
The Human on Heaven's Throne

Why the Ascension of Christ Matters

Gerrit Scott Dawson*

“You’re not going to heaven.” That captured their attention. “Even if you believe in Jesus, *you* are not going to heaven.” It was the mischievous pastor in me, desperate to show how much the ascension matters. “You’re not going to heaven *on your own*, in yourself, as an independent, free-agent choice-maker. Even if you made the right choices.”

While that hung ominously in the air, we read John 3:13: “No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.” There’s only one guy who goes up. The guy who first came down. The man whose origin is not earth but heaven itself. That’s Jesus, the eternal Son of God, who alone among men is a native of God’s realm. In the fullness of time, he became the Son of Man in Mary’s womb. Then after his sinless, faithful life and atoning death, Jesus rose and ascended—in the same body in which he was crucified! The Redeemer returned to his Father, yet he remained one of us as he took our humanity with him.

Only Jesus could ascend. So our future, embodied life in the presence of God, along with all the saints, depends, so to speak, on our hitching a ride with him. For us to go up to heaven, Jesus had to make a way. He had to reconnect heaven and earth. And we have to be *passengers* in Christ. We have to be made one with him by the Holy Spirit. We have to be united to Jesus as members of his body. Because only one guy goes up. I have to be included *in that man* if I want to go. I’m ever only a passenger. Christ is the vessel which alone can make the passage from earth to heaven.

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THE NEW AND LIVING WAY TO GOD

All this, of course, is just another way of saying that we ever live from a dependent, vibrant relationship with Jesus. We live only in him. We live only out of him and unto him. Jesus doesn't help us find the way; he himself is the new and living way to God (Heb. 10:20). I can go where he has gone—into intimate communion with his Father—only when I go *in him* by the uniting work of the Spirit. And that's why his ascension matters so much to us. It is the event basis in Jesus's history among us for our continuing union with him.

This insight was developed famously by Augustine in the late fourth century:

Cleave unto Christ, who by descending and ascending has made Himself the Way. Do you wish to ascend? Hold fast to Him that ascends. For by your own self you cannot rise. . . . Do you wish to ascend also? Be then a member of Him who only has ascended. For He the Head, with all the members, is but One Man. And . . . no one can ascend, but he who in His Body is made a member of Him.¹

The ascension of Jesus Christ is vital to us personally. We all have an eternal stake in what happened as Jesus returned to his Father. In these brief reflections, let's consider five key implications of the ascension related to our union and communion with Christ.

1. *The Continuing Incarnation*

In the person of Jesus, the Son of God united himself to our humanity. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). But when his days among us concluded, the Word did not cease to be flesh. The ascending Son did not dis-

1 Augustine of Hippo, “Sermons on Selected Lessons of the New Testament,” in *Sermon on the Mount, Harmony of the Gospels, Homilies on the Gospels*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. R. G. MacMullen, vol. 6, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series (New York: Christian Literature Co., 1888), 41.7–8 (spelling modernized).

continue being the human Jesus when his redemptive work was finished. Jesus did not unzip his skin suit as he rose from sight. He did not discard the clothing of our humanity. The ascension of Jesus in the same body in which he was crucified and resurrected establishes his *continuing union* with our humanity.

The angels assured the disciples who stared into the sky as Jesus ascended, “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). This has always been hard to believe. We know this was never about space travel. Jesus did not go somewhere in outer space. He went into another state, another kind of dimension where he “is at the right hand of God” (1 Pet. 3:22). But earthbound as we are, we cannot understand how “body” can enter the realm of the spiritual. Indeed, one of Augustine’s arguments for the truth of the gospel is just how incredible it is “that Jesus Christ should have risen in the flesh and ascended with flesh into heaven.”² Though it staggers the mind, people do indeed come to believe this news, and thereby experience right now the spiritual power of “that one grand and health-giving miracle of Christ’s ascension to heaven with the flesh in which He rose.”³

The ascension affirms that the incarnation continues. Jesus retained the body in which he lived, died, and rose as he ascended to his Father. That flesh, of course, has been transformed and glorified. Jesus need never die again. For his body has been outfitted for an eternal heavenly life. He has a spiritual body (1 Cor. 15:44). But spiritual means enlivened by the Spirit; it is more a body than ours, not less. So even now, “He is not ashamed to call them brothers” (Heb. 2:11). The triune God wants what we are. He wants us with him, in communion, as embodied humans, restored to what we were made to be. So from heaven he fulfills his threefold offices as the exalted Lord.

2 Augustine of Hippo, “St. Augustin’s City of God,” in *City of God and Christian Doctrine*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Marcus Dods, vol. 2, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series (New York: Christian Literature Co., 1886), 22.5.

