

# The Ascension

**Big Idea:** The ascension matters because it means that Jesus' sacrificial work is complete, that he's enthroned as king, and that he's empowered us to continue his work.

Quick question for you: What is the climax of Jesus' life?

You may think the answer is Easter. Just a few weeks ago we celebrated the triumph of Jesus over death, a triumph that means that death is defeated and that those who trust in him can also look forward to their own resurrection. It is amazing news and absolutely central to the Christian faith.

But what about the ascension of Jesus? Australian theologian Michael Bird [argues](#):

If the resurrection has been relatively neglected in evangelical theology, then the ascension of Jesus has been neglected even more. The ascension is the poor cousin in the family of the work of Christ. Evangelicals celebrate Christmas and Easter and sometimes even Pentecost, but Ascension Sunday is pretty much a nonstarter in the evangelical liturgical calendar (and yes, I'm aware that "evangelical liturgy" is an oxymoron). Yet the ascension of Jesus, including his exaltation to the right hand of God, is a significant element of the work of Christ. It is arguably the real eschatological fulfillment of the rejoicing

in the psalms about the exaltation of Israel's anointed king (see Pss 2; 24; 47; 68; 110).

It's actually part of the Apostle's Creed: he "ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father." And yet we really don't give it much thought. There may even be some good reasons for that. The Bible doesn't talk a lot about it; the implications are unclear; the idea of Jesus disappearing into the sky seems abnormal. And yet it's so important. Theologian Patrick Schreiner [writes](#):

Without it, the story of Christ's work is incomplete. Without it, other doctrines become misaligned. Without it, our good news is truncated. Without it, Christ is not declared Lord and Messiah. The Son of God did not come down to earth to stay. He arrived in order that he might return, and then return again.

As the same theologian [tweeted](#) this week:

We talk about Jesus's birth on Christmas

We talk about Jesus's death on Good Friday

We talk about Jesus's resurrection on Easter

We should also talk about Jesus's exaltation on #AscensionDay.

That's what we want to do today.

What I want to do today is simple. I want to look at the event, and then I want to look at its significance for us today.

## The Ascension Event

The ascension is mentioned in two passages, both by the same author: Luke 24:49-53, and Acts 1:9-11. (It's also in the end of Mark, but that passage seems like it wasn't part of the original book.) As you examine them together, this is what you find:

- 40 days after this resurrection, Jesus led the disciples to the vicinity of Bethany, about 3 km from Jerusalem.
- He lifted his hands and blessed the disciples, like a high priest blesses the people.
- As he blessed them, he was taken up into heaven, and a cloud hid him from their sight.
- The disciples stared. We would have too. We wouldn't know what to say!
- Two men in white then stood beside them, and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."  
(Acts 1:11)

- The disciples worshiped Jesus, and returned to Jerusalem with joy. They stayed at the temple and praised God.

That's it.

The ascension is physical. Jesus' body ascended. Jesus continues to live in his resurrected body in God's presence. But I don't think we're supposed to try to figure out the physical details of the ascension. We'll find that out one day. One theologian (Thomas Torrance) says, "The ascension must be thought of as an ascension beyond all our notions of space and time, and therefore as something that cannot ultimately be expressed in categories of space and time."

We're supposed to understand that Jesus left our realm and entered God's realm. We are supposed to think about those who were also taken like that before, like Enoch and Elijah.

That is a basic outline of the events. Jesus has ascended to God's right hand where he now rules until his return.

## **The Significance of the Ascension**

Why does this matter for us? Why should we pay attention to the ascension?

Although the Bible doesn't say much about the events of the ascension, it says lots about the meaning of the ascension. We're only going to be able to scratch the surface in what we cover today. But I hope this helps and encourages you.

Let me give you three reasons why the ascension matters to us today.

## **First: It means that Jesus' work as priest is both complete and ongoing.**

Hebrews 10 says:

And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

(Hebrews 10:11-14)

What a difference! Imagine being a priest. Imagine your full time job being the slaughter of animals, those animals acting as a substitute for you, dying in your place. The temple would have been a bloodbath. No matter how many animals were killed, still more would need to be killed tomorrow and the next day. There were no chairs in the temple, because the work was never done.

Not so with Jesus. Jesus made a single sacrifice for our sins. And then he did what no priest had been able to do in all of history. He sat down. He finished the work by

offering the final and complete sacrifice for sins, effective for all time. It never needs to be done again. Our salvation is a done deal.

The fact that Jesus is seated at God's right hand is very good news for us, because there's nothing more that needs to be done for our salvation. His priestly work of sacrifice is over; now his priestly work of intercession continues on our behalf. He is always pleading our case before the Father (Romans 8:34). The work of sacrifice has finished, but his work of representing us continues.

If you ever worry that what Jesus did for you wasn't enough, you need to know: Jesus isn't worried. He is seated at God's right hand. His work is done. Everything that he needed to do to offer a sacrifice for sins has been done. We can rest in the completeness and finality of his work for us. It truly is finished.

