



The Ascension of Jesus

Acts 1:1-11

Rev. Jerry Hamstra
Riverside ARP Church
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We are going to look at the ascension of Jesus Christ this evening. I thought that I would preach a topical sermon so that I could focus on something of the breadth of the biblical teaching. When you think of the ascension you might be tempted to think that it is a fairly narrow slice of the biblical teaching about exaltation of Jesus Christ, but the truth is that it is a very significant part of the biblical picture of Jesus Christ and what he accomplished. So, I want to try to get across something of the richness of the biblical teaching.

The ascension of Christ is part of the exaltation of Jesus Christ. Our Lord came from heaven to earth where he took upon himself the form of a servant as Paul reminds us in Philippians 2. His outward appearance was not very impressive. He just looked like another man. He was poor. He had only a small group of followers. He was not accepted by the religious establishment. He was accused of blasphemy, tried and condemned. He was executed as a heretic. And as far as unbelief sees it, that was that.

But according to the Bible, Jesus' death was not the end. The Bible claims that Jesus rose from the dead. It claims that through Jesus' life, death and resurrection, God has conquered sin and evil and death. The Bible claims that Jesus' life, death and resurrection are the foundation of God's purpose to defeat sin and all the misery that it has unleashed upon the world. The Bible claims that through Jesus Christ, those who believe in him are forgiven their sins, reconciled with God, delivered from the power of sin and are part of the new creation that will never end. The resurrection of Jesus means that death has been overcome and those who are united to Christ by faith share in that resurrection, spiritually in this life, physically in the life to come.

But God's plan for the implementation of what Jesus accomplished involves a long period of history. Jesus died and rose again and that is the heart of the God's plan for the renewal of the world, but we are clearly not there yet. Jesus rose from the dead, almost two thousand years ago, but as the scoffers of 2 Peter 3 remind us, "All things are continuing as they were from the beginning." The world is still filled with the results of sin. The devil is still active and powerful. The horrible results of human sin is staggering. Even the lives of those who follow Christ are tarnished by sin. And the church is weak and despised and often not very attractive. In many places it is persecuted. Why would anyone want to be a Christian? The biblical teaching about the ascension of Jesus Christ gives us many reasons.

By his ascension into heaven, Jesus left this world. He is no longer physically present in this world. We cannot see him. Acts 1:9 says that as the disciples "were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight." Jesus is out of our sight. He is in heaven in his resurrected body and he is visible there, but he is not visible to us. And so, the wonderful truths about him are not visible to us. He is exalted, but we do not see his glory. We do not see him at all. As Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 4:18, "[W]e look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal." And in 2 Corinthians 5:7, he says, "[F]or we walk by faith and not by sight."

The ascension of Christ opens to us a glorious vision of the glory of Christ and the implications of that for us, but that glory is only seen by faith – faith in the Word of God. But that vision that we see by faith is a wonderful reality in the light of which to live. We do not see it, but we believe it and we live in the light of that unseen reality. And that makes everything different. It makes everything better. It gives us a perspective for living that is exhilarating and that gives us hope in the midst of a visible environment that often looks hopeless and distressing.

So, as the disciples looked on Jesus "was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight." What is going on here that we can only see by faith? What is the unseen reality that is transpiring here? The Bible teaches that the ascension was Jesus' return to heaven as the victorious king

who had triumphed over the forces of evil which are the greatest imaginable forces of destruction and misery in the world. The Bible pictures Jesus' ascension as a victory parade. This is anticipated in Psalm 68:18 where we read, "You ascended on high, leading a host of captives in your train and receiving gifts among men..." Paul picks up on this in Ephesians 4:8 where he applies Psalm 68:18 to Jesus Christ. "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men" (Ephesians 4:8).

Psalm 68 is a psalm that David may have composed in connection with the Ark of the Covenant coming into Jerusalem to take its place in the tabernacle there. In any case, it is about God as a warrior who is victorious over his enemies. This Psalm is part of the theme in the Bible which reveals God as a warrior who fights against his enemies and the enemies of his people. Listen to the opening verses of Psalm 68, verses 1-3, "God shall arise, his enemies shall be scattered; and those who hate him shall flee before him! As smoke is driven away, so you shall drive them away; as wax melts before fire, so the wicked shall perish before God! But the righteous shall be glad; they shall exult before God; they shall be jubilant with joy!" You see this is the beginning of the Psalm that later is picked up by the apostle Paul as a foreshadowing of the ascension of Christ.

The Psalm is celebrating God leading his people from the bondage in Egypt, through the wilderness to the Promised Land and finally to Jerusalem, the dwelling place of God. Verse 7 says "O God, when you went out before your people, when you marched through the wilderness..." Verse 12 says, "The kings of the armies – they flee, they flee!" Verse 17, "The chariots of God are twice ten thousand, thousands upon thousands; the Lord is among them..." And then verse 18 again, "You ascended on high leading a host of captives in your train and receiving gifts among men..." And this, Paul is saying, foreshadows Jesus ascending into heaven.

