

The Apostles' Creed

He Ascended Into Heaven

Selected Texts

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He Ascended Into Heaven

Introduction

As we continue our series in *The Apostles' Creed* I would like to examine today what it means to believe that Jesus ascended into heaven. Please listen as I recite the Apostles' Creed:

*I believe in God the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth.*

*I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
and born of the Virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended into hell.
The third day he rose again from the dead.
**He ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand
of God the Father Almighty.
From there he will come to judge
the living and the dead.***

*I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy Catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.*

It is always difficult to measure one's own spiritual maturity. But there is a sense in which one can assess it generally by the dominant image one has of Jesus Christ.

For example, some people think of Jesus in terms of his Incarnation with the result that their mental picture is basically that of a baby lying in a manger. That's not wrong, of course. Our Lord

did become a baby in his Incarnation, and the Incarnation itself is an important concept. But it only *introduces* us to Jesus.

A more mature image is that of Christ on the cross, which is what other people think of Christ. That is better, because the cross explains the Incarnation. Jesus came to earth to die. “The Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28).

Still, good as that image is, it is not enough. Jesus is no longer dead. An image of the resurrected Christ is necessary to round out the picture. It is the resurrected Christ, not Christ on the cross, who speaks peace to his disciples and commissions them to the task of world evangelization.

The Bible, having spoken of the resurrection, goes on to Christ’s ascension to heaven—where he is now seated at the right hand of God the Father, ruling his church and awaiting the day when he shall come forth in power to judge the living and the dead.

The New Testament refers to Christ’s ascension in many places. In the Gospel of John it is twice referred to in an anticipatory manner. Jesus asked those disciples who were offended by him, “What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before?” (John 6:62).

To Mary Magdalene he said, “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned [ascended] to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am returning [ascending] to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’” (John 20:17).

In Acts his ascension is recounted with circumstantial details: “After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight” (Acts 1:9). The same account is found in the longer ending of Mark (16:19) and in Luke 24:51.

Later, in the Epistles, the ascension is referred to in speaking of the fullness of Christ’s work. Paul says in Romans 8:34: “Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.”

The Apostles' Creed

In Colossians 3:1 he says: “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.”

The letter to the Hebrews makes repeated references to Christ’s ascension and present position (referred to as his *session*) in heaven (Hebrews 1:3; 6:20; 8:1; 9:12, 24; 10:12; 12:2; 13:20).

In 1 Timothy 3:16 the ascension is placed within the full perspective of Christ’s work: “Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.”

Lesson

That the ascension of Christ is mentioned so often in the New Testament is a clear indication of its importance.

But that does not tell us why it is important or how it relates to us. However, the verses also give us an explanation of the meaning of the ascension, in three main areas.

These are framed succinctly in the well-known words of the *Apostles' Creed*: “***He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.***”

So, today I would like to examine the following:

1. The Ascension of Jesus Christ,
2. The Session of Jesus Christ, and
3. The Judgment of Jesus Christ.

I. The Ascension of Jesus Christ

First, then, let’s examine the ascension of Jesus Christ. The *Apostles' Creed* says, “***He ascended into heaven. . .***”

Three truths are suggested by the ascension of Jesus Christ.

First, heaven is a real place. To say that it is a real place does not mean that we can therefore describe it adequately, even with the help of various biblical symbols.

The book of Revelation, for example, speaks of it as a city whose streets are paved with gold, whose foundations are massive, where the light never ceases to shine. But heaven is not necessarily an actual city, although it may be. We need to remember that the language of Revelation is largely symbolic. A city speaks of a place to belong, a home. Foundations convey the idea of permanence. Gold suggests that which is precious. Light speaks of the eternal presence and unhindered enjoyment of God by his people.

Yet in recognizing the symbolism we do not want to make the error of supposing that heaven is therefore anything less than a real place, perhaps even as localized as Tampa, for example. The explicit teachings of Christ on heaven as well as the ascension itself are meant to teach such a literal reality.