3 Augustine of Hippo, “St. Augustin’s City of God,” 22.8.

2. *The Kingly Gift*

In ascending, Jesus was exalted by his Father. He was crowned with the name above all names (Phil. 2:9). Jesus is “the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords” (1 Tim. 6:15). In ancient days, the greatness of a king would be shown by the quality of gifts he bestowed upon his loyal subjects. More than any earthly ruler, our reigning King showers signs of his favor on his people. The bounteous gift our Lord pours upon us is nothing less than his own Spirit!

On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit shook the house with the sound as of a mighty wind. He rested on the disciples in the form of tongues of fire above their heads and enabled them to glorify God in languages they had not known, adapted to the speech of the many ethnic groups gathered in Jerusalem (Acts 2:1–4; cf. 4:31). When Peter stood up to explain to the gathered crowd what happened, he gave a brief history of the ministry and death of Jesus, concluding, “This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing” (Acts 2:32–33).

The blessed Spirit of Jesus is the royal gift beyond compare. For starters, the Spirit regenerates us (Titus 3:5), creates faith in us (Eph. 2:8), makes us members of Christ’s body (1 Cor. 12:13), teaches us the things of Jesus (John 15:26), lives and prays in us (Gal. 4:6), prays *for* us (Rom. 8:26), grows the qualities of Jesus in and through us (Gal. 5:22), and empowers us for ministry (Acts 1:8). In short, Jesus pours his Spirit upon us in order that we might (1) be taken into the triune life of God and be given all that Jesus is and has (John 14:20; 16:15) and (2) be sent into the world to bring others to Christ (John 20:21–22).

The ascension was necessary to the sending of the Spirit. Jesus said, “I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you” (John 16:7). How can this be? Think of it: If Jesus had stayed on earth after his resurrection, the number of people who could speak and be with him at any one time would be restricted to the limits of human voices and ears. The ones who could intimately speak with

him or be embraced by him would be even fewer. In ascending, Jesus did not lose his human body. But he is able to relate to an unlimited number of people through the uniting work of the Holy Spirit.

In fact, because the Spirit of Jesus dwells within the hearts of believers (Rom. 5:5), we are actually closer in intimacy and union with Jesus than even his first disciples who had physical proximity to him! The royal gift of our ascended King is perpetual access and deepening closeness to him.

3. *The Priestly Intercession*

The ascended Jesus serves even now as our Great High Priest (Heb. 4:14). He offered on the cross a perfect atonement for sins. Then he entered “into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf” (Heb. 9:24). His sacrificial offering was once for all. His application of that offering, the pleading of the merits of his blood on our behalf, continues. Jesus makes a constant connection for us as our brother in skin with his Father in heaven. Joined forever to our humanity, he brings to us, his adopted brothers and sisters, the eternal favor he has always enjoyed from his Father as beloved Son. And he brings us into the presence of the Father who sent him to save us in the first place. Jesus offers us in himself as a love-gift to his Father. He presents us cleansed and recreated in himself.

The ascension has a key role in this adopting, redeeming activity. For it is the hinge in the work of Jesus as our perfect *priest*. The ascension links Jesus's once-for-all atonement completed on the cross with his continuing ministry for us in heaven. So, Jesus told Mary, “Go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’” (John 20:17). Jesus is about to go back to heaven. But he will do so joined to his disciples by the Spirit. And more: joined to all who have faith in him in the future through the disciples' proclamation of this gospel. Jesus may have been going back, but he went bringing us with him. Even now, he's bringing us into his Father's presence by offering his good word on our behalf. He shows up before us, speaks on our behalf, and opens the way for us to draw near to the Father in him (Heb. 10:21–22). And, of

course, his “word” is more than just speech—Jesus offers his whole being, and us in him, to the Father as part of the everlasting love between them.

In his ascension, Jesus our High Priest has gone into the true Holy of Holies, the very presence of his Father, as himself the offering for sin (Heb. 9:24). That atonement has been accepted. We are reconciled to God in Christ. But he remains, as our ascended brother in flesh, at his Father’s side to maintain and deepen this relationship. “He always lives to make intercession for [us]” (Heb. 7:25). Once and for all upon the cross, Jesus our priest offered the perfect sacrifice: he offered himself, the Lamb without blemish, to take away our sins. The act of atonement is complete. But in ascending, he appears now on our behalf in a continuing intercession. Why? So that what he has secured for us may be worked out in practice in our daily lives of relating to the Father through the Son and bearing forth such love in the Spirit’s power into the world, until he returns to take us home.

