

## Why the Ascension Matters

Evangelical Christians often spend time considering all the benefits won for us on the cross and in the resurrection but spend little time pondering how the ascension further secures and confirms these salvific benefits. We typically give little thought to the question: How does Christ's ascension into heaven benefit us? (Heidelberg Catechism Q.49). In this essay, we hope to consider this very issue in order to better understand how central the ascension to salvation.

The general failure to understand the importance of the ascension for the life of the believer leads to a truncated view of soteriology and the application of soteriology. While there is always the looming danger that we existentialize the objective truths of Christianity, making them mere subjective realities, there is the opposite danger that we as believers fail to recognize that these objective realities that happened to Christ in history have occurred for the benefit of those who are in union with Christ. As believers, we cannot contemplate what God has done 'in the fullness of time' without our hearts being warmed. We recognize that God has brought the benefits of this *once-for-all* work unto us in order to nullify all human effort, boasting, and self-glorification. Similarly, we cannot contemplate what has been done for us in the application of salvation, without immediately considering that God has accomplished the benefits in the *once-for-all* of the work of Christ at the center of history.

### ***The Ascension as an Event in the History of Salvation***

At the core of salvation history is the work of the Triune God in the death-resurrection-ascension[of Christ]-and Pentecost. This event complex is divided into the two states of Christ: (1) his humiliation and (2) his exaltation. While it is certainly true that Christ cried out on the cross "It is finished", referring to his self-offering as the sacrifice to pay for sin, Christ's role in redemption continues. Just as Paul might say about the resurrection "if Christ has not been raised...you are still in our sins" (1 Cor. 15:17), so too, we might say about the ascension "if Christ has not ascended into heaven itself, we are still in our sins." Even after the work on the cross, there remains the phase of Christ's exaltation in order to apply the benefits of redemption. The Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck has wisely stated, "Without application, redemption is not redemption" and "In his state of exaltation there still remains much for Christ to do."<sup>1</sup>

The ascension of Jesus is essential to our understanding of the gospel just as much as the death and resurrection are essential. Note for example that Peter's preaching in Acts 2 upon the descent of the Spirit centers on the death, resurrection, *and ascension* of the LORD who has been placed at the right hand of God on David's throne. Without the ascension, there is a very real sense that redemption is not fully accomplished. The price has been paid on the cross but it remains for Christ to triumph and exercise that kingship and priesthood won on the cross.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Gaffin, "Biblical Theology and the Westminster Standards," *The Practical Calvinist: An introduction to the Presbyterian and Reformed Heritage*, (Ed. Peter Lillback; Christian Focus Publications, 2002) 430. The first quote comes from Herman Bavinck *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (Kampen: Kok, 1976) 3:520 "Dempta application, redemption non est redemption" [*Reformed Dogmatics, Vol. 3* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2006) 523-4]; the second quote from *Reformed Dogmatics Vol. 3*, p.568.

The ascension is the Son's installation on the throne. It is an historical event of central importance to the gospel just as the death and resurrection of Christ is central to the gospel. The proclamation that Jesus Christ is Lord is punctuated by the fact Christ has both rose from the dead *and* he has been installed on the throne in fulfillment to the promises made to David. Christ's ascension to the right hand of the Father is not a postponement of the Kingdom of God; it is the fulfillment. God's reign is executed through a human vice regent who has been exalted over all the creation. This is why in Peter's first post-resurrection preaching of the gospel, not only does he reference Ps. 110:1 after referring to the resurrection predicted in Ps. 16, he also focuses on the fact that Jesus 'has been made [by God] both Lord and Christ' (Acts 2:36). Was Jesus the royal Messiah before his ascension? Yes. But now, as Peter has pointing out, he has been exalted to God's right hand.