That give us insight and imagery that helps us to understand and imagine the ascension of Jesus. Jesus is the fulfillment of the great OT theme of God as the warrior against his enemies and the enemies of his people. And Jesus ascension into heaven is a further development of

this same theme. When a king in the ancient world was victorious in battle he would arrive back at his city in a victory parade leading his captives in his train. This is the picture that the Bible gives us of Jesus arriving back in heaven. Here the captives are Satan and his hosts. The gospels have shown us Jesus exerting his power over Satan as he cast out demons. Jesus has told us that by means of his death on the cross, the ruler of this world has been cast out. Revelation 20 tells us that Satan is bound until just before the Lord Jesus returns. Hebrews 2 tells us that “through death [Jesus destroyed] the one who has the power of death, that is the devil.”

The devil is still active in this world, but he is a defeated foe. Jesus has come to destroy the works of the devil and the decisive victory has been won. The complete victory awaits the second coming. So, Jesus’ ascension into heaven presents is a victory march into the heavenly Jerusalem with Satan and his followers bound in his train. And with Satan are what Satan fosters and promotes, namely, sin and death.

Now Paul also sees a fulfillment of the part of Psalm 68:18 which says that the victorious king “received gifts among men.” By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul sees a deeper meaning in those words. So, in Ephesians 4:8 he quotes Psalm 68:18 in an interpretive way and he writes, “When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.” The victorious king of ancient times returning to his city would receive gifts but as the ESV Study Bible puts it, “Paul’s adaptation of the truth of the psalm focuses on how that conqueror distributed the spoils to his own.”

Paul then goes on to speak of the gifts that the ascended Jesus gives to the church. Ephesians 4:11-12, “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up the body of Christ.” For us the apostles and prophets represent the NT, for they brought us the word of God. Evangelists and shepherds and teachers proclaim that word so that the body of Christ is built up. In other passages Paul mentions other gifts. Romans 12 mentions, prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, generosity, leadership and mercy. These gifts are given for the building

up of the church and they are associated with Jesus' victory parade that occurred at the time of his ascension into heaven.

So, the gifts that serve you to build you up and the gifts by which you contribute to building up the church are associated in Scripture with Jesus' ascension into heaven. This is the further outworking of God's plan for the renewal of all things. The church is an important part of that plan. The church is the body in which believers participate in Jesus' victory over sin and death and Satan.

The gift of the Holy Spirit is central to that. Peter on the day of Pentecost declared of Jesus, "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."

The Holy Spirit is the key gift that Jesus poured out upon the Church. The Holy Spirit applies Jesus' salvation to the hearts and lives of his people. He brings the dead to life. He is the power of the new life that makes us the people of God. He gives faith and repentance. He is the source of growth and perseverance. It is by the Spirit that we confess that Jesus is Lord. It is by the Spirit that we are set free from the power of sin and that we are enabled not to gratify the desires of the flesh. All of this belongs to the gifts that the victorious Christ poured out in connection with his ascension into heaven. There is so much more that could be said about this, but we must move on.

In a very helpful article on the significance of Jesus's ascension, a theologian named Andrew H. Trotter, Jr. writes, "Clearly the greatest theological emphasis of the New Testament regarding the ascension is that Christ now regains the glory he had with the Father before the world began, is now able to send his powerful Spirit into the world, and reigns from heaven over every authority and power in heaven and earth." I want to focus for a moment on the last part of this quotation. The ascension of Jesus Christ means that Jesus "reigns from heaven over every authority and power in heaven and earth."

In the book of Acts, as Stephen was dying at the hands of the persecutors of the followers of Jesus, he says, "Behold I see the heavens

opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." In Ephesians 1:20-21, Paul writes that God the Father, "seated [Jesus] at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹far 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." Peter, in 1 Peter 3:22, says of Jesus, "[He] has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him." The ascension of Jesus Christ means that Jesus "reigns from heaven over every authority and power in heaven and earth."

What is the significance of that? What difference does that make? Psalm 110:1 gives us the answer. "The Lord says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool."" Paul spells this out in 1 Corinthians 15:25-26: "For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death." In Ephesians 1:22, he writes, that the Father has "put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church...." What this means is that Jesus is the highest power in the universe and he exercises that power for the growth and wellbeing of his church. The wonderful truth of Romans 8:28 that "all things work together for good" for "those who love God" is implemented by Jesus from his position of power and authority at the right hand of God.

This is an incredibly exhilarating perspective. This is one of those things that we do not see with our physical eyes, but that we can see through the eyes of faith and which makes all the difference in our lives. The book of Hebrews puts it like this, in chapter 2:8-9: "Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control. At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor...."

