

ASCENSION DAY MEDITATION

Forty days after Jesus rose from the dead he ascended into heaven. Thus, forty days after Easter, the church celebrates Ascension Day. Because Ascension never falls on a Sunday, it is often overlooked, but the church usually refers to the Sunday that falls closest to Ascension Day (always a Thursday) as “Ascension Sunday” or “Ascension Lord’s Day.” In the future, we hope to commemorate Ascension Day itself in a more communal, festive, and formal way. This year, you’ll notice we have a few hymns and lectionary readings that draw on the ascension theme in Scripture. What is the meaning of Ascension Sunday? Why would we celebrate Jesus’ return to the Father? Wouldn’t it be *better* to have Jesus with us on earth? Actually, it is better for us that Jesus returned to his Father’s right hand in heaven. This is so – at least for now -- for at least six reasons.

First, Jesus’ ascension means that one who shares our own flesh and blood has finally entered into the heavenly sanctuary at the Father’s right hand. In the old covenant, God’s people were shut out of his presence. They could worship from a distance at the earthly tabernacle and temple (and occasionally at other appointed sites), but they had no access to heaven. On that first Ascension Day, Jesus became the first man to “break through” – to enter into the heavenly sanctuary before the Father’s throne of grace. We can take comfort in knowing that our flesh – formed originally from the dirt of the earth – has ascended to the heights of heaven. This is our destiny. In the ascension, the original trajectory established for humanity at creation has been fulfilled, as man has entered into full union with the Trinity. In Jesus, God descended to the lowest place so that in Jesus, man might ascend to the highest place.

Because we are in union with Christ, his ascension is our ascension. His entrance into the Father’s throne room is our entrance. His access is now our access. This is why Paul says we are seated in the heavenlies in Christ Jesus and our lives are hid with God in Christ in the heavens (Eph. 2:6; Col. 3:1-3). The ascension is good news because it means heaven and earth are no longer barred from one another. Even on earth, we have a way into the heavenly sanctuary through the flesh of the ascended Christ (Heb. 10:19ff). We can draw near before the throne of grace (Heb. 4:16) because Christ has cut a pathway back into God’s presence for us. Worship in the old covenant always took place on mountains (cf. ascension offerings; Psalms of Ascent, 120-134). Worshipers ascended to meet with God (cf. Eden, Mount Moriah, Mount Sinai, Mount Zion, etc.). Now worship takes place in the “high place” of heaven itself.

The ascension is not just a way of explaining why we no longer see Jesus on earth. Yes, the appearances of Jesus came to an end. But this was so he could begin to appear in heaven on our behalf. The ascension is a necessary event, to

complete the resurrection. As C. S. Lewis said, if you deny the historical fact of the ascension, you have to put something much more dubious in its place. This is an event heavily freighted with theological and practical significance.

Second, we know that because Jesus has ascended, he will reign until all his enemies have been defeated (cf. Ps. 110; 1 Cor. 15). Again, this is good news – this is why the ascension is a necessary piece of the gospel story. The ascension is a sign of Christ's coming victory. It is the guarantee of his eschatological triumph. In the old covenant, priests were never able to sit down in the tabernacle/temple because their work was never done. But Jesus completed his priestly offering on the cross and then took his seat at the Father's right hand. From that position he exercises rule and sovereignty. Psalm 110 tells us he will remain seated there *until* every last enemy is subdued. His ascension leads into his session which leads into his progressive victory. Death will be defeated last of all, when he comes again in glory to resurrect his people into the final form of the new creation. While the ascension is an important piece of the story, following on the heels of the resurrection, it is not the last chapter. Jesus is seated at the Father's right hand – but at the last day, after every enemy (excepting death) has been conquered, he will return to this world to unite heaven and earth in God's finalized new creation. So the ascension is a doctrine with present ramifications; but it also give rise to our future expectations.

Again, because we are in union with Christ, in some mysterious way the church shares in Christ's rule over all things *even in the present time*. As we rule ourselves (our "flesh"), conquering sin in our members, we share in Christ's dominion over sin (Rom. 6). As we work faithfully and diligently in our callings, we share in his reign over the earth and culture (Gen. 1-2). Christ is the True Adam, who fulfills the dominion mandate, given to the first Adam in Genesis 1:26-28. As Ephesians 1:20-23 indicate, Jesus now has total rule over the creation and fills the whole creation with his presence. Of course, *ruling* and *filling* point us back to Genesis 1. God always intended to have a wise, mature, obedient human at the helm of the universe; in Christ, this plan has been fulfilled. Because we are seated with him in the heavenlies, we know that our work is woven into the kingdom of Christ and serves to fulfill God's original design for the world. We have authority over creation because we are in Christ; in him, all things are ours (1 Cor. 3:21-23).

But most especially, we share in Christ's dominion through prayer. The church exercises unthinkable power in prayer because the God of the entire universe listens as she speaks her requests and petitions. Like a good husband, God consults with and listens to his bride, even when he wisely chooses to overrule her requests. We must think prudently and biblically about what to pray for in the heavenly sanctuary. We must also pray with fervency and constancy. If we dwell on the event of the ascension more, we will be driven to pray with greater

urgency and frequency. Prayer is power because it is the primary way God invites us to share in his total rule over the universe. The ascension assures us of our place in God's "cabinet" of counselors, so to speak. We must remember that we pray in unison with the ascended Christ.