Second, the ascension of Jesus Christ speaks to us of his present work. One aspect of the present work of Christ is the *sending of the Holy Spirit*, which we should understand not merely as a past sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost but also as a present continuous sending of the Holy Spirit to do his work in this world. Jesus said, “But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you” (John 16:7).

Another aspect of the present work of Christ is *his intercession on behalf of his people*. The book of Hebrews makes much of this, pointing out that Jesus exercises an intercessory role for us as our heavenly priest. “Therefore he [Jesus] is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them” (Hebrews 7:25).

Third, Jesus is preparing a place for his disciples. Jesus promised his disciples that he was going to go and prepare a place for them in John 14:2-3: “In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come

back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.” We cannot know what Jesus is actually doing in this regard, since we cannot actually visualize heaven. Nevertheless, we know that in some way Jesus is preparing a place for his disciples. That assures us of our Lord’s present interest in us and of his activity on our behalf.

II. The Session of Jesus Christ

Second, let’s examine the session of Jesus Christ. The *Apostles’ Creed* goes on to tell us that Christ “*is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.*”

That image is drawn from the ancient practice of having a person who was particularly favored by a king seated next to him on the right. It speaks of the honor given to that person and of his role in the king’s dominion.

That Jesus has been so honored is made clear in many places in Scripture. Hebrews 1:3 is an example: “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.”

Again, although specific reference to Christ’s being seated at God’s right hand is omitted, Philippians 2:5-11 gives a similar basis (i.e. that he had provided purification for sins) for Christ being honored. It is because he possessed “equality with God” but nevertheless “made himself nothing” and became “obedient to death” for our salvation. “Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:9-11).

Christ’s session at the Father’s right hand also speaks of his present authority over the world and the church. It is the authority he spoke of prior to his ascension but following his resurrection. Jesus said in Matthew 28:18-20: “All authority in heaven and on

earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” It is impossible to overestimate the scope of Christ’s authority. The announcement is not merely that authority has been given to him but that *all* authority has been given to him. Then, lest we misunderstand or minimize his authority, he goes on to declare that it is an authority exercised both in heaven and on earth.

That all authority in heaven has been given to Christ means at least two things. First, it means that the authority he exercises on earth will be recognized in heaven.

And second, Christ’s authority is exercised over all heavenly “powers” and “authorities” (cf. Ephesians 6:12), that is over all angelic and demonic beings. Consequently, we do not fear Satan or demons because Christ has authority over them.

But Christ also has authority on earth. This has several dimensions. It means that he has authority over us, his church. If we are truly his people, it means that we have come to him confessing that we are sinners, that he is the divine Savior, and that we have accepted his sacrifice on our behalf and have pledged ourselves to follow him as Lord. It is hypocrisy if it does not contain a recognition of his authority over us in every area.

To be sure, there are other legitimate though lesser authorities over us as well—authorities appointed over us by God: the authority of parents over children, of church officers within the church, of state authorities.

But Jesus is the King of kings and Lord of lords.

Moreover, Christ’s authority extends over those who are not yet believers. That is, his authority extends to the “nations” to whom he sends the gospel (Matthew 28:19).

This means, on the one hand, that the Christian religion is to be a world religion. No one is outside the sphere of his authority or to be exempt from his call.

The Apostles' Creed

On the other hand, it is also a statement of his ability to bring fruit from our efforts, for it is through the exercise of his authority that men and women actually come to believe in him and follow him.

