

The Ascension of Jesus Christ

When the prophet Elijah went up to heaven, his successor Elisha asked for a double portion of Elijah's power. The condition for receiving it is remarkable: only if Elisha saw Elijah go up to heaven would he receive this portion. That is why Elisha was so intent on not missing the moment of the ascent. He did not miss it, and he became a witness of an awe-inspiring scene (2 Kings 2:9–14).

Today, too, it could be just as important not to miss the Lord's ascension. Of course, it happened long ago and can no longer be missed. But the significance of Jesus' ascension is seldom brought out. It has its important place in salvation history, just like the crucifixion and the resurrection.

Taken Up in Glory

Part of the mystery of godliness—the foundation of faith, which is opened to us in the person of Christ—is that HE was taken up in glory.

And confessedly great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory. 1 Timothy 3:16

It is not only that glory was the place to which he ascended. His whole entry into heaven was wrapped in glory. The cloud of God's glory received him and was the escort for his entry into heaven.

He was taken up, in the cloud:

And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. Acts 1:9

I believe that this ascension of the Lord was no less awe-inspiring than Elijah's. It is the Son of the Father, who fulfilled his mission at the cost of his life, who now enters heaven, ascending to his coronation, to be welcomed by God the Father. With his ascension his enthronement begins. Jesus, the despised Nazarene, is immediately afterward made Lord and Christ. He now takes his seat on the Father's throne. A man who is the Son of God enters heaven, the throne room of God, as the first human being, and is received and welcomed with all the honor, enthusiasm, and admiration that a father can give his son. Heaven is witness to this unique scene: the return of Jesus to the heavenly realm from which he had come (John 3:13; 6:62). The Son comes home again, and he says:

I have glorified you on the earth; I have finished the work that you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed. John 17:4–5

Even earlier we hear him say:

When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and will glorify him at once." John 13:31–32

The ascension, which took place ten days before the feast of Pentecost and forty days after his resurrection, is closely connected with his glorification. We may picture before our eyes the joy of heaven as our Lord, as our forerunner, is received in heaven.

Victory and Triumph

The ascension is the proof of his triumph. The battle has been fought, the fight won. And heaven wants him back:

So then the Lord, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. Mark 16:19

who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels and authorities and powers subjected to him. 1 Peter 3:22

He who descended is the same one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things. Ephesians 4:10

If his resurrection was already the proof of a completed redemption, then his taking the highest place of honor in the universe finally seals the fact that God's Christ has fulfilled—indeed exceeded—all of God's demands. Voluntarily he came down, lived as we live, died the sinner's death for others, descended into the lower parts of the earth.

The Word speaks again and again of his descent and his ascent. It is this infinite distance, this boundless humiliation, that was necessary to fulfill God's counsel. And his exaltation that followed is just as boundless, as high and lofty as no human being could ever have attained. And it is breathtaking that, because he humbled himself in this way, he opens heaven for us. He has not only cleared the way; in him we have already been transferred there with him.

The honor of his place on the throne can only be measured if one senses the depth of his humiliation.

That he might fill all things! It is as if his name can be read in every corner of heaven; everything is marked and filled by him!

Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified. Acts 2:36

This word, too, makes clear the salvation-historical dimension of his ascension and glorification. The reach of his glorification has consequences for the whole world. The house of Israel loses its monopoly on God's salvation; the whole world can come to know Christ the Lord, God's anointed.

Redemption Is Accomplished!

Of course, this was already sealed by God in the resurrection. But here, against the background of the never-ending sacrifices and services of the old covenant, the uniqueness and eternal validity of his self-giving and of the value of his blood are directly connected with his entry into the heavenly sanctuary.

nor with {or: by} the blood of goats and calves, but with {or: by} his own blood, he entered once for all into the sanctuary, having obtained an eternal redemption. Hebrews 9:12

At Golgotha he gave his blood, that is, his life, and spiritually entered the Most Holy Place with his blood. But this passage of Scripture is about the fact that he went in a single time and did not come out again like the high priest, and that he sat down at the right hand of God. The "service" of redemption is accomplished; Christ sits on the throne.

He is the author, the creator of eternal salvation. Who can make this breathtaking claim? Who can say that he has accomplished such a thing?

and having been made perfect, he became to all who obey him the author of eternal salvation, greeted {or: addressed} by God as high priest according to the order of Melchizedek. Hebrews 5:9

Only the one whom God greets and welcomes into his sanctuary, to take his seat on his throne—the highest place there is. What a welcome! The Son comes back after 33 years! And he receives the title of honor “high priest according to the order of Melchizedek”!

