

Foundations 7: I Believe in Jesus Christ, ...He Ascended into Heaven and Sits at the Right Hand of God the Father Almighty

February 27, 2022 Sermon by Stephen Portner

Luke 24:50-53

50 When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. 51 While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. 52 Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. 53 And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.”

We are continuing our series on the twelve statements of the Apostles' Creed, which has formed in summary for almost 2000 years the foundation of why we Christians believe what we believe. Each statement is based on Scripture. This week we will focus on the statement, **I Believe in Jesus Christ, ...He Ascended into Heaven and Sits at the Right Hand of God the Father Almighty.**

When we go to a baseball game, we like to stay for the whole game. I've never quite understood why so many people get up to leave before the game is over. Perhaps they want to get out to their cars before everyone else does and avoid the traffic jam. But I think to myself, "Why did you spend all this time and money or something and you don't seem interested in how it all turns out?" After all, there may be a grand slam at the end that reverses everyone's expectations. Yet there are so many people who treat the end of the game as though it doesn't really matter.

Unfortunately, that's how some people treat the ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ. They cheer for his birth, they cheer for Jesus' rising again from the dead, but then they don't seem all that much interested in how the rest of Jesus' earthly life plays out. Ascension Day is like Jesus making the winning grand slam that wins the day. It's the victory lap that brings Jesus victoriously to home base. Yet so many people have a blasé attitude about it.

After Jesus was risen from the dead, he roamed the earth for forty days, appearing at various times to his disciples. After forty days Jesus lifted his hands, blessed the disciples. And then, while he was blessing his disciples, Jesus ascended into heaven. Luke, who also wrote Acts (Luke-Acts was originally one book), states that a cloud took Jesus out of their sight (Acts 1:9). While he was going, the disciples were gazing up toward heaven (Acts 1:10). This was a visible sign to the disciples that Jesus was returning home, home to his Father in heaven.

Can you imagine leaving heaven to come to earth? That's what Jesus did for us. So, the moment Jesus' work on earth was done and he could return home to His Father in heaven, that was a grand slam!

What did Jesus's ascension signify? We are going to talk about four things – three this week and one the next. The four things that Jesus' ascension mean for us today is that:

- 1) Jesus ascended to be our prophet
- 2) Jesus ascended to be our priest
- 3) Jesus ascended to be our king; and
- 4) Jesus ascended to be our judge.

1) Jesus ascended to be our prophet.

A prophet is not so much one who tells the future, although Jesus could do that too. A prophet is more a person who speaks forth truth. When Pilate was getting ready to crucify Jesus and had him on trial, he asked rhetorically and condescendingly, "What is truth?" Likely he anticipated that there is no answer to that. It's not a matter of "what is truth," but "who is truth." Jesus is the Truth.

A prophet of God speaks forth the truth, regardless of the consequences. There are not many people who appreciate the truth spoken to them, even when it is a truth spoken to them in love. It is primarily because Jesus is the Truth that evil people wanted to put him to death. The truth of Jesus was like a bright light shining into their darkness, revealing a part of themselves which they preferred remained hidden. There were those so put off by the Truth that they wanted to put to death the person who embodied it. They succeeded in putting the person to death, but Jesus rose again from the death. The truth still reigns!

Jesus did foretell what the end of time would be like. We do not know when that day will come. In the meantime we are waiting. In the meantime Jesus himself is waiting. We do not often think of Jesus as waiting, but he has been waiting close to 2000 years now for the plan of God the Father to work its way out. He didn't completely usher in the kingdom. He waited until people like us were born so that we can be a part of God's kingdom as well. That's something definitely to be thankful for!

Jesus has been waiting for nearly two thousand years and counting. ...Once the prophets delivered their word, they waited to see if the people repented or hardened their hearts. We don't often think about God waiting, but this is the language of Scripture itself. Jesus waits for the full consummation of his victory to be realized. The victory is secured, but not everyone sees it, knows it, and believes it.¹

¹ Timothy Tennent, Foundations of the Christian Faith, pp. 35-36.

Thanks be to God for His immeasurable grace, while he waits for us before the door to his kingdom comes in its fullest.

2) Jesus ascended to be our priest.

Priests are to be the intercessors between God and humanity.

The priests were the ones set apart by God to enter the holy of holies [in the Temple of Jerusalem] to intercede on behalf of the people by praying and offering the blood of the sacrifice on the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant. No ordinary person, even an ordinary Jewish person, could presume to be a priest. According to the [Jewish] Law, only the members of the tribe of Levi could become priests. But even those priests only fulfilled certain functions (sacrificing animals, caring for the temple, distributing money to the poor, for example). Only a certain class of Levites who were the direct descendants of Aaron, the brother of Moses, could become High Priests. Only the High Priest could enter the holy of holies, and he could only do it once per year on the Day of Atonement.²

You may remember that Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, was one who had been chosen by lot to go into the Temple of the Lord and burn incense.

The people were waiting for Zechariah to come out of the Holy Place and pronounce the Aaronic blessing (see Nu 6:24-26. One priest from each of the 24 divisions served at the temple for one week each six months, but a priest could be chosen by a lot to enter the holy place and burn incense only once in his lifetime.³

In one commentary I read that a rope would be tied to one foot of the priest, so that if he should die while performing his duties, the other priests could pull him out rather than risk going into the presence of the holy place. Being a priest was a risky venture!

Jesus was the perfect priest, unlike his human counterparts. His priesthood was determined by being the Son of God rather than one chosen by lineage and then by lot. His priesthood was permanent whereas human priesthood was temporary. His priesthood gained him entrance into heaven itself, not just a place on earth called the holy of holies. His priesthood was pure because he did not need to sacrifice for his own sins before sacrificing for the people. His sacrifice was once and for all, whereas human priests had to sacrifice over and over again. Jesus the priest has the power to take away sin, whereas human priests have no power to remove sin.

3) Jesus ascended to be our king.

² Tennent, p. 36.

³ Archeological Study Bible footnotes, p. 1665.

We believe that Jesus “sat down at the right hand of God.” “Sitting at someone’s right hand” is a phrase we use for someone who has been given the authority of the king. We might speak of someone being our “right hand man” or “right hand woman.”

What does it mean for Jesus to be seated at the right hand of the Father? This language conveys that Jesus rules and reigns over all. He is sovereign in power, glory, and majesty. His sovereignty is why the apostle Paul says that “every knee shall bow” and “every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:10-11). Christ rules and reigns, which is why the very earliest confession of faith in the church was the three-word phrase, “Jesus is Lord.”

Now when we think of Jesus ruling and reigning at the “right hand of God,” we should not think of this in spatial terms, as if Jesus is sitting on a great big chair in a large throne room in heaven. Or at least we should not think of it *only* in those terms. The “right hand of God” is a much bigger concept than simply a physical location. These words are a way of expressing that Jesus is actively present and extends the rule and reign of God in *every* place in the whole universe. So when Jesus rose from the dead and ascended, he reassumed the full exercise of his prerogatives as the second person of the Trinity. When Jesus became incarnate, he accepted the spatial limitations of a human body. ...When Jesus ascended into heaven, he ascended from here to everywhere, not simply from here to another location. This is why the presence of Jesus can be with us when we pray, as well as commune with us as we receive the Lord’s Supper and so forth.⁴

And it is from there, at the right hand of the Father, that Jesus judges the living and the dead. But more on that next week.

In conclusion, the ascension of Christ brings the full power of Jesus’ incarnation, death, and resurrection “home,” revealing how Jesus fulfills the role of prophet, priest, and king. It’s a grand slam!⁵

⁴ Tennent, p. 38.

⁵ Tennent, p. 38.