

The Good News of the Ascension

[Proposition: Jesus ascended to heaven to complete his saving work, take up his rule of all things, and empower his church for mission in the world.]

Introduction

Depending on what branch of Christianity you come from or find yourself in, you will tend to emphasize one particular aspect of the Saving life and work of Jesus—sometimes to the neglect of others. If you are an Eastern Christian, the Incarnation is often stressed. For Evangelicals it is usually the cross. Reformed folks will chime in, don't forget the Resurrection! And if you're more Charismatic, then the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost is the focus. If you are unbeliever and have any regard for Jesus, it will be his teaching about the Kingdom that gets attention. We all focus on one particular aspect of the events of the Gospel, but virtually no-one focuses on the Ascension of Christ. It is often an afterthought.

That's interesting because actually when you look at the NT, the Ascension is critical to the work of Christ, critical to the Gospel. **Jesus ascended to heaven to complete his saving work, take up his rule of all things, and empower his church for mission in the world.**

I. What happened in the ascension?

For such a strange event as the ascension, the Bible gives us very little in the way of answers to questions a modern person might ask, describing the scene with few of the details we might want. The actual event of Jesus's ascension is narrated twice, both by Luke. We read Luke's account of the ascension in Luke 24:51:

While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven.

And in Luke's second volume, Acts 1:9 he gives slightly more information:

9 And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

While it may not answer all of our questions, we should note a few things:

A. The Ascension was a real historical event

While there are only these two specific accounts of the ascension. It is corroborated by multiple other witnesses and early writers (Eph 4:10, 1 Tim 3:16, 1 Peter 3:22, multiple texts in Hebrews). As one specific example, in John 20:17 the risen Jesus says to Mary:

17 Jesus said to her, “Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”

B. Saying Jesus was “carried up to heaven” means that he was taken into God’s presence.

The emphasis is not on Jesus going up to the sky like the recent NASA/SpaceX launch, but going into the place where God almighty dwells. The word heaven can be used for both ideas, but here the point is that he was taken from this place or this realm—the physical world as we know it—and went into the spiritual realm which is not less physical but even more real. He went with his resurrected human body into the heavens where God is, and is now seated at the right hand of God.

II. Why Is the Ascension Good News for Us?

A. The Ascended Jesus pours out the Spirit

Pentecost is possible because of the Ascension.

You can see this in v. 49:

⁴⁹ And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”

Jesus has given them the commission to go to the nations with the message of forgiveness of sins, but they are to wait to receive the “promise of my Father” and be “clothed with power.” Acts makes clear this is the promised Holy Spirit who clothes the disciples with power so they can fulfill the mission.

1. He gives the Spirit because that is the only way we could live the life he called us to.

This is the problem with viewing Jesus just as a great ethical teacher—you’re basically admitting 1) that what Jesus teaches is what everyone ought to do, but if you’re honest 2) none of us do. We harbor anger and lust in our hearts. We do serve money as our master. We do not love our enemies. We don’t because we can’t, apart from the gift of the Spirit which Jesus gives to all who believe in him.

He empowers change in us, and equips us for his mission in the world.

Illustration:

Asking broken human beings like us to preach repentance for the forgiveness of sins in our own power is more impossible than me asking Ari (my 18 mo son) to change the oil in my car. He completely lacks the knowledge or ability to successfully accomplish that mission, and the only possible outcome is disaster. That’s why Jesus gives the Spirit, the Great Commission is not ultimately a matter

of learning or human capacity—but dependence on the Holy Spirit—we can't live up to our calling without it.

Corrie Ten Boom used the analogy of a glove and a hand. Human beings without the Spirit are like an empty glove, they look like a hand but a glove can't do anything apart from the hand coming into the glove to fill it and make it useful. So we are the glove and the Spirit is the hand.

2. He gives the Spirit so he and the Father can be with us wherever we go, whatever we face.

In John 16:7 Jesus tells his disciples it is to their advantage they he goes to the Father, because only then can he send the Spirit. One of the reasons he sends the Spirit is so that (John 14:23) He and the Father can make their home with us. That's why it is to our advantage—Jesus Ascends so he can dwell in the heart of everyone who believes in Him through the Spirit.

Application:

When we are sad, confused, afraid what do often want? We want to be with our family and friends, just in their presence. But God is closer than they could ever be, and the hope he offers is eternal, the comfort unshakeable.

The Ascension is also Good News because

B. The Ascended Jesus takes up His rule

This is implied in those phrases in v. 47 “to all nations” and v. 49 “from on high.” As we saw last week, the commission to the nations is guaranteed because Jesus as the Son of Man has been given all authority in heaven and on earth (Daniel 7:13-14). As we look at the rest of the New Testament, this is aspect of Jesus's ascension that is highlighted most.

