

Follow up to my Ascension Sunday sermon---

Obviously the ascension does a lot more than simply show us why Jesus is no longer visible to us on earth. I want to focus more on the practical aspects of the ascension, building on some of the things I said this past Sunday:

1. The ascension as a comfort to the church: Jesus' ascension is our ascension. The man who has entered heaven is our representative and covenant head. One of us, the dust of the earth, is in heaven -- and because he represents us, we are in heaven as well. The ascension is the sign that the Father has accepted the Son and accepted his work -- which means it is also the sign that the Father accepts us and accepts our work. If Jesus is the one who has clean hands and a pure heart, so that he can truly ascend the mountain of the Lord, *in him*, we may ascend the mountain of the Lord as well. Jesus' triumphal entry into heaven assures us of a triumphal entry. We are now seated in the heavenlies in Christ (Eph. 2:6). When the Father welcomed his victorious Son into his presence, he welcomed us as well.

There is great comfort in knowing that Jesus is and will always remain a human being. He did not shed his skin, or throw off his humanity, when he ascended into heaven, returning to the Father's glory. A *man* is at the Father's right hand, ever living to make intercession for us. He still bears our humanity. He has taken our humanity into heaven, to assure that heavenly glory is our final destination as well. He has taken our humanity into the life of God, so that we share in his relationship as Son to the Father. In Jesus, humanity comes of age, entering the heavenly destiny God intended for us from the beginning. In the incarnation, Jesus has united deity to humanity forever; in the ascension, that humanity is united to God in a glorified form. The ascension means our hope is anchored in the heavens. As Calvin says, the ascension means that heaven is not merely a hope, but a present possession for the church in her Head/Representative.

But this comfort goes beyond our union with the ascended Christ. We are also comforted in knowing what Christ does for us in the heavenly realms.

Romans 8:34 and Hebrews 7:25 describe Jesus' present heavenly ministry in more detail. He intercedes for us. He continually prays for us. He presents his once-and-for-all offering before the Father, that we might have continual access to the throne of grace. Unlike the old covenant High Priest, who could not sit down in the Holy of Holies, and who had to leave almost immediately, Jesus is seated at the father's right hand as our High Priest until all his enemies have been made a footstool for his feet. Because Jesus intercedes for us, we know every charge brought against us will be answered. Because Jesus intercedes for us, we know the promise of ongoing forgiveness is always sure. Because Jesus intercedes for us, we know that his Spirit is strengthening us, enabling us to persevere and overcome. Just as Stephen saw the ascended Christ as he was being stoned to death (Acts 6), so we know that Christ is in heaven serving as our Helper, helping us to bear up under the load of trials and tribulations we endure in this world. We know he is our Advocate, continually applying the forgiveness of sins to us as needed. The work of Christ is not just a "past tense" reality; Jesus continually makes his past work efficacious in the present by his ongoing ministry of intercession. The ascension of the Son in his humanity guarantees the future validity of his work. His once-and-for-all sacrifice ever avails for sinners because he is now seated at the Father's right hand in our humanity, complete with scars from the nails and spear and thorns, offering himself for our sakes. The appearances of the Risen Christ on earth came to an end so that he could appear on our behalf in heaven before the Father.

His prayer life before the Father is also what gives efficacy to our prayer. Our prayers only reach the Father and carry weight with him because they are offered in the name of the ascended Christ. Our prayers are joined to his and presented to the Father through his mediation. Because in Christ, we have been brought near to God, we may rest assured that he hears our pleas and

will answer and act in accord with perfect love and wisdom. We are sharers in Christ's ascension – and no where is this more practical and experiential than in the church's prayer life.

2. Christ's ascension undergirds the church's mission. This is so, because Jesus not only intercedes for the church, he prays for the nations. Psalm 2 is very explicit: When the Father enthroned the Son at his right hand, he promised the nations to him as his inheritance. As the Son asks the Father, the nations are enfolded into his kingdom.

Note that this promise to the Son dovetails beautifully with the commission Jesus gave to the church. The Father promises the nations to the Son as a present, rewarding him for his suffering with global dominion. The Son commissions the church to go claim his gift through proclamation of the gospel.