We will not be able to understand how Christ "has been made Lord" if we do not understand the role of the ascension into heaven as an installation of rulership. Christ's ascension is not a return to the way things were, it is the first time that glorified human flesh enters into heaven itself. Peter's proclamation is not a statement of the Son of God's eternal Lordship but an announcement of his royal kingly installment. As one now within creation, Jesus in his humanity receives a lordship that is manifest over all creation. All things are under his feet, even if we do not yet see all things as under his feet. When we consider what it means to profess that Jesus Christ is Lord, it certainly entails a confession that he is the eternal Son of God, but it also entails a confession of his reign. The promised Messiah is on the throne. This enthronement is the climax of God's plan for redemptive history.

### ***The Ascension and Christ's Kingship in Glorified Humanity.***

Hebrews is arguably one of the most Christological books of the New Testament. It is an exposition of the person and work of Jesus as the Son of God. From the very beginning the book of Hebrews is concerned with the reality of ascension of Jesus Christ and the implications that flow from this reality. We find the Son is the one whom the Father "appointed heir of all things" (1:2) and has now "sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (1:3). He is the Son ascended.

Chapter one of Hebrews centers largely on the person of Christ as the exalted figure. The defense of Jesus from the Old Testament begins and ends with Psalm 2:7 and Psalm 110:1, respectively. In fulfillment of Psalm 2, Jesus is the Messiah who has been installed on the throne. The declaration of the Son as begotten is, based on the Old Testament context, the declaration of the Son's royal installment. God speaks of the Son: "As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill" (Ps. 2:6). Likewise, with Hebrews 1's use of Psalm 110:1, the Son is shown to have gone into heaven and sat at his Father's right hand. "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet" is the explication of the Son having sat at the right hand and received the inheritance of the name (Heb. 1:3b-4).

It is of fundamental importance that Christ's humanity does not cease in his ascension. Just as the resurrection is a real bodily resurrection (albeit a glorified body not subject to death or decay), so his ascension is in this glorified resurrected *fully human body*. Hebrews 2:6-8 draws

this out with the use of the quotation from Psalm 8. The psalm takes a passage that was spoken of humanity in general and applies its fulfillment specifically to the role of the Son in his humanity as the glorified Messiah.

The Son in his humanity was at one time lower in status than the angels. But now, after his suffering death, in his humanity he has been exalted up and crowned to rule over them and all of God's creation. He fulfills the Adamic vice-regency and the kingly mediatorship that was given to David and David's descendants. The eternal Son now incarnate fulfills the role that God intended for all humanity in the first Adam. The point is that in the exaltation (both resurrection and ascension) Jesus Christ as a true man is crowned with glory and honor.<sup>2</sup> It is this Son, in the experience of true humanity that the Father says "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet".

Christ's humanity is like our humanity in every way. There is no element of human nature (both body and soul) that Jesus Christ lacks. Because he takes on this true humanity he is able to be our high priest and minister before God in the true heavenly tabernacle. *Yet this all presupposes if he had to be made like us to be our priest in his humanity, he must continue if he is going to serve as our high priest.* Albeit, again, his humanity is resurrected and glorified but this too will be our experience (Christ our forerunner [6:20] and to bring sons to glory [2:10]). Again, this returns us to the notion that Christ's humanity entails two stages: humility and exaltation. But his transition from humiliation to exaltation assures us that those will one day be exalted in an exaltation like his.

Consider the insight from Athanasius:

Since then the Word, being the Image of the Father and immortal, took the form of the servant, and as man underwent for us death in His flesh, that thereby He might offer Himself for us through death to the Father; therefore also, as man, He is said because of us and for us to be highly exalted, that as by His death we all died in Christ, so again in the Christ Himself we might be highly exalted, being raised from the dead, and ascending into heaven...But if now for us the Christ is entered into heaven itself, though He was even before and always Lord and Framer of the heavens, for us therefore is that present exaltation written."<sup>3</sup>

Thus, Jesus enters heaven for our benefit. Consider 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." His going up into glory and sitting at the Father's right hand will bring many sons to glory (2:10). Jesus also enters heaven, with its heavenly tabernacle, as our forerunner: "where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek" (Heb. 6:20). As

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<sup>2</sup> I have argued more extensively for the Second Adam features in Hebrews 2 in Timothy J. Bertolet, "Obedience of the Son: Adamic Obedience as the Grounds for Heavenly Ascension in the Book of Hebrews" (Ph.D. diss, University of Pretoria, 2017) ch. 4, pp. 157-242.

