

The Apostle's Creed: I Believe in Jesus Christ Who Ascended Into Heaven

Acts 1:9-11

By [J. Ligon Duncan](#)

If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Acts, chapter 1. We are continuing our study through the Apostles' Creed and today we come to the phrase in which we confess that "we believe in Jesus Christ who ascended into heaven."

Now, the wise old Reformed theologians of the 17th Century used to speak of Jesus' exaltation in three stages: His resurrection, His ascension, and His session; that is, His sitting at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. You will notice in those three stages the references that we are studying. We started last week with the resurrection; we'll look at the ascension this week; and next week, Lord willing, we'll look at that heavenly session and we will examine each of those clauses of the Apostles' Creed. That Jesus was raised again on the third day, ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand are the three phases in the exaltation of Christ.

The exaltation of Christ was necessary. We are going to see in just a few moments that just as He came into this world and took on our flesh, and lived and died on our behalf, and experienced humiliation on our behalf, it was also necessary that He would be exalted. He is the humiliated and exalted Lord, and each of these phases of exaltation are essential to God's witness about Jesus Christ and about His work--God's witness to us to remind us of just who His Son really was and just what His work really accomplished.

So today, we are going to look at this truth and we could look at many places in the New Testament, but a beautiful synopsis of the teaching in the New Testament on the ascension of Christ is found right here in Acts 1 beginning with verse 9. Let's hear God's Word.

And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and the cloud received Him out of their sight. And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was departing, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them. And they also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have

watched Him go into heaven." Amen.

Thus ends this reading of God's Holy Word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we ask that by Your Spirit, You enable us to understand what the ascension is and what it means for us, and then by Your Spirit, apply that truth to our heart in such a way that we would embrace it by faith and walk in it by obedience. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

A lot has been written about the resurrection of Christ, and appropriately so. The resurrection has always been challenged by unbelievers and consequently, Christians have written many pages to explain what we believe and even to defend what we believe about the resurrection. And of course, the resurrection is a precious truth of the New Testament repeated many times.

And much has been written about the session of Christ, His sitting at the right hand of the heavenly Father as He intercedes on our behalf; as He rules the world by His word and Spirit for those who have embraced Him by the gospel. And it is perfectly appropriate that that truth would be celebrated. It's a precious comforting truth.

But it is a shame that we haven't studied more the ascension of Jesus Christ. The New Testament is filled with references to the ascension, not just here in Acts 1, not just at the end of the gospels, but also in the letters of the New Testament. Paul refers to the ascension on numerous occasions, and the Book of Hebrews contains numerous allusions to the ascension of Jesus Christ. It is a doctrine which is not only rooted in Scripture, it is a doctrine rooted not only in the creeds and the confessions of the Church from the days of the old Roman rule, not only in the Apostles' Creed and through the various confessions of the Protestant churches, but it is a truth which is filled with comfort for believers. And so, what I want to do is simply look at what the ascension is and secondly, look at what the ascension means, especially with regard to its application to us.

I. What the Ascension is: Jesus' bodily departure from earth into the Father's presence at His right hand.

So let's begin by looking at what the ascension is. Look again at Acts 1:9-11. When we say that Jesus Christ was taken up into heaven; when we say that Jesus ascended into heaven; we mean Jesus' bodily departure from the earth into the Father's presence at the Father's right hand. Jesus' ascension is a vital stage in His enthronement. He's going to the right hand of the Father to be enthroned. As King of the universe, He'll rule the world from the right hand. The ascension is the vital aspect of that enthronement. It is designed to exalt Him and to encourage us.

In the ascension, the Son of God in the flesh, the incarnate second person of the Trinity, was raised visibly. The disciples saw it; locally, from one place to another and bodily, in His flesh, from earth into the heavens. Think about it. Jesus came into this world and He had to depart this world somehow. The way that God chose for Him to depart the world is uniquely appropriate in order to emphasize the truth that God wanted to emphasize to the disciples - that Jesus was going to heaven to reign.

The disciples were going to have every reason to doubt that truth in their lifetimes. They were going to experience persecution. That doesn't look like a world that their dear Lord, friend, and Savior Jesus Christ is reigning over. And so the Father in numerous ways testifies to them that His Son is reigning. Even by taking Him up, even as a king would ascend the steps of the dais to be enthroned, anointed as king, appointed as king over a nation; so also, Jesus ascends into heaven.