Now: Do you think Jesus asks his Father for the nations? You better believe it! Maybe Christ does not receive his inheritance as quickly as we would like. But there must be good reasons for that. In the meantime, we should know beyond the shadow of a doubt that the nations belong to Christ. He purchased them with his blood; the Father promised them to him; he commissioned his church to go and disciple them. He will have them. They belong to him.

What does this mean for us? The prayers of the ascended Christ undergird the church as she goes about her mission, proclaiming the gospel to the nations. The intercession of Christ continually supports the church in her work and her warfare. The church's mission is not undertaken in her own strength; it is undertaken in the confidence that the Father has delivered over the nations to the Son and the Son rules over them as he pleases.

There is a great saying that brings all of this together. I'm not sure where it comes from, though I first heard it from Craig Higgins, a Presbyterian pastor in New York. It goes:

Jesus rules the world for the sake of his church; and he rules the church for the sake of his world.

Jesus is King -- and that's a great encouragement to the church. That's our hope. That's how we know that ultimately all things work together for the good of the church. We know we are on the right side of history -- the side of the Champion, the Victor, the True Hero. Christ directs the course of world history for the sake of his church (Eph. 1:20ff). The church is his bride and body. The church is his "precious" for which he was willing to give even his life. Jesus wanted the church so badly, he chose to die rather than live without her. There is no question: Jesus' reign over all things serves the church.

Jesus is King -- that's the presupposition of the church's mission to the nations. Because Jesus is King, we have a task: to announce the gospel of his lordship throughout the earth. We are called to disciple every nation under heaven (not just a remnant out of each nation, but the nations as such). We are made his witnesses, offering proof of Jesus' reign through word and deed.

In this way, the church ministers to the world in Christ's name. We are commissioned to serve the world by showing the world the loving lordship and gracious government of King Jesus. Jesus rules over, directs, and guides his church for the good of the nations, so that they may be drawn to him, as he pleases. The church exists for the sake of the world, embodying Christ's love as his agent and representative on earth, even as he is our representative in heaven. The church is sent, even as Jesus was sent -- not to condemn the world, but that the world through her might be saved (Jn. 20:21 + Jn. 3:17). There is no doubt: Jesus' church exists for the life of the world. The church exists to share Jesus with the world. The church exists to bring the healing of the gospel to bear upon the brokenness of this world. Jesus has commissioned the church to serve the global common good by applying Christ's lordship to every aspect of human life.

The ascension is *not* a picture of Jesus escaping the created world, promising us an easy escape as well. Just the opposite. The biblical pattern is cross-resurrection-ascension-mission (if you want, you can insert Pentecost in between ascension and mission). If the ascension was about escape, it would not be followed mission, obviously. The reality is, through the Spirit, Jesus remains totally involved in what happens “down here” even though he is “up there.” The ascension is an objective fact in history, as Jesus is enthroned as king over all creation. If that enthronement means anything, it must mean that Jesus is concerned with setting the world to rights. And that is exactly what the church’s mission is all about.

This is an important point to further clarify. The ascension is NOT about “going to heaven when you die.” It is true: we go to be with the Lord in heaven when we die. But that is not our final hope. That is not the blessed hope of the church. That is merely an “intermediate state” – better perhaps than this life, but not as good as the final resurrection state will be. That’s why the ascension cannot be disconnected from the final coming of Jesus at the end of history, when he judges the world, perfects creation, and gives us our resurrection *bodies*. As N. T. Wright has put it, the Christian hope is not “life after death,” but “life after life after death.”

This is why the mission of the church in the arena of this creation is so important. This world is “world without end” as say in the liturgy. The world will be transformed and purified when Jesus returns again. This world will be rejuvenated and matured. This world will be joined to God’s heavenly world forever. And because this is so, the church’s mission takes on eternal significance. The things we accomplish for the sake of the mission will endure. There is continuity between this world and the next. The world to come is simply this world, perfected and matured and glorified. The time in between the first and final comings of Jesus is the time of his reign from heaven – but things done on earth during this age of history are the material out of which Christ will form the final kingdom at the last day.