<sup>3</sup> Athanasius, *Four Discourses Against the Arians*, 1.41.

Thomas Goodwin puts it, “A forerunner is a forerunner of followers...so he truly entered, *pro nobis*, for us, that is in our stead and in our names, as a common person...thereby showing, that we are likewise to come after him...”<sup>4</sup> He is a trailblazer of sorts. His entering into God’s presence assures us that we too will one day enter into the full presence of God. The ascension of Jesus Christ brings benefits to the believer. Christ goes into heaven itself as one of us and so his appearing in God’s presence is for our benefit.

### ***The Ascension and Christ’s Appointment to Priesthood***

Not only is Christ’s ascension into heaven his coronation to kingship on our behalf, Hebrews gives attention to how Christ’s session at the right hand of God fulfills his work as our high priest. He is fully designated and coronated as high priest. He is the high priest who has passed through the heavens (Heb. 4:15; 8:1-2). Jesus Christ can only enter the Holy Place after he has accomplished our redemption.

**Heb. 9:11** But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation)

**Heb. 9:12** he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.

The greater more perfect tent that Jesus enters is heaven itself. In the Old Testament “Day of Atonement” the sacrifice was made and then the high priest would proceed into the Holy of Holies to make intercession. So too with Christ, the blood of Christ was shed first so that Christ could go before the throne of God. Recently L. Michael Morales has shown how the book of Leviticus and the whole Pentateuch centers on the ascension offering at the Day of Atonement. The high priest is a cultic Adam who having offered the sacrifice “ascends” into the house of God.<sup>5</sup> In the Septuagint, Aaron’s Ephod was one of ‘glory and honor,’ echoing the Adamic language we find in Ps. 8 and Heb 2:6-8.<sup>6</sup>

The requirement of being a high priest is that he must come from among men (Heb. 5:1a). As we see in Hebrews, Christ became just like us in every way except without sin (Heb. 2:14, 17a). The divine Son takes on the fulness of humanity so that he can be fitted to serve as high priest and represent us in every respect. He obeys the will of God in the fulness of this humanity (Heb. 5:7-8; 10:5-9). He is faithful in every respect even in the midst of temptation. Therefore, in raising him up God appoints him as high priest.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Goodwin *Christ Set Forth & The Heart of Christ in Heaven Towards Sinners on Earth* (Rhoss-shire, Scot.: Christian Focus, 2011) 102.

<sup>5</sup> L. Michael Morales, *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord: A Biblical Theology of Leviticus* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity, 2015) 28-38, 167-184, esp. 175-6 & 182.

<sup>6</sup> Similarly, G.K. Beale has shown that Adam in the garden is both a king *and* a priest (*Temple and the Church’s Mission* [Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity, 2004] 66-68)

<sup>7</sup> I have argued elsewhere that it is the obedience of the Son as an Adamic and Davidic figure that qualifies the Son to receive the eschatological state and is the grounds for his royal/priestly ascent, Bertollet, “Obedience of

Hebrews 5:4-6 focuses on the glorification in relation to his high priesthood. Christ does not appoint himself high priest but the Father appoints him to this task. The language “no one takes this honor... he did not exalt (lit. glorify) himself...” (5:4-5) is reminiscent of the language of Ps. 8 of being crowned with glory and honor. The appointment *in his glorification* to priesthood is the same as the fulfillment of Ps. 2:7 and 110:1. He is made a priest forever (Heb. 5:6; Ps. 110:4). This is not to say that in some respect his self-offering on the cross was not priestly, but rather just as Christ to say that the glorification is a significant installation of the Son into the fullness of the kingly priestly office of the glorified humanity.