In the Bible there are various meanings of the term *heaven*. Heaven can refer to the skies, it can refer to space, it can refer to the place where God is, and the place where His people enjoy His presence and communion with Him. When Jesus is taken up into heaven, first and foremost it means that He is going to be in the presence of, and in communion with, His heavenly Father. That even His body is going to be in the presence of His heavenly Father, and so it is uniquely appropriate that He would ascend up into the heavens.

In our experience, the skies and the space beyond are the closest thing in our experience to something that is infinite, eternal. It's the closest thing that we can relate to. Of course, communion with God, in the presence of God, is an endless experience for all of those who trust in Christ. So when we say that Jesus ascended into heaven, we don't mean that He went into outer space, but the fact that He ascended into the skies points us to the reality that He has gone to be in the infinite presence of the infinite God to sit at the right hand.

And if you ask me, "Where is Jesus?" I'm going to tell you, "He's at the right hand of the heavenly Father." And if you ask me, "Where is the right hand of the heavenly Father?" I'm going to say, "It's where Jesus is." I can't tell you locally, but I know that He is locally present there; He is bodily present there. It is so vital for us to understand that a man is at the right hand of the heavenly Father right now. The God-man Jesus Christ. That's what we mean by the doctrine of the ascension.

C.S. Lewis describes this in a short phrase. He says, "The disciples first saw a short, vertical movement. Then a vague luminosity." He was an English professor--a cloud, OK! "They saw a short, vertical movement; then a vague luminosity, and then nothing." That's exactly what they saw, and that was the translation of Jesus locally and bodily from this earth into the very presence of

His God and Father at His right hand. And so, this was neither a mere obscuring of His presence to us, as if He's still here somewhere but we just can't see Him, nor a divinization of His humanity. His humanity did not evaporate when He went back to glory. No. It is a real translation of His resurrected human body to the throne of God where it will dwell until the great Day of Judgment. And though we still experience Jesus' presence by His grace and through His Holy Spirit, we will not experience His bodily presence until He comes again from that throne of judgment to judge the living and the dead.

II. What the Ascension means for us: Confirms God's saving work by publicly witnessing to the claims of Christ.

Now, you may be asking yourself, "How does that doctrinal truth impact me? How can that doctrine give me comfort?" There are actually a lot of biblical answers to that question that I can't get to today. That's why you need to read Derek's book, *The Ascension of Christ*. But let me suggest five things that that doctrine means and five ways in which it is a comfort and an aid to us in our Christian life. Let me just outline them for you very quickly, and then we'll come back to them one by one.

What does the doctrine of the ascension mean for us? First of all, it means that Jesus' work worked. Secondly, it means that we will be with Jesus. Thirdly, it means that we will share Jesus' inheritance. Think about that. Fourth, it means that Jesus reigns. Fifth, it means that those who truly love Jesus will long more than anything else for fellowship with Jesus. And that fellowship with Jesus that can only be experienced by physically and locally present with Him again.

Let's look at each of these things. The ascension means for us each of these things and more. First of all, it means that Jesus' work worked. The ascension confirms God's saving work in Jesus Christ. It is God's way of saying, "He did everything I asked Him to do on your behalf. I have accepted everything I asked Him to do on your behalf and now I am exalting Him because He did everything I asked Him to do on your behalf." Let me ask you to turn quickly to Philippians 2. Isn't this precisely what Paul is emphasizing there? You'll remember that in Philippians 2:1-8, Paul is interested to show how Jesus humbled Himself. Paul says in verse 7, that "Jesus humbled Himself by taking the form of a bondservant; by being made in the likeness of men; by being humbled by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross." And then he says in verse 9: "Therefore also, God highly exalted Him." In other words, because Jesus did those things and fulfilled those things, God highly exalted Him.

Now, the ascension is God's way of saying to us as believers what He will one day say to the whole world. That Jesus accomplished all these things and therefore, Jesus has the name which is above every name. Isn't it interesting that

when this ascension occurs, it doesn't occur in the middle of Jerusalem with everybody watching it. There were many witnesses to the resurrection. At one time Paul says there were as many as 500 people who saw the resurrected Jesus Christ. But the ascension was witnessed by just that inner circle of disciples. But the ascension says to the believer what one day God will say to the whole world about Jesus Christ - that His work is finished, His work is complete, His work has been accepted by God on our behalf. That is why John Blanchard can say, "When Jesus went back to heaven, His desk was clear." He had finished His work on behalf of His people, and so His people are encouraged by the reality that His work worked. And that work's work is shown to us in the ascension; God has accepted it.

