



## OUR LORD'S ASCENSION<sup>1</sup>



Each Ascension Day we meditate on a relevant individual text of Scripture. Since no one text affords us a full explanation of Christ's return to heaven, our meditations have been somewhat piecemeal. We get one perspective now, then another later, but we do not get to see the one event in a single shot, hence this sketch of the biblical significance of our Lord's ascension. (Photo: The Church of the Ascension, Jerusalem.)

### THE PLACEMENT OF THE ASCENSION

The ascension occurred toward the end of that all-important cluster of events at the heart of the history of redemption. It occurred between the preceding incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ, and his subsequent outpouring of the Spirit from heaven.

Although the ascension was unexpected so far as the disciples were concerned (Luke 24:50–51; Acts 1:9), it was fully expected by our Lord. John the Evangelist records differing instances in which Jesus foretold the event. Initially, he spoke of it rather cryptically (John 6:62 [*cf.* John's comment in 13:1]); then more clearly (John 16:5, 28–29); and most explicitly during the forty-day period between the resurrection and ascension (John 20:17). The ascension is thus located toward the end of the fifty-day period between the resurrection of Christ and his outpouring of the Spirit on the church.

## THE PRINCIPLES OF THE ASCENSION

The Bible's scattered references to the ascension reveal four principles—

### ***First principle: Our Lord is divine.***

Although Jesus was not alone in by-passing death (at least, on his second return to heaven [*cf.*, Luke 23:43]; nor in foretelling events (the prophets did, too); he was alone in foretelling his ascension and in describing it as a return to his Father. The prophecy came true, for Jesus was “carried up into heaven” (Luke 24:51); “lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight” (Acts 1:9). The cloud is significant, for as Paul says in 1 Timothy 3:16, our Lord was “taken up in glory.” The depiction of the cloud as glory was a reminder of the *Shekinah* cloud of the Lord's glory (*cf.*, Dan.7:13). Unsurprisingly, then, the disciples responded with worship to the sight of Jesus ascending on a cloud to heaven (Luke 24:52). As if they had not seen and heard enough to realize already the divinity of Jesus, their last glimpse of him in the flesh prior to their joining him in heaven, underlined unmistakably just how divine he is.

### ***Second principle: Our Lord remains fully human.***

Jesus ascended to heaven in the same body in which he lived, died, and was resurrected. His raised body had superior powers, but it retained the same features as the body in which he had lived (John 20:24–29). The disciples saw Jesus ascend precisely because he was in the body they knew (Acts 1:9). In the ascension he took his body to heaven, thereby teaching us not only that our humanity is found at the pinnacle of the universe, but that it is in our humanity that Jesus remains our sympathetic High Priest. He intercedes for us as one remaining in our flesh (Hebrews 4:14–16).

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***Third principle: Our Lord is eternally alive.***

Since Jesus didn't die again on earth subsequent to the resurrection, we can be sure he has not died in heaven either, for there is no death there. He sat down at the Father's right hand because his death-work was finished. To quote Hugh martin, he "died death dead." Yet, he remains most active, for in entering into heaven he has appeared in the presence of God on our behalf (Heb. 9:24). Seated next to the Father, he ever prays to him on behalf of his people (Ps. 110:1; Heb. 7:25). He does so to dispense grace and help as sought and needed (Heb. 4:14-16). He rises to sympathize with us in our sufferings, and he greets us as we enter heaven (Acts 7:55-56).

***Fourth principle: Our Lord is highly honored for his work on earth.***

The Father has "highly exalted" Christ by bestowing on him accolades of "dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him" (Phil. 2:9; Dan. 7:14). These belong naturally to Christ by reason of his divinity, being co-equal in power and glory with the Father and the Son, but now they belong to him as the God-man on account of his accomplishment of our redemption. Thus, his name is hyper-exalted, his reign is begun, and it will never end (Dan. 7:14b; 1 Peter 3:22). His every enemy will one day be placed under his feet (Ps.110:1), for his foes as well as his friends shall bow before him, confessing he is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2: 11). That said, it is only to those who are his true friends that Jesus promises a share in his throne (Rev. 3:21). From it the saints will judge the world (1 Cor. 6:2).

THE PONDERING OF THE ASCENSION

While, in the Christian calendar, our celebration of the ascension lasts a day, our pondering of it is surely lifelong. Biblical references to the ascension teach us that this pondering is:

***Active not passive.***

Recall the rebuke of the angels that famous day: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" (Acts 1:10-11). We are to be heavenly-minded not heavenly-gazing! Soon our brief lives will be over. We have work to do (Eph. 2:10). It is not impossible that Christ will return for his church in our day. We glean from the angels' proclamation of the coming reversal of the ascension that the Lord's return will be sudden, personal, bodily, and glorious.

***Positive not negative.***

Christ has left this earthly scene, but he has sent us the Holy Spirit as his representative on earth (John 16:1-11). In fact, Jesus said that if he were not to ascend the Holy Spirit would not come. This is because on his return to heaven Christ was rewarded as the God-man with the authority, as such, to send the promised Holy Spirit. The Spirit applies to us the benefits of Christ's work (Acts 2:33) and empowers us to witness to the world (John 15:26).

***Hopeful not hopeless.***

Amid our growth and our witness as Christians lies a great deal of life experience. We live the life first lived by Christ before he, by the ascension, opened the heavens for us to follow in due time. Having experienced life at its most earthy, fallen, and pressurized, Christ not only sympathizes with us, he urges us to hold fast our confession under duress, and to come with confidence to his Father for all that we need (Hebrews 4:14-16). Said Peter, who witnessed the ascension: The "divine power [of the Lord Jesus] has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of [God] who called us to his own glory and excellence" (2 Pet. 1:3 [ESV]).