3. The ascension has implications for worship.

This is hinted at in Luke 24:50-53. The (initial) ascension of Jesus into heaven produces a response of worship on the part of the disciples.

In part, this is for the kinds of reasons gives above. The disciples rejoice because now Jesus is the representative human at the helm of the universe. They know that God’s plan for humanity is being completed in him. They know he has gone to prepare a place for them and to intercede for them at the Father’s right hand.

But there’s more going on. If we dig a little deeper, we can see why worship should be the church’s fundamental response to the ascension.

Ascension, in some sense, is always a prerequisite for worship in the Bible. Worship in the Bible is a “high place” event. In the OT, worship always takes place on mountains -- God put Adam on the mountain-garden of Eden; Abraham offered sacrifice on Mount Moriah; Moses and the elders ate and drank in God’s presence on Mount Sinai; the book of Leviticus highlights the importance of the ascension offerings (not “whole burnt offerings,” as it is often translated), which rose up to God’s throne as a sweet smelling aroma; the church’s worshipping assembly is called Mount Zion in Hebrews 12; etc. When Israelites would go to worship in Jerusalem for the festivals, they would “go up” to the temple. Their traveling songs were the “ascension Psalms” (120-134) to reflect this fact. Worship cannot take place without some movement upwards, towards the heavenly sanctuary.

But there’s an even deeper rationale for tying worship together with the ascension.

On the second day of creation, in Gen. 1:6-8, God takes some of the water on earth up to heaven (the first ascension movement in the Bible). In doing so, he creates a boundary between “heaven” (God’s realm) and “earth” (humanity’s realm). Note than every time someone has a vision of

heaven, they see this "heavenly ocean" beneath God's throne (cf. Ezek. 1, Psalm 148, Rev. 4-5, Rev. 15, the hymn "Holy, Holy, Holy," etc.).

But note that the work of day 2 is *not* called "good." Like Adam's singleness (called "not good" later in Gen. 2), this barrier between God's realm and man's realm is not supposed to be permanent. It is "not good." It is an initial design feature of the creation, but it is to be removed eschatologically, so that heaven and earth can become one and God can dwell with man in fullness. God's plan from the beginning was to tear through that watery curtain and "marry" himself to the human race – when the time was right.

In the tabernacle and temple, the blue veils (the color of water and the sky) were a sign of that heavenly barrier between heaven and earth. When Jesus died on the cross, that veil in the temple was torn, signaling that a new and living way has been opened up into heaven. Thus, it is only fitting that Jesus ascends up into the heavenly sanctuary since the pathway to heaven from earth was cut in his act of dying for sin. But if Jesus has made way back into God's presence, in him we have access to the Father as well (Eph. 3:12).

This is the great privilege of the new covenant: heaven has been opened. Now, the people of God have access to the heavenly sanctuary. The treasury of heaven is opened, and all of God's gifts are ours. In the old covenant, the people could draw near to God, but they were still kept at arm's length. The way into God's presence was blocked (cf. cherubim stationed at Eden in Gen. 3; veils in the tabernacle/temple). They could not array themselves around the ark of the covenant, where God dwelt above the cherubim. *Now* we can go before the throne of grace in Christ (Heb. 4:16). Now we can enter the heavenly most holy place in worship (Heb. 10:19ff). The place of glory and power is now open to us.

Ever since the ascension of Christ and the end of the old covenant temple system, God's people have worshipped him in heaven. The point is too large to develop here, but it is critical to note at least this much (cf. Heb. 12:22ff). In some sense, the church is much like Jesus during those 40 days between Easter and Ascension Day. The church is moving back and forth between heaven and earth. Every Lord's Day, "we lift our hearts up to the Lord" and join with "angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven" in rendering God praise. Every Lord's Day, we ascend into the heavenly sanctuary, meeting with Lord around his throne.