"At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him." What we see is the overwhelming power of the evil one who does not appear to be bound very much. We see the forces of evil growing in their influence in the world. We see the church in the west becoming weaker and weaker. We see the growing marginalization of the church in the west and an increase in animosity against God and those who represent

him. We see more persecution in the world today than there has ever been. "At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him."

But we know that Jesus has ascended into heaven and is sitting at God's right hand. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to [him.]" And he is using that power and that authority to implement the perfect plan of God for the coming of his kingdom and the building of his church and the defeat of all the powers arrayed against him. "God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow ... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Now the key to this perspective is the cross of Jesus Christ. The cross helps us to see how God uses weakness and apparent defeat to win the greatest victories. The one who sits at God's right hand is the one who lived life as a pauper, and from human perspective lived a life of failure and defeat. How much worse can it get if you are executed and all of your followers run away! Jesus' death seemed to be an utter failure. And yet the moment of the greatest darkness and despair was the moment of triumph and victory. Hebrews 2:14 tells us that it was through death that Jesus destroyed "the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil."

And you see, that is why we should not be discouraged at the weakness of the church and the strengthening of the forces of evil in this world. On the cross, Jesus overcame evil with good. On the cross God used evil to bring about victory and salvation. And he continues to do that. The cross of Christ shows us that things are not as they appear. Tim Keller puts it like this in a sermon on the ascension. "Sometimes God looks absolutely absent and terrible things are happening, and yet he's never absent. He's always working. The ultimate defeat of evil is to have it undermine itself, defeat itself, bring about greater good than would have happened if the evil hadn't happened. That is the model. It's the cross on which Jesus Christ is running your life and running the universe. How do you know that? The ascension. The ascension means that. The ascension means you can get up and not be afraid and say, "Why did

this ever happen?" I don't know, but I know Jesus is running things on the model of the cross."

Finally, we will look at the relationship between the ascension of Jesus and the forgiveness of our sins. We have been looking at the big picture and it is a glorious picture. It is the picture that allows us to live in this broken world with hope and expectation. But our participation in the bigger picture of God's salvation requires our individual salvation. And the ascension of Jesus is intimately related to that as well. Listen to how this is expressed in Hebrews 9:24. "For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf." Verse 26, "[H]e has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself." Chapter 10:12-14, "¹²But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. ¹⁴For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified."

Hebrews also brings out other implications of Jesus ascension into heaven. Chapter 8:1, "[W]e have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven..." Chapter 7:24-25, "[H]e holds this priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them." And chapter 4:14-16, "¹⁴Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. ¹⁵For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

So, we have the picture of Jesus ascending into heaven. Acts 1:9, "[A]s they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight." In our minds we can see Jesus ascending into heaven. The verses that we have just heard from the book of Hebrews describe what happened once he got there. He appeared in the presence of God for us

as our heavenly high priest. He has offered for all times a single sacrifice for sins. He ever lives to make intercession for us.

The ascension of Jesus was Jesus ascending to the heavenly temple both as our high priest and as the offering. He presented himself to God as the one who gave his life for the sins of his people. And we are told that he ever lives to make intercession for us. That means that he is our advocate with the Father. 1 John 2:1-2 uses this language. "[I]f anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world."

You know, when we think of the theme of God as a warrior who defeats his enemies and how that theme is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, we must remember that by nature we are enemies of God. We are sinners and we could not stand for a moment on our own in the presence of God. I trust that you are aware of your sins and what you deserve because of your sins. This is something that we should never forget.

But the truth of Jesus' ascension into heaven to appear in the presence of God for his people is the most wonderful good news that there is. The people for whom he presents his sacrifice and intercedes are those whom God has given him from before the foundation of the world. They are those whom the Holy Spirit has renewed and made aware of their sins. They are those whom the Father has drawn to believe on Jesus. They are those to whom the Holy Spirit has given faith. They are those who have come to Jesus for rest because he has invited them to. They are those who have believed in Jesus because of the promise that whoever believes on him shall not perish but have everlasting life.

And because of that we can have confidence that we are no longer God's enemies, but he is our God and we are his people. Hebrews 10:19-22 invites all believers in Jesus, "¹⁹Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, ²¹and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²²let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water."

So, through trusting in Christ by means of the gift of the Holy Spirit that he has poured out upon the church, we can think of the big picture of the ascension of Christ with excitement, with joy, with expectation and with hope. What a mess the world is in! What a mess we have made of our lives! And what a wonder that we can think of Jesus arriving in heaven in a victory procession, leading captives in his train and know that we have been delivered from that captivity. God our Father, through Christ, by the Holy Spirit “has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Colossians 1:13-14). By grace and through faith we belong to the one who is seated at the right hand of God who is above all power and authority and who is using that power and authority to direct all of history for the good of his people, for the good of his church. We believe that not because of what we see, but because of what we know to be true from the Word of God. And it is in the light of these glorious truths that we live and move and have our being.