The one appointed priest is appointed as one who first “has been made perfect [i.e. glorified]” (Heb. 7:28). Geerhardus Vos is very helpful on this point. He certainly does not deny Christ’s offering on the cross was priestly but shows how Hebrews focuses on Christ’s self-presentation and self-offering in heaven.<sup>8</sup> Richard Gaffin notes that for Hebrews “being designated high priest, then, is seen as taking place subsequent to his death, in his exaltation.”<sup>9</sup> It is not that Christ’s earthly ministry is not priestly [or kingly for that matter] but that a “new and climatic stage of priesthood begins with his exaltation, so much so that it is as if he were not high priest until then.”<sup>10</sup> As Vos points out, the earthly obedience of Christ is preparatory for his for his glorified priesthood.<sup>11</sup> The priesthood of Christ is unlike the Old Covenant priesthood because it is the priesthood of the glorified eschatological man. The grammar of Heb. 5:9-10 is rather clear, it is in his ‘being made perfect’ (5:9) that he is then designated priest (5:10). In the new priesthood of the age to come, God “appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever” (7:28). Jesus first enters the state of the age to come himself, then enters heaven from where he will bring others into the final state of glory.

The point for Hebrews is that the eschatological perfection is the full completion and fulfillment of these offices. So that having “been made perfect” in the sense of eschatological glorification, he brings to fulfillment and complete the types and patterns of the Old Testament. In the ascension, the king is on the throne and the priest is in the tabernacle, glorified humanity entered heaven itself.

### ***The Ascension and the New Covenant.***

The ascension of Christ guarantees to us that the New Covenant has begun. It is the oath of the priesthood given to him that makes him “the guarantor of a better covenant” (Heb. 7:22).

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the Son” ch. 6 pp.326-408. Taking one true humanity entails the Son taking on the human vocation of trusting God, especially in the midst of despairing trials, per Heb. 5:7-8.

<sup>8</sup> “The Priesthood of Christ in Hebrews” *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation* [Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1980] 153-160). More recently on the role of the presentation in heaven for the nature of the atonement see David Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of the Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (NovTSup 141. Leiden: Brill, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> “The Priesthood of Christ: A Servant in the Sanctuary,” *The Perfect Saviour: Key Themes in Hebrews* (Ed. by Jonathan Griffiths. Nottingham: Intervarsity, 2012) 54.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>11</sup> “Priesthood,” 157.

Christ's ascension into heaven guarantees the oath is fulfilled. Christ is mediating the new covenant. Because it is into the greater tabernacle, the true tabernacle and not the earthly shadow, the ascension guarantees that Christ is mediating a greater covenant than the Old Covenant of the Law.

**Heb. 8:1-2** Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man.

In the Old Testament, as well as Second Temple Jewish apocalyptic texts, heaven is the throne of God. It is the true sanctuary where the earthly tabernacle or temple is a copy of what was in heaven. Moses made it after the pattern he was shown in heaven. The one on earth is a shadow cast by the real tabernacle of heaven itself that God made (Heb. 8:5). We are assured then that Christ is the mediator of something better, a greater covenant than the Old Covenant, because he has entered in ascension to God's right hand. If the earthly tabernacle was symbolic of God's house with a throne in the holy of holies, then heaven is the place of God's true and ultimate throne.

