches, we will hear a lot more about Cinco de Mayo than we will about Ascension Day. The Bible doesn't command us to hold a holiday to celebrate the ascension of Christ, but it does tell us that we need to understand what His ascension means for our lives and why it is worthy of celebration.

How do you think of Christ? The Bible wants us to see that the Christ who calls us to commit our lives to Him, to follow Him, to worship Him, to believe in His presence, and experience His love, is not only the Christ who was laid in the manger, taught on the hillsides, died on the cross, and rose from the dead but is ultimately the Christ who is exalted to heaven as Savior and Lord.

In the Apostles' Creed, we confess faith not only that Christ rose from the dead but also that He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father, Almighty.

According to the Scriptures . . .

The Ascension Is the Return of Christ to the Right Hand of the Father in Heaven

Acts 1:9 says He was taken up before His disciples' very eyes, and a cloud hid Him from their sight. When the Bible speaks of the Ascension, it is not saying that just Jesus' spirit went to heaven but that . . .

After His Resurrection He Returned to Heaven in His Resurrected Body

After Jesus died on the cross for our sins, His spirit went to be with God in heaven. That's why, in Luke 23:43, He says to the thief on the cross, "This day

you will be with me in paradise.” Although His spirit was conscious and in the presence of God, the body of Jesus was not resurrected and transformed until Easter Sunday.

Part of the comfort of the story of Jesus is that what He experienced in His death is what we will experience in ours. When a believer in Jesus Christ dies, his spirit goes immediately into the presence of God. In 2 Corinthians 5:8, Paul says that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. We experience what Christ experienced. The Bible also says that one day there will be a resurrection for all believers, in which we will receive transformed, glorified bodies, perfectly suited for eternity.

Jesus died and was buried, His spirit went to be with God in heaven; then on the third day, His body and spirit came together again in a powerful miracle of resurrection. His body was transformed; the Bible uses the word “glorified.” Its very nature was changed so that it was ready for a whole new kind of existence. In His resurrection body Jesus was able to pass through physical barriers such as locked doors and walls. He appeared and then apparently vanished at will. Yet He possessed a resurrected body that was real. He ate with the disciples and invited them to touch and see that He was not just a spirit or a vision.

On the first Easter morning, when Jesus told Mary not to cling to Him because He had not yet returned to the Father, He was saying that He had not returned to the Father in that resurrected form and body. He was appearing on the earth after His resurrection in a manner that would be only temporary.

The book of Acts tells us that this temporary, transitional, time before His ascension lasted for forty days.

During the Forty Days After His Resurrection and Before His Ascension, Jesus Did Three Things

He gave convincing proofs that he was alive. Acts 1:3: “After his suffering, he showed himself to these men 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.”

He spoke about the kingdom of God. That's the second half of verse 3. The forty days enabled Jesus to clarify His teaching about the kingdom of God.

You get a good idea of what this means when you look at verses 6-8: "So when they met together, they asked him, 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?' He said to them: 'It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.'"

Notice that Jesus did not say their whole concept of the kingdom of God was wrong. He did not say there is never going to be a kingdom of God or that there is only going to be a spiritual kingdom in the hearts of Christians. No, He did not correct their basic concept of the kingdom of God, but He did correct their preoccupation with its timing. They asked, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said, verse 7: "It is not for you to know the times or dates." Jesus was saying, "You are not called to worry and wonder about the timing of the kingdom. What you are called and empowered to do is to be My witnesses on earth. Verse 8 says, "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."

He convinced them He was alive. He clarified their view of God's kingdom. And third . . .

He commanded them to wait for the coming of the Spirit. Verses 4-5 say, "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. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'"

During the forty days that followed His resurrection, Jesus was convincing His followers that He was alive, clarifying their view of the kingdom of God, and commanding them to wait for the gift of the Spirit.

Verses 9-11 say, "After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. '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.'"

Forty is a spiritually significant number in the Bible. Forty seems to signify transition and a new beginning. Forty weeks is the period of human gestation. In

the days of Noah the forty days of the Flood began a new age on the earth. The Israelites were forty years in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land. Moses was forty days on Mt. Sinai when he received the Law. Elijah was sustained miraculously for forty days in the wilderness. Jesus spent forty days in the desert as He prepared for His mission. Then He spent forty days after His resurrection preparing His followers for *their* mission. At the end of the forty days, He ascended into heaven.

The dramatic way in which He did this is important because the ascension of Jesus signaled the ending of an important chapter in His life and ministry.

It is technically true there is no single place on earth where you can stand and say heaven is “up there.” After all, the earth is a sphere that rotates on its axis in space. Heaven may be more of a dimension than a direction, but it made sense for Jesus to ascend into heaven the way He did. He had been making a series of appearances to His followers, but these couldn’t go on forever. It would have been odd and maybe even confusing if His appearances had just petered out and He had simply vanished one day, never to reappear. There had to be a day when the resurrected Jesus of Easter would become the ascended Christ of heaven. The Ascension of Christ was that event.

The Ascension was not only the ending of what had been; it was also the beginning of something new.

The Ascension Is the Foundation for a New Relationship with the Risen Christ.

What is the relationship that we have with Christ today because of His ascension? What difference does it make for our lives? Three things stand out.

First, Because of the Ascension of Christ, We Can Live with the Assurance of Amazing Grace

Hebrews 1:3 says: “The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.” The ascension of Christ to the right hand of the Father is symbolic of

the completion of His work of redemption. You cannot provide purification for your sins, but He can and He did.