We need to grasp the fact that the ascension is not so much Jesus leaving the church behind as it is Jesus taking the church to a new place in himself. When he ascends, he makes way for our ascent. And as we ascend with him, we share in his rule, in his warfare, in his mission, and in his life of prayer. The way into heaven has been opened; let us enter his heavenly courts with praise and thanksgiving.

For more on the notion of heavenly worship, check the links:

<http://www.trinity-pres.net/audio/lecture-dabneyIITurgyII.mp3>

<http://www.trinity-pres.net/audio/Liturgy-II.pdf>

<http://www.trinity-pres.net/audio/aa-sermon03-10-19.mp3>

<http://www.trinity-pres.net/audio/rpc-sermon1997-08-10.mp3> (This one is 10 years old, so listen at your own risk. The recording quality is very poor.)

4. The ascension reveals the true identity of Jesus.

It is interesting that most of the traditional liturgy for Ascension Day is drawn from the psalter. The psalter is full of ascension theology. But it gets even more interesting: There are some Psalms

that describe the ascent of a *man* (Ps. 15, 24:3ff) and others that describe the ascent of *God* (Ps. 47:5-9, 68:18-20).

Of course, if we look at the NT witness to Jesus we can see how these different strata within the psalter fit together. The Psalms that refer to a divine ascent and to a human ascent are both fulfilled in the one event of Jesus' ascension since he is both God and man. In his ascent, man is enthroned to the position God always intended him to have, as mature king of the creation. But at the same, God established his rule over the earth in a new way. The kingdom of God comes – as promised in the OT.

This is why the disciples immediately worshipped Jesus (Lk. 24:52) and then God (Lk. 24:53) after the ascension. The ascension gives us the highest possible view of who Jesus is – one who shares in the Father's reign over all things, and is worthy of the very same worship offered to God. The ascension is one of the ways in which the NT shows that Jesus is now included in the definition of God. The ascension is part of the larger NT witness to the full deity (and humanity!) of Christ.

In Eph. 4:8, Paul applies Ps. 68 directly to Jesus. But Paul gives the Psalm an interesting christological twist. In the original text, the Psalm describes the ascending one "receiving" gifts. Paul turns that into "giving" gifts. Of course, the whole point of his receiving is so that he can give. Most especially Jesus receives the gift of the Spirit from the Father, which he then gives to the church. As Paul develops his line of thought in Eph. 4, he immediately turns from the ascension to the gifts of the Spirit granted by the ascended Christ to the church (4:11ff). [If we were going to celebrate ascension, perhaps one aspect of that celebration should be the exchanging of gifts, much the way gifts are given and received at Christmas. Not that we necessarily need more of that...]

One more note. I said in the sermon that the apostles' question in Acts 1:6 was misguided and Jesus' answer comes as something of a rebuke. I pointed to the struggle of the apostles to accept the catholicity of the kingdom later in the book of Acts as proof that they still don't have things figured out. For example, we know from Acts 10 and Gal. 2 that Peter struggled to view Gentile believers as holding equal status in the kingdom as Jewish believers. The question in 1:6 presupposes a situation that is now obsolete. God is no longer focusing his covenant purposes on Israel, but on the nations (cf. Gen. 12:1-3). The kingdom has been opened up to all peoples and there is no need to become Jewish (e.g., submit to circumcision and the distinctive requirements of the Mosaic law) in order to share in the blessings of the new covenant.

N. T. Wright provides an alternative interpretation (*Bringing the Church to the World*, p. 195). He says that Jesus' answer to their query about restoring the kingdom to Israel is a "redefined yes." He points to the very next section in Acts 1, where the apostles are careful to restore their number to 12, obviously a symbolic pointer to the 12 tribes of Israel. Thus, Wright says, "Jesus was restoring the kingdom to Israel: but it was Israel as redefined by his death and resurrection. The Ascension launches the church, not on a nationalist or triumphalist mission, but on the task of announcing and inaugurating the sovereign rule of *Jesus* in the whole world."

Of course, Wright's interpretation and mine are not far apart. Wright points to the "new Israel" theology of the rest of the NT. The church is the "new Israel," a new nation composed of Jew and Gentile together in Christ. Everyone who is united to Jesus by faith is a "True Israelite."