Pastor and theologian John Stott beautifully summarizes the authority of Christ:

The fundamental basis of all evangelism and missions activity is the universal authority of Jesus Christ, “in heaven and on earth.” If the authority of Jesus were limited on earth, if he were but one of many religious teachers, one of many Jewish prophets, one of many divine incarnations, we would have no mandate to present him to the nations as the Lord and Savior of the world. If the authority of Jesus were limited in heaven, if he had not decisively overthrown the principalities and powers, we might still proclaim him to the nations, but we would never be able to “turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God” (Acts 26:18). Only because all authority on earth belongs to Christ dare we go to all the nations. And only because all authority in heaven as well is his have we any hope of success.¹

III. The Judgment of Jesus Christ

And third, let's examine the judgment of Jesus Christ. The *Apostles' Creed* goes on to say: “***From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.***”

There is a reluctance today to talk about God's judgment. We can talk about God's love, grace, mercy, care, compassion, strength. We can say that he is the answer to whatever problem we have, that he is adequate for every emergency. But to talk about God as a God of judgment and of Jesus Christ as a judge is so offensive to our culture that many let this doctrine pass.

How can we possibly overlook the fact that the great and holy God of the universe will one day judge sin? If it were not true

¹ John R. W. Stott, “The Great Commission,” in *One Race, One Gospel, One Task*, World Congress on Evangelism, Berlin 1966, Official Reference Volumes, ed. Carl F. H. Henry and W. Stanley Mooneyham (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1967), vol. I, p. 46.

that God will judge sin, it would be a blot on the name of God. We could not talk about a holy God, a just God, a sovereign God, if he were to let sin go on unchecked indefinitely as he obviously seems to let it do for a time in the world.

We may object by saying that sometimes sin *is* punished in this world. Sin has its built-in, self-destructing mechanisms.

But to be honest we must admit that sometimes good people suffer also, and sometimes evildoers go free. Although the evildoer is sometimes punished, no one would seriously maintain that all evil is properly punished and all good properly rewarded *in this world*.

So if there is not a final judgment in which the inequities of this life are made right, there is no righteousness in God. There is no ultimate justice anywhere.

But according to the teaching of the Bible, there is justice and there will be a judgment.

Whenever we begin to talk of justice before God, there is a sense in which we should rightly draw back in horror. It is not just a matter of this particular good deed, which we imagine ourselves to have done, being rewarded, and that particular bad deed being judged.

It is rather that by God's standards "there is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one" (Romans 3:10-12).

To speak of the judgment of God is to speak of judgment that rightly falls upon each one of us. What shall we do then? How shall we stand before Christ in that judgment?

The only way to stand before Christ as Judge is to receive him as Lord and Savior. While we are alive we have the opportunity to believe that Jesus paid the penalty for our sin, and to ask him to forgive us and receive us into his presence on the basis of his perfect and finished work.

There is a beautiful picture in the book of Acts of how the Christian can stand before God. It is a picture of how the one who

has believed in Christ will find him—miracle of miracles—not as judge but redeemer. The picture comes to us from the account of the death of Stephen, a common person who had preached in Jerusalem with such power that the authorities hated him and had stoned him to death. Before he died, however, God granted him a vision of the heavenly Christ. He saw Jesus, not seated on the throne of judgment at the right hand of God, but rather standing at God's side to welcome him to glory. His testimony was "Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:56). As he died he repeated his Lord's own statements: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (7:59) and "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (7:60).

Conclusion

I summarize this section by saying that Jesus is the source in which all spiritual good may be found. It is as John Calvin wrote:

If we seek strength, it lies in his [i.e. Christ's] dominion; if purity, in his conception; if gentleness, it appears in his birth. For by his birth he was made like us in all respects (Hebrews 2:17) that he might learn to feel our pain (cf. Hebrews 5:2). If we seek redemption, it lies in his passion; if acquittal, in his condemnation; if remission of the curse, in his cross (Galatians 3:13); if satisfaction, in his sacrifice; if purification, in his blood; if reconciliation, in his suffering on the cross; if mortification of the flesh, in his tomb; if newness of life, in his resurrection; if immortality, in the same; if inheritance of the Heavenly kingdom, in his entrance into heaven; if protection, if security, if abundant supply of all blessings, in his Kingdom; if untroubled expectation of judgment, in the power given to him to judge.²

In view of Christ's person and work it is foolish to seek for spiritual blessing elsewhere. It is wise to trust him only. Amen.

² John Calvin, *Institutes*, pp. 527-28.

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