Romans 8:33-34 says: "Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? 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." These are rhetorical questions. The point is that the answer to both of them is "no one." No one can bring a charge against those whom God has chosen, and no one can condemn them. If you have received Christ as your Lord and Savior, then you are one of God's chosen people, and no one can bring a charge against you that will stick, because Christ died for your sins and was raised again for your salvation. And not only that but He is in heaven at the right hand of God as your advocate, interceding for you continually. God not only wants you to have His amazing grace, He also wants you to have complete assurance of amazing grace.

The ascended Christ is your continual advocate in heaven who intercedes for you, not by pleading for mercy but by standing for justice. He says, "I have paid for her sins. I have made the sacrifice for him. I have paid the debt she owes. I have atoned for the wrongs he committed."

This is what we sing in the hymn "Before the Throne of God":

Before the throne of God above
I have a strong, a perfect plea,
A great High Priest whose name is Love
Who ever lives and pleads for me

When Satan tempts me to despair
And tells me of the guilt within,
Upward I look and see Him there,
Who made an end to all my sin.

My name is graven on His hands,
My name is written on His heart.
I know that while in Heaven He stands,
No tongue can bid me thence depart

Because of the ascension of Christ, we can live with the assurance of amazing grace.

Second, Because of the Ascension of Christ, We Can Live with the Assurance of the Lordship of Christ

When the apostles wrote about the ascension of Christ in the New Testament Scriptures, they were always doing so out of a concern to teach or encourage Christians with something that would help them live in this world.

For instance, in Ephesians 1, the apostle Paul is concerned that Christians live lives that are truly empowered by a clear vision of the lordship of Christ. Out of this practical concern, in Ephesians 1:18-23 he shares with them his prayer for them: “I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.”

To say that Christ has ascended to the right hand of the Father is to say that, without competing with or displacing God the Father, He rules as Lord with absolute authority, in complete harmony and unity with the Father.

God has always been sovereign over all of humanity, but the ascension of Jesus to the right hand of God assures us that the Father's sovereignty is being exercised through our Savior Jesus Christ, not only for God's glory but for our good. Christ is God the Son, in human flesh, our Savior, exalted to heaven as the head of a whole new human race.

Notice verse 22: “And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church.” This isn't just saying that Christ is head over the church but that He is head over everything *for* the church. World history serves church history under the lordship of Christ. Christ works all things

together for the good of His people the church, because His glory and our good have become completely intertwined in His heart.

This does not mean Christians may not have to go through trials and pains and heartaches. Just read how the story of the church begins in the book of acts or concludes in the Revelation, and you will see that that is not the case. But you will also see clearly revealed the lordship of Christ in all that happens. The lordship of Christ assures us of the promise of Romans 8:28: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

The third assurance is this:

Because of the Ascension of Christ, We Can Live with the Assurance of Christ's Presence with Us

In John 14:18-20, Jesus says: "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you."

That is why in John 16:7 He also says: "It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you."

We lift up our hearts to Christ in worship, but we also realize that the ascension of Christ to heaven freed Him from every limitation of space and time so that He can be powerfully present with every believer in every place, in every age, all the time.

In his book *Reaching for the Invisible God*, Philip Yancey tells about a friend who is a hand surgeon. He specializes in reattaching fingers that have been partially or completely severed in accidents. When this surgeon enters the operating room, he knows that he will be squinting through a microscope for six to eight hours stitching together a snarl of nerves, tendons, and blood vessels, some as fine as human hair. A single mistake and the patient could permanently lose sensation in or the ability to use the hand and fingers.

Once he got an emergency call at three in the morning, and he could hardly face the prospect of the strain that the surgery would place on him. To help him face it, and to add incentive and focus, he decided to dedicate the surgery to his father, who had recently passed away. Throughout all the hours of the surgery, he imagined his father standing beside him, a hand on his shoulder, offering encouragement.

This idea worked so well that he started dedicating all of his surgeries to people he knew. He would call them up and say, "I've got a difficult procedure ahead of me. I'd like to dedicate this surgery to you. If I think about you while I am performing it, that will help me get through." Then one day it dawned on him. Shouldn't he offer his life to God the same way? The details of what he did each day did not change. Answering phone calls, hiring staff, reading medical journals, meeting with patients, scheduling surgeries changed little. Yet somehow the awareness of living for God gradually affected all of those everyday tasks. He said he found himself spending more time with patients, treating nurses with more care, and worrying less about money. He was practicing the presence of God.

The ascension of Christ means that Christ, having ascended into a heavenly, spiritual dimension of existence is also present with all who belong to Him, all of the time. We don't have to imagine a presence that is unreal. We have to become conscious of a presence that *is* real. We practice the presence of Christ.

How do you do that? In Ephesians 3, Paul prays that Christ would dwell in our hearts by faith. By continual acts of faith you believe in the presence of Christ, you present your heart to His presence, you speak to Him continually and listen for His assurance and guidance.

When the angels appeared to the disciples at the time of His ascension they asked, "Why do you stand here looking at the sky?" I wonder, if they came to us, if they would ask, "Why do you live as if Christ were not with you every day and in every place?"

Conclusion

St. Augustine wrote about the Ascension. Speaking of Jesus, he said: "You ascended from before our eyes. We turned back grieving, only to find you in our hearts."

The ascension of Christ into heaven makes possible His continuing presence with all of us. All of life can and should be lived in His presence and for His pleasure. Be confident of His grace, committed to His lordship, and conscious of His presence.