There are so many significances of that truth for us that we don't have time to contemplate them. Some of you may be looking around this crazy world that we live in. You may be looking at the rampant crime in your neighborhood and in your city, you may be looking at the tension and strife in your state and in your nation, you may be looking at the world in war. And you may be saying to yourself, "Boy, it doesn't look like a place where grace is reigning or will reign." And then God says to you, "Look at the ascension. There is a Man sitting at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, and that is a down payment, it is a deposit guaranteeing the total reign of grace one day." Right now, we've seen the pledge; He's ascended, He's gone before us. But one day we'll see the rest of the reality that that will bring in.

Or maybe you're struggling with assurance. You're one of those Christians who sees your sin very clearly and sometimes sees your sin so clearly that you can't see your Savior. And you begin to doubt whether grace can cover your sin. "It can cover other people's sins, but Lord, You don't know my heart." And then you look at the ascension, which is proof that Christ's work of active and passive obedience has been accepted by the Father. His work *worked*. He's been shown by God through the ascension to be the redeeming Son of God with power.

Maybe you're looking at your own body and you have physical maladies that will never go away. Maybe there's a disease that is working on killing you right now. Maybe you have a loved one that has a disease that is working to kill her or him right now. And you say, "It doesn't look like the Lord Jesus is reigning. My body is evidence of sin. I live in a world of sin. I live in a fallen world where things are falling apart. Then you look at the ascension and you think of a man sitting on the throne of glory; and you remember that in our flesh we are oppressed, but in our flesh we *will* see God. In this deteriorating flesh, in this flabby flesh, glorified and transformed, I *will* see my Redeemer. The ascension holds in it many comforts for the believer. But that's just the first thing: Jesus' work worked.

Secondly, we will be with Jesus. The ascension is the trail blazed by the Mediator into the presence of God forever and His people will follow. Jesus' exaltation through His ascension is simply leading the way for His people into glory. He is

our forerunner there. Jesus is like the vanguard of the army. Just as He is the first fruits in the resurrection, so also He's the first fruits in the ascension. You remember what He said to His disciples in John 14:1-3: "Don't let your hearts be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you." His departure is for the work of straightening up; He's preparing a place for you. He's preparing to come back for you to take you there. He's your forerunner into glory.

Jim Packer, in his wonderful little book, *Lord, I Want to be a Christian*, has a section on the Apostles' Creed. And in the Apostles' Creed section, he has a meditation on the ascension and he finds this wonderful hymn text from the 17th Century. I've never heard it before; I've never sung it before. The text so beautifully illustrates this point that we will be with Jesus and the ascension witnesses to that truth. Listen to it. *Love moved Thee to die and on this I rely, my Savior. You have loved me. I cannot tell why, but this I can find. We too are so joined; He'll not be in glory and leave me behind.* That's the truth of the ascension. He'll not be in glory and leave you behind. His purpose of being there now is so that He can bring you to be with Him forever.

Thirdly, the ascension means that we will share in Jesus' inheritance. The ascension is one of the steps in which the Father publicly bestows upon His Son His earned inheritance. And Jesus' deserved inheritance displayed to us in the ascension guarantees our undeserved inheritance. Remember what Jesus tells us in Hebrews 9:15? He says that He is the mediator of a new covenant so that those who have been called may receive that promise of the eternal inheritance. And in Ephesians 2:4-6, the apostle Paul can say that that promise of our eternal inheritance of Christ is so sure that we are already seated with Him in heavenly places. We've already pulled up to the banquet table; we've already been exalted with the enthroned Jesus Christ. We've already received this inheritance which has been prepared for us. The ascension points us to that reality. We'll share in that inheritance.