**Heb. 8:6** But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises.

**Heb. 9:11** But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation)

**Heb. 9:12** he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.

**Heb. 9:15** Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant.

Christ is the greater covenant sacrifice by his death made on the cross but because he enters into the greater tabernacle, heaven itself, Christ's ascension has secured that the covenant is effective. To secure the effects of the mediation of the New Covenant the sacrificed one enters into the true tabernacle. The parallel to the Day of Atonement is striking: the sacrifice was made on the altar but then carried into the holy of Holies so that it could be placed before God's throne. So Christ dies on the cross but enters in glorified humanity offering himself before God in the throne room, 'cleansing the tabernacle' so we can draw near to God (Heb. 9:23-24). Even more, Hebrews overlaps this Day of Atonement imagery with the covenant inauguration imagery from Exodus 24. Just as Moses cleansed the people to put a covenant into effect, Christ cleanses us, entering heaven to sit down having finished his work (10:10-14). Christ is the greater Moses who has inaugurated the greater covenant in his ascension.

### ***Whom Have I in Heaven But Thee?***

*"Since no man is worthy to present himself to God and come into his sight, the Heavenly Father himself, to free us at once from shame and fear, which might well have thrown our hearts into despair, has given us His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord to be*

*our advocate [1 John 2:1] and mediator with him [1 Tim. 2:5; cf. Heb. 8:6 and 9:15], by whose guidance we may confidently come to him, with such an intercessor, trusting nothing we ask in his name will be denied us, as nothing can be denied to him by the Father...*

*“For as soon as God’s dread majesty comes to mind, we cannot but tremble and be driven far away by the recognition of our own unworthiness, until Christ comes forward as intermediary, to change the throne of dreadful glory into the throne of grace.”*

*--John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion. 3.20.17*

*“For, having entered a sanctuary not made with hands, he appears before the Father’s face as our constant advocate and intercessor [Heb. 7:25; 9:11-12; Rom. 8:34]. Thus, he turns the Father’s eyes to his own righteousness to avert his gaze from our sins. He so reconciles the Father’s heart to us that by his intercession he prepares a way and access for us to the Father’s throne.”*

*--John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 2.16.16*

The Bible teaches us that we **cannot** enjoy a relationship to God apart from Christ’s death, resurrection, *and* ascension. As a sinner, in order to be saved by grace, I **need** a high priest who has entered heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. God is the ruler who is exalted over all things, who ‘reigns from heaven,’ but we cannot approach the throne of his glory. We need the incarnate glorified Jesus to go before God the Father so that we might draw near to the Father.

The reality of the ascension grounds the assurance I can have as a believer. Christ is mighty to save. Heb. 7:25 says, “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.” I can have great assurance that my cries for salvation are heard. It does not reside in my ability to cry loud enough so that my prayers ascend upward to heaven, rather, Christ has ascended upward into heaven, and as a merciful and faithful high priest he will hear my cries and dispense mercy and grace. As Goodwin writes, Christ “entering into heaven as a common person, sets us far above that state of non-condemnation. It places us in heaven with him. You would think yourselves secure enough if you were ascended into heaven.”<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, Christ’s ascension assures me that Christ does indeed rule over all things. As Hebrews 2 reminds us, we do not yet see all things under his feet. At times, the world does seem to spin out of control in rebellion against God, these storms often crash over us in life. Yet, I have a faithful merciful one who is in heaven. Furthermore, he is in heaven as one from among men. He was just like me in every respect, he suffered, faced temptation, and knows what it is to cry hard for deliverance in suffering. How great is the one who overcomes? How magnificent is his sympathy and empathy in our hour of need.

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<sup>12</sup> Goodwin, *Ibid.*, 102-3.

The ascension is a beautiful doctrine. Its truth needs to resonate deep within our heart. It shapes our prayers and it defines our hope. We need to return again to understand the rich benefits of grace that flow from the fact that Christ has ascended into heaven on our behalf.

Heidelberg Catechism Q.49.

Q: How does Christ's ascension into heaven benefit us?

A: First, he pleads our cause in heaven in the presence of his Father. Second, we have our flesh in heaven—a guarantee that Christ our head will take us, his members, to himself in heaven. Third, he sends his Spirit to us on earth as a further guarantee. By the Spirit's power we make the goal of our lives, not earthly things, but the things above where Christ is, sitting at God's right hand.