The Father’s address includes this word: Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet! Psalm 110:1

Would an eternal and unassailable redemption have been accomplished if he had not been received by God in this way?

Representation in Heaven – Rescue on Earth!

He has passed through the heavens. That is his ascension, which is the precondition for his office as high priest. He went up in a triumphal procession, seen by all the angels.

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in every way just as we are, yet without sin. Let us then draw near with boldness to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace for timely help. Hebrews 4:14–16

He does not just look on, as we often do. No, he prays and pleads to God for us, that we do not give up on the narrow way to glory.

Therefore he is also able to save completely those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to intercede for them. {or: to represent them, to plead for them} Hebrews 7:25

God’s Spirit: Living Water, Helper, and Power from on High

The condition for God’s Spirit being sent to earth at Pentecost was a Christ who had ascended to heaven and been glorified!

Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, out of his belly will flow rivers of living water. Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet there, because Jesus had not yet been glorified. John 7:38–39

The Spirit of God was to bear witness to a glorified Christ and to make this glory alive for us on our way to the goal—a way that, outwardly, does not let us recognize or even suspect anything of this glory of Christ, which he will share with us and which is already our possession now. In this sense we can also speak of power from on high: the essence and the effect of the glory on high.

It is indeed our secret that our Lord is now the Lord of glory and that we are on our way into this very glory. He wants to show us his glory, which the Father gave him because of his finished work.

At Pentecost this Spirit came and became the power from on high for the disciples. But everyone knows that this very day, through the Spirit, became the birth hour of the church of God:

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 which you see and hear. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says: "The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet." {Psalm 110:1} Acts 2:33–35

On that day all the disciples were made to drink of one Spirit and joined to the heavenly Head. Head and body are picture and reality of the intimate and inseparable union of Christ and the church. And it was to be a glorified Christ who would be the Head—no less than the one who fills all in all. Not a risen Christ before his ascension, when he was still on earth, but the one to whom the future belongs, the one who wants to share this glory with the church forever. He will never again be anywhere without the church being there too, because head and body are inseparable.

That Jesus would leave the disciples was bound to make them sad. But the Master makes clear to them—and to us through the whole New Testament—how important and absolutely necessary it was that he went back. Into this emptiness the Spirit of God would step, fill them, and dwell in them. He would come again, in this Spirit, who is also called the Spirit of Christ.

But now I am going to him who sent me, and none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. John 16:5–7

HE Is Preparing for Our Arrival!

The ascension also has to do directly with our hope. He must go there to prepare a dwelling for us where he has always been with the Father. He personally takes care of this place, to make it fitting for us. What might that mean? He means so well toward us—we have no idea what awaits us!

In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you? For I am going to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. John 14:2–3

You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I will come to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, for [my] Father is greater than I. John 14:28

Here the Savior lets us look into his heart. He wanted to go home! He was not at home in the world. He was a stranger, a servant focused on his mission. But he wanted his home to become our home too.

So we will not be at home on earth but with him. As people who were once earthly, we will hardly miss anything, even if such thoughts try to creep up on us now and then.

Jesus has hurried ahead as our forerunner, and he is now in the sanctuary, which describes the same place as the Father's house—from a different angle, of course.

which we have as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, which also enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. Hebrews 6:19–20

A forerunner has followers, and we are they. He is the founder and perfecter of faith. We will follow him on the same way by which he passed through the heavens. He will personally take care of our “pickup,” too, just as he takes care of furnishing our dwelling.

HE Leaves Behind a Commission!

And he said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation.” Mark 16:15

It would be an omission not to quote these words of the Master in the moments of his farewell to the disciples. The commission is unmistakable. It is the gospel of the glory of God in the face of Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6). It is the message of eternal salvation, for which Christ died and rose again and ascended to heaven. And his place on God’s throne gives us the authority to go. It is precisely not the message of a failure who ended on a cross. It is the message of the victor who is coming again, who lives!

HE Is Coming Again!

Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up 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 1:11

He will stand on the Mount of Olives:

And on that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives, which lies before Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very great valley, so that one half of the mountain shall move northward and the other half southward. Zechariah 14:4

He now sits on the Father’s throne. Then, when he comes, he will reign on his own throne, at whose feet all his enemies will lie (Revelation 3:21).

The glory that he already has now will break forth like the sun!

As surely as there was the day of his ascension, so surely there will be the day of his return! We will witness all this from up close. Hallelujah!