One of the fundamental aspects of Jesus' teaching to His disciples is: what happens to the Master happens to the disciple. The hard side of that truth is that in this life, we go through many trials and tribulations just like our Savior. There are many losses and crosses in this life. Jesus starts discipleship by saying to us, "Take up *your* cross and follow Me." The glorious flip side of the truth of what happens to the Master happens to the disciple, is that we also share in His exaltation! His inheritance becomes ours. Union with Christ guarantees that we will participate in what Paul calls in Ephesians 2:6 "The surpassing riches of His grace." The ascension witnesses to that. We too will be exalted, we too will be vindicated, and we too will experience the surpassing riches of His grace forever. So that's a third thing that the doctrine of the ascension means for us.

But there is a fourth thing. The ascension means that Jesus reigns. That is very

important and good news. The ascension is a step towards the enthronement of Christ, it testifies to His Lordship, and it sets the stage for His pouring out of the Holy Spirit. Jesus' ascension is a witness to His reign and to His Lordship just like the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

In John 16:7, Jesus said to His disciples, "It is to your advantage that I depart from you so that I can send the Holy Spirit." Christ's ascension was necessary for His pouring out of the Holy Spirit on His people. By His ascension, He steps up to the seat of power, to the right hand of the Father, and from the seat of power, He dispenses and pours out and grants His Holy Spirit to His people.

Think of it. When does this happen? When does Pentecost come? When is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit? Acts, chapter 2. When does the ascension occur? Acts, chapter 1. The pouring out of the Holy Spirit is like Jesus saying to His disciples, "Guys, I'm here at the right hand. Throughout your lives when you doubt that I'm at the right hand, look at the Spirit poured out at Pentecost. I am ruling this world. Spirit, go." Who says, "Go, Holy Spirit?" We may pray, "Come, Holy Spirit." Who says "Go, Holy Spirit" if He is not at the right hand of power? The coming of the Holy Spirit is our evidence that Jesus is reigning. The message of the ascension is that Jesus the Savior reigns. And that is good news for us because we live in a world where every scrap of evidence that we can find tempts us to doubt that He reigns. Every time we see a death, every time we experience a broken relationship, every time we see a world torn apart, every time we see people living in sin and godlessness, we are tempted to question the reign of Christ. The ascension is saying, "Disciples, the world may not know it; but He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords."

Fifth and finally, the ascension draws our hearts away from earthly things and causes our hearts to desire more than anything else, fellowship with the One who is at the right hand of the heavenly Father. The ascension sets our hearts on heavenly places and focuses our ultimate hopes on divine communion. Fellowship with Jesus is the heart desire of every true Christian and the ascension draws us away from the temporal things of this world to long to be in fellowship with God. Christ's ascension draws our hearts to Him and our desires to communion with Him. Jesus says, "No man can serve two masters—God and mammon." You'll either hate one or love the other. It is also true that no man can love two masters—God and mammon. The ascension is wooing us away from mammon and wooing us to God because our hopes are there at the right hand—not here. Not until the transformation. You see, the ascension inaugurates an inconsolable yearning in the Christian. We long to be with Jesus. Our hearts are there. He's our treasure. We want to be with Him. He has put us into the world to be His salt and light. We feel the tension of Paul. It's good for us to be here and to do His bidding, to glorify His Holy name, but it is *better* to be with Him. I think sometimes that some of the pagan ideas about Avalon and Valhalla actually are just a mirror of a warped image of this Christian longing--Avalon, where Arthur is taken at the end of his life; Valhalla, the place of the dead warriors of old.

The real inconsolable yearning, the real truth, is the truth about eternal fellowship of Jesus Christ and the ascension presses us to set our hearts there, not here. We seek for a city that has foundations whose architect and builder is God, not for an earthly city. The biblical truth of the ascension is a very practical truth. I want to stress to you that it is the biblical truths that we have nothing to do with bringing about, that are most comforting to the Christian in the Christian life. Thank God, we contribute nothing to the doctrine of the Trinity. But it is a glorious truth. We contribute nothing to the atonement. Thank God. But it is the ground of our hope. We contribute nothing to justification. It is an act of God's free grace. But it is the ground of our assurance. We contribute nothing to the ascension, but the sheer reality of it is one of the great comforts of the Christian life. Friends, we need to meditate on this neglected truth and feed our souls on it and strengthen our minds on it and encourage our walks in it, and be wooed to Christ, our ascended bridegroom by it. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, this is Your Word; it is Your truth. Bring it home to our hearts and bring us home to the One who is at the right hand. We ask it in His name. Amen.

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