I love what John Bunyan wrote:

Believers should not only look to the cross for comfort; they should ascend up after him to the throne. At the cross you see his sorrow and humiliation, his tears, his blood; but if you follow him to where he is now, then you shall see him in his robes, in his priestly robes. Then you will see him wearing the breastplate, and your names are written upon his heart. Stand still awhile and listen and look. Enter with boldness. Here our High Priest ever lives to make intercession for us.

Why does the ascension matter? Because his work of sacrifice for us is done, but his work of priest continues. He is representing you right now.

Here's a second reason the ascension matters:

## **Second, it means that Jesus is enthroned as King.**

People talk about the ascension and *session* of Jesus. Session is an old word that means sitting. It usually refers to sitting for the purpose of governing or judging, like a session of Congress. The ascension means that Jesus began his session of judging the world until he returns again.

Ephesians 1 says that God

...raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (Ephesians 1:20-23)

What does the ascension mean? It means that Jesus has taken his rightful place as king of the universe. He's always been king, but now he's installed and enthroned as king. All power and authority is his. He's received:

...dominion  
and glory and a kingdom,  
that all peoples, nations, and languages

should serve him;  
his dominion is an everlasting dominion,  
which shall not pass away,  
and his kingdom one  
that shall not be destroyed.  
(Daniel 7:14)

During the Scripture reading today, we read Psalm 110. Psalm 110 contains the most quoted verse in the New Testament. And what is it about? Psalm 110 anticipates the reign of Jesus as king. We've been longing for the enthronement of Jesus as king for centuries. Jesus took his seat at God's right hand at the Ascension, and it's very good news, something that even David longed to see.

I've never had a year in which I felt the world was so out of control. Here's what the ascension teaches us: Jesus is on his throne. He rules over all things including the forces of evil. And get this: those who trust in him become part of the royal family. We will one day rule with Jesus (Revelation 3:21). We can rest easy. Evil will be defeated. Jesus is on his throne. No matter how out of control this life gets, Jesus is on his throne.

The ascension matters because it means his work is complete, and that Jesus is enthroned as king. There's one more reason we're going to look at today for why his ascension matters:



## **Finally: It means Jesus empowered us to continue his work.**

Before Jesus ascended, he gave us work to do. Acts 1:8 records Jesus' last words before he ascended:

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

While he was on earth, Jesus acted as prophet. He preached God's word and performed signs and wonders. But Jesus left and empowered us to continue that work. Earlier this year we looked at what Jesus said in Acts: that it's better that he leave so he could send us the Spirit and so we could do even greater works than he did (John 14:12; 16:7).

Jesus said: "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you" (John 14:18). Catch that? Jesus would leave, but he would come to us in a different way. Through the Holy Spirit, he is now present with us, empowering us as we carry on his mission of announcing the good news in our lives. "The followers of Jesus become the hands and feet of Jesus as they go out and speak about the Lord Jesus and perform signs and wonders, thus building and growing his church" (Schreiner).

This is amazing. The ascension means that Jesus has shifted his ministry. After the ascension, his work continues in a better way. "His prophetic work shifted, increased,

multiplied, and expanded. Our mission is to continue Christ's work by the power of the Spirit, as we speak of Christ's exaltation and wait for his return" (Schreiner).

We've really looked at Jesus as priest, king, and prophet. The ascension shifts and perfects each of these roles. I mentioned that we're just scratching the surface here, but let me try to sum up what I'm saying. **The ascension matters because it means that Jesus' sacrificial work is complete, that he's enthroned as king, and that he's empowered us to continue his work.**

I love what Patrick Schreiner writes:

The basic assertion is the ascension is a key plot moment, a hinge on which Christ's work turns. It not only authorizes and endorses Jesus' work, but *continues* Christ's three roles. The ascent culminates Christ's earthly work and marks a shift in Christ's function as prophet, priest, and king...

Before, Christ was prophet on the earth; now he builds his church as the prophet in heaven. Before, he was a priest on the earth; now he intercedes as our heavenly priest. Before, he was worshiped as the king of the Jews; now he has been installed as the Lord of heaven and earth.

Without the ascension, Christ's work is incomplete. Without the ascension, a huge hole stands open in the story. Without the ascension, other doctrines become skewed.

I love what N.T. Wright says: "To embrace the Ascension is to heave a sigh of relief." Friends, breathe easy. Embrace the ascension, and breath easy tonight because Jesus'

work is complete, he's reigning as king, he's empowered us to continue his work, and he's coming again.

Father, thank you for Jesus' ascension. Fill us with hope tonight. Nothing more needs to be done. Right now, Jesus is interceding for us. He is king and we are his royal family. And he is with us, working through us. Help us to breathe easy because of the ascension. In Jesus' name. Amen.