In fact, the most quoted passage in the NT from the OT is Psalm 110:1:

*110 The Lord says to my Lord:
“Sit at my right hand,
until I make your enemies your footstool.”*

The NT writers will often connect Jesus's ascension or exaltation with that passage, specifically the phrase “sit at my right hand.” For instance, 1 Peter 1:22:

22 [Jesus] has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

The Ascension is Jesus's coronation. In one sense he became King when he was crucified under the charge “King of the Jews,” in another when he defeated death in his resurrection, but that work was only fully completed when he ascended to heaven and sat down at the right hand of the Father. This means

1) Jesus is Lord of All

As broken and messed up as this world is. As much as we feel the world being out of control. When things are beyond our control, beyond our ability to change—Jesus is Lord, and his purposes for us never fail. The false Lords will ultimately be judged, and every evil deed brought to light.

2) *There is a human on the throne of heaven.*

The Ascension fulfills the purpose of the Incarnation. Human beings were made by God to rule over his creation, to fill the earth with his glory. But our first parents opted for self-rule, and we each follow in their footsteps rejecting God and sinning against God and other people. Now humans are trapped in our sin and excluded from God's presence.

But God sent Christ into the world to become like us in everyway and to fulfill the purpose in which we failed. To restore us to spiritual health through his death and resurrection, so we can participate in his rule and reign, and we are assured because he lifted humanity into the presence of God.

Unlike Enoch and Elijah who were taken to heaven, Jesus ascended and makes a way for his followers to come with him. Through faith in Him we too can enjoy the New Creation when God makes all things new. Because we are connected to Jesus through faith, Paul can say in Ephesians 2:6 that we are seated with him in the heavens already! Because Jesus, the True Man, reigns and will fill all things with his presence.

Illustration:

April 15th is Jackie Robinson Day in Major League Baseball. Jackie Robinson was of course famous for breaking baseball's color barrier. He was also the first African-American VP of a major US company, the first African-American television baseball commentator. He entered these realms where no one thought he could go. But for Him being the first African-American to do something was never just about his own achievements. He wanted to use his being first, the fame and influence that came with it, to open the way for others.

This is a picture of what Jesus has done for us, except in our case because of sin we deserve to be excluded, which makes this even more wonderful.

Quote from Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on Luke:

...[Christ] was carried up into heaven so that he might share the Father's throne even with the flesh that was united to him.

C. The Ascended Jesus intercedes and pours out blessing as the Great High Priest

1) *Jesus intercedes for us.*

The book of Hebrews repeatedly connects the ascension of Jesus with his being the Great High Priest. We read in Hebrews 7:25-26:

²⁵ Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

²⁶ For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.

Because Jesus ascended and entered God's presence through the perfect offering of his own blood as payment for sin, we have a high priest who lives forever at the right hand of God to intercede for us.

Christ prays for us, for our needs. That God would give us all we need to walk with him. That God would forgive us for the sake of his blood. That God would pour out all the benefits of Redemption on us. And, because he lives to intercede for us, we will be saved "to the uttermost"—completely, finally, fully.

As the High Priest

2) *Jesus blesses us.*

You see this in v. 50-51:

50 And he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them.

51 While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven.

This is subtle, but what Jesus is offering his disciples is a priestly blessing.

There are a few reasons for this, but for the sake of time here is only one: We have that unique phrase, "lifting up his hands he blessed them." There is only one other place in the Bible where those two ideas of lifting the hands and blessing are explicitly stated. Leviticus 9:22:

²² Then Aaron lifted up his hands toward the people and blessed them, and he came down from offering the sin offering and the burnt offering and the peace offerings.

This became the standard way for priests to do blessings, they offer sacrifice, come out, lift their hands, and bless the people.¹

What was the blessing that Jesus likely gave his disciples before he ascended?² The priestly blessing God told the priests to say to the people in Numbers 6:24-26:

¹ There is also a strong parallel between the Greek Deuterocanonical book Ben Sirach 50:20-22 (NRSV):

²⁰ Then Simon came down and raised his hands over the whole congregation of Israelites, to pronounce the blessing of the Lord with his lips, and to glory in his name;

²¹ and they bowed down in worship a second time, to receive the blessing from the Most High. ¹

² Moreover, the story of Zechariah in Luke 1 includes the interesting detail that he came out of the Temple unable to speak to the people (1:21)—ie. unable to bless them as he ordinarily would. Can we say that in Luke 24, after giving his life as a sacrifice, and being raised again, Jesus lifts his hands to give the blessing we've waited for since ch. 1?

²⁴ *The Lord bless you and keep you;*

²⁵ *the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;*

²⁶ *the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.*

For the priest those were prayers of hope, but for Jesus they were realities he accomplished on our behalf. Through the Gospel of Jesus – Incarnation, Obedience, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension, Pentecost—Jesus is blessing us, keeping us, shining his glory on us, extending grace to us, looking upon us with love, and giving us his peace.

As one author put it:

The great High Priest came and not only pronounced the benediction, but he became the benediction.³

He became the blessing and offers himself to you through faith.

Conclusion:

This is the good news of the Ascension: **Jesus ascended to heaven to complete his saving work, take up his rule of all things, and empower his church for mission in the world.**

Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, 14:23

In Bethlehem He came to men to begin the work of Redemption; from the Mount of Olives He ascended to receive the crown for the work of Redemption.

Amen.

³ Kelly Kopic, "Receiving Christ's Priestly Blessing," 252.