Third, the ascension means that Jesus is continually interceding for us at the Father's right hand. Jesus prays for us in ways we cannot even understand. He continually applies the efficacy of his once and for all sacrifice to us, to grant us ongoing forgiveness and enable us to die to sin. We should be greatly assured by this intercessory ministry. Jesus passed through the heavens (his ascension) so he could become our heavenly high priest. Just as the old covenant high priest passed through the tabernacle/temple rooms, towards the Holy Place, so Jesus has gone into the true inner sanctuary in heaven on our behalf. He lives there to minister salvation to us.

But his prayers are not limited to the church's present membership. He also asks the Father to give him the nations as inheritance (Ps. 2). Thus, the ministry of the ascended Christ is the key to the church's mission. Our hope of success in discipling the earth hinges on his heavenly work of prayer. But this means our hope for victory on earth and in history is not in vain; Jesus will receive the nations because he died to reclaim them from the dominion of Satan, his Father has promised them, and the church has been sent to reach them. All of these things – the intercessory prayers of Jesus, the promises of the Father, and the commission of the church – mesh together to show us where history is going. History continues so that the nations can be drawn into the kingdom of Christ, resulting in nothing less than the salvation of the world.

Fourth, the ascension is important because it prepares the way for Pentecost. This is why Christ's ascension is associated with the giving of gifts to the church (cf. Eph. 4:7ff). When Jesus ascended, he led captivity captive – meaning he set the old covenant saints free from the realm of Sheol, and took them into heaven (cf. Heb. 11:40). But he also gave gifts to men. He began to bestow his Spirit upon his people in a new way, equipping them for greater service than ever before. In the power of the Spirit, the church can do even greater works than those Jesus performed in his earthly ministry (cf. Jn. 14-16). Through the Spirit, the ascended Christ equips every member of his body for ministry in the church and world.

This complex of events – the death/resurrection/ascension of Jesus, followed by the sending of the Spirit at Pentecost – is what undergirds the church's mission. The church is sent as Jesus was sent (Jn. 20:21). We are not sent to condemn the world, but that the world through us might be saved (Jn. 3:17). The ministry of Jesus determines the shape and form of our ministry. But we can have confidence that our ministry will be successful because the Spirit makes the risen

and reigning Christ present with us in all that we do. The church cannot fail because Jesus cannot fail.

Fifth, his ascension means he is coming again. As already noted, his going away cannot be the final chapter in the story; he must come again to fulfill his work. In his death/resurrection/ascension, Jesus opened heaven for us. He opened up a new a living way into the sanctuary of God. But heaven and earth are not yet fully united. (Note that the separation of heaven and earth on day two of the creation week in Genesis 1 is not called "good"; in other words, it was intended to be only a temporary design feature of the creation). At the last day, when Jesus comes again in glory (Acts 1:9-11), God will fully "marry" heaven and earth together into one realm, where God will dwell with his people forever in beauty, glory, and love. His is our hope.

Jesus returned to dwell among us through the Spirit at Pentecost, and that Spirit-presence is the form he is with us in the present age. This is a wonderful manifestation of Christ's glory. But the best is still to come. The ascension and session will give way to Christ's final coming, at the end of history. At that time, Christ will return to earth, resurrect the saints, pass judgment on all men, and send everyone to their final destiny. The righteous will dwell forever in a glorified new creation as God brings heaven and earth together in an eternal marriage. The ascension is a pointer to that final coming, for when he ascended, the angel said to the disciples, "This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven." Just as Jesus rode his glory-cloud chariot into the heavens, so he will descend on the cloud in blazing glory and awesome power at the last day. Jesus did not go to heaven to escape this world; he will return to complete his work of rescuing creation from the ravages of sin. The ascension is the sign that heaven and earth will ultimately come together.

Sixth, the ascension is a key piece of our assurance of salvation. The ascension is the Father's acceptance of the Son and of his work on our behalf. Indeed, when the Father accepts the Son, he accepts us as well. The ascension is the victorious homecoming of the Warrior-Son to his Father, as has finished off the enemy on the battlefield of Calvary. But because we have been united to Christ, we share in that reunion; we have been inserted into the flow of love that binds together the Father and Son. The ascension is the guarantee of our welcome into heaven (at death) and the new creation (at the last day). If the head is in heaven, how can the body be left behind? We build our hope of ascension on the fact of his ascension.

Furthermore, as already noted, the ascension assures us because Christ ever lives to make intercession for us (cf. Heb. 7). He continues to work on our behalf from

the Father's right hand, covering our sins and defects, and asking for his promised inheritance of the nations (cf. Ps. 2). Because he intercedes for us, no charge brought against us will stand (cf. Rom. 8:31ff); because he intercedes for us, the salvation of the world is sure.

Obviously, the ascension is a mysterious event. We do not know what it means to say that Jesus entered heaven. How do you get there from here? How can a body pass out of this realm into the realm of heaven? Heaven is a place, and yet it's not the kind of place we can travel to in a spaceship. The mechanics of the ascension elude us. The cosmology of this event is inexplicable. We can't do the science. And yet, it really happened. Jesus is really seated at the Father's right hand, reigning over all things, until he comes again, to consummate his work of redeeming and judging. At that last day, he will hand over the kingdom to his Father for approval and final glorification (1 Cor. 15). Ascension might not get the same attention that Christmas and Easter receive, but it is a vital piece of the gospel story and one we should learn to celebrate with joy and hope.