4. *The Prophetic Meeting Place*

The ascension establishes how we are to know Jesus right now. As we noted, the ascension of the physical, historical Jesus removes him from our immediate grasp. We cannot simply go and find Jesus somewhere. And yet, it is the same Jesus who was here who has gone to heaven; he is still himself, still enfleshed as God and man. Paradoxically, this withdrawal of Christ from immediate contact with us on earth actually makes his history among us crucial to our present relating. His ascension directs us to the Jesus of Scripture as the way we meet him right now! Thomas Torrance asserts that

by withdrawing himself from our sight, Christ sends us back to the historical Jesus Christ as the *covenanted place* on earth and in time which God has appointed for meeting between man and himself. The ascension means that our relation to the Saviour is only possible through

the historical Jesus, . . . the Jesus whom we meet and hear through the witness of the Gospels.⁴

That means there is not some other, new Christ to know. There is not more information to be given in this age. Only reflection on what has been revealed. So, we can have confidence that when we seek Jesus in the New Testament, we are drawing near to Jesus as he really is, and as he wants to be known.

So Jesus is not somewhere on earth where only those with enough pull can get an appointment with him. Yet the record of his words and deeds on earth long ago can, by his Spirit, bring us into present, vibrant contact with him. We can be assured that anyone, anywhere, relying on the word and the Spirit, can truly know Jesus in transformative intimacy. We all become *present* witnesses to the historical Jesus of the Gospels as our active Lord and Savior right now. John said, “That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3). John bore witness to the Jesus he had physically touched. Though his audience could no longer experience Jesus in that tactile way, yet they could enter communion with Christ, and be taken into the very triune exchange of love.

We rely on the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit, the rule of truth that is the apostolic witness, and the faithful community of believers as we quest into the word for the ascended Christ. The one whom we meet in study and worship is Jesus himself! We quest back to the place where he was when people could see him, back to the words he spoke when people could hear his voice. The kingly gift of the Spirit right now brings Jesus to us from heaven through the Scriptures. Through means of word and sacrament, prayer and praise, the Holy Spirit presents the historical, ascended, and still coming Jesus to us freshly in every present moment. So, far from separating us from Jesus, the ascension makes the histori-

4 Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 133.

cal, yet living, Jesus, the man in whose face the light of the glory of God shone (2 Cor. 4:6), our perennial meeting place with God.

5. *The Pledge of Glory*

The ascension of Jesus provides the pledge of our future. It offers a guarantee of what will become of us who are joined to Jesus. In his magnificent chapter on the resurrection body, Paul offers this assurance: “Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven” (1 Cor. 15:49). What Adam had after the fall, we also have: a body that decays back to the ground. But what the second Adam has after his resurrection, we also will have: an imperishable spiritual body. This is our great hope in a broken world of dust and swiftly passing time. Jesus’s ascension in the flesh is God’s earnest money that this future of resurrection life will come to pass.

In the third century, Tertullian described this pledge:

Designated, as He is, “the Mediator between God and man,” He keeps in His own self *the deposit of the flesh which has been committed to Him by both parties—the pledge and security of its entire perfection*. For as “He has given to us the earnest of the Spirit,” so has He received from us the earnest of the flesh, and has carried it with Him into heaven as a pledge of that complete entirety which is one day to be restored to it. Be not disquieted, O flesh and blood, with any care; in Christ you have acquired both heaven and the kingdom of God.⁵

The ascension inaugurates a double pledge of our future in the person of Jesus. The first we recognize easily as the deposit in *our* flesh of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13–14). But Tertullian discerns that as Jesus went up still wearing our flesh, he now holds *in himself* the pledge of the resurrection bodies and eternal life in

5 Tertullian, “On the Resurrection of the Flesh,” in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, trans. and eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 3, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325* (New York: Christian Literature Co., 1885), 51 (emphasis mine).

which we will partake. Ascending in the glorified skin and bones of our nature, Jesus guarantees in his very person what we will become.

The ascension is the very essence of our assurance. Paul writes, “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself” (Phil. 3:20–21). Christ is given to us. All that he has accomplished is pledged to us now and will be gloriously fulfilled, including the transformation to have a glorious resurrection body like his. These are the promises to those who are *passengers in Christ*—that is, united to the saving events of his history among us by the Spirit through faith.

We who are passengers in Christ receive passports from our new homeland. We are not natives of heaven, but taken into Christ, we share citizenship with him. Adopted into Christ Jesus, we share his sonship. The ascension of Jesus means his continuing incarnation, which, in turn, guarantees our eternal union and communion with him in the triune life.

HE CANNOT FAIL OR FALL

To conclude, we realize that these very great and precious promises reveal that God still so loves the world that he made. He loves us enough to keep what we are joined to himself forever. And until such time as Christ returns, he sends us with that same seeking, gathering love to the lost world. He has staked his life on humanity and asks us now to do the same in his continuing mission to the ends of the earth until the end of time. We go with love's abandon, knowing that the ascension assures us that nothing that really matters can ever be lost. As George Herbert wrote,

What Adam had, and forfeited for all,
Christ keepeth now, who cannot fail or fall.⁶

6 George Herbert, “The Holdfast,” *The Temple*, lines 14–15.