

## **Series Apostles' Creed**

### **This Message #7 I Believe that Christ Ascended into Heaven and Sits on the Right Hand of God the Father Almighty**

**Scripture John 16:4-11; Ephesians 4:1-6; Philippians 2:6-11; Acts 1:3, 9-11**

Today we will focus our attention on the statement “He ascended into heaven and sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.” We don’t think about the Ascension of our Lord very much, at least when compared to His death and resurrection. However, the leaders of the early Church thought it was important enough to include in the Creed.

The event itself is only briefly mentioned in Luke and Acts. In contrast both the crucifixion and the resurrection are described by all four gospel writers in great detail. The importance of the ascension is not emphasized until the New Testament letters. We will cover a lot of Scripture passages today in order to answer three important questions: Where did Jesus go? What authority does He have? And what is he doing now?

Let me begin by describing my journeys. When I travel on one of my trips I say goodbye to my wife, drive away from my home, head for the airport, get on a plane, and several hours later arrive at my destination. Getting to my destination is only half of the journey. When my ministry is completed, I say goodbye to my friends, go to the airport, get on a plane, and several hours later arrive back at my house.

The journey of Jesus Christ through human history is a much more fascinating and important study than mine, but the journey of Jesus Christ can be divided into two stages, just like my travels. We can think about these as His outbound travel from heaven and His homeward bound travel back to heaven. It will fit the description of the Creed better if we use the words “descent” and “ascent.” Scripture informs us that Jesus left His heavenly home because the Father sent Him into our world in order to fulfill the Father’s plan to reestablish a spiritual connection with humanity.

Read Philippians 2:6-8

In His heavenly home Jesus shared in the glory of the Father. He and the Father, along with the Holy Spirit, were together in eternity past. Together they created all things. Later, when it was time for the Triune God to redeem the fallen human race, Jesus, in obedience to the Father, divested Himself of His divine glories and was incarnated into humanity. He did not cease to be God, but He had to set aside His heavenly glories before He could become the helpless infant in Mary's arms. He had to empty Himself of all the privileges, powers, and sovereign rights of godliness before He could take on the limitations of human physical life, live as a servant, and offer Himself as the atoning sacrifice demanded by the Father. The final step in stage one of His journey was burial and His descent into Hades.

It was at that point that the journey of Jesus reversed direction. The resurrection pointed Jesus toward home. Death had been overcome. The resurrection was proof that His mission on earth had been successfully accomplished.

Read Acts 1:3.

During the forty days following His resurrection, Jesus interacted with His followers on several occasions. There were no doubts among His followers about who He was or about His new resurrection body. His appearance was the same as before His death, but yet He was a completely different kind of person. He no longer had a "flesh and blood" body, but rather an eternal, glorious, powerful, spiritual body [*See I Corinthians 15:42-44*]. During those forty days, Jesus taught His followers about the kingdom of God and commanded them to be His witnesses throughout the world (*Acts 1:8; Matthew 28:18-20*). And then came the day of their separation.

Read Acts 1:9-11

It is remarkable how simply and briefly this momentous event is recorded in Scripture. The only other reference to the ascension is at the end of the Gospel of Luke, which states: "When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven" (*Luke 24:50-51*). Jesus was sent to earth by the Father, He was raised from death by the power of the Father, and He was "taken up" by the Father.

The Apostles watched as He was taken up into the clouds. This visible exaltation of Jesus was an important step in the verification of who Jesus was and what He had accomplished while on earth. His resurrection from the dead could not be seen by mortal eye since this was part of the hidden supernatural transaction between Jesus and the Father having to do with the redemption and justification of mankind. Of course, the fact of the resurrection could not be questioned since the followers of Jesus were with Him on several occasions and saw Him in His resurrection body. They could bear witness to the reality of the resurrected Christ and then, at the end of the forty days, they could also bear witness to His return to heaven. His resurrection body and His ascension were visible evidences that the glories which were rightfully His were being restored.

The angels who suddenly appeared in front of the cloud gazers announced that Jesus had been taken into “heaven.” There are various meanings in the Bible of the term “heaven.” Sometimes it refers to the skies, and it can refer to the far reaches of space, and the word “heaven” also refers to the place where God dwells. The reference in Acts is not to be understood as a “material location which can be mapped on a chart” since God has a spiritual nature rather than physical qualities.

Scripture always describes heaven in relation to the fatherhood of God. In Jesus’ teachings, heaven was synonymous with His Father’s presence. We understand that the spiritual citizenship of believers is in heaven, with God. Believers pray, “Our Father, who is in heaven.” The Scriptures remind us that God is transcendent. He existed before creation and He will exist eternally outside of the material creation. The incarnate life of Jesus on earth was a unique one-time exception to the distinctive nature of God necessitated by the spiritual needs of sinful humanity.

The idea that heaven is “up” “somewhere out there” comes from the inadequacy of language to convey the sense of “otherness” and “transcendancy.” When we say that Jesus was taken up into heaven, we don’t mean that He went into outer space, but rather that He was returning to the presence of His heavenly Father. The word “up” implies exaltation. Jesus was taken up and returned to His original position as a member of the Trinity.

There are numerous references to the ascension in the New Testament. These references are always connected with the responsibilities and roles of Jesus. For example, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, in explaining that Jesus is our great high priest, said that He “passed through the heavens” (*Hebrews 4:14*) and that He “entered into heaven itself, to appear for us in God’s presence” (*Hebrews 9:24*). It was on earth that the Lord Jesus Christ was the substitutionary atoning sacrifice for the sins of the human race, but it was at His ascension that the Lord entered into His work as Prophet, Priest, and King on behalf of the people who were called into God’s family.

Both the Creed and Scripture assert that Jesus is at the “right hand of God the Father Almighty.” To be at the right hand of the sovereign Majesty of the universe is to be in a unique position of honor and authority. Notice what the Father did for His Son:

Philippians 2:9-11

Jesus is now in the place of supreme and highest honor in the universe. He earned and therefore deserves all the glory and praise that creation can offer. All the assembled throngs in heaven expressed their adoration in these words: “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise” (*Revelation 5:12*).

In His position alongside the Father, Jesus is in the position to exercise His authority to save people as well as to intercede for them. It is at this point in this message where I will explain how the truth about the ascension of Jesus Christ touches on our everyday lives. Just think about the authority that Jesus has, and just think about the spiritual benefits He can provide for us because of that authority.

Jesus introduced this topic to His disciples when, on one occasion, He said, “I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away” (*John 16:7*). These words were both puzzling and upsetting to the disciples. They wanted Him to stay with them to accomplish the things they expected Messiah to accomplish. Jesus continued, “Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.” This, of course, was a reference to the Holy Spirit.

If Jesus had not been taken up, His presence on earth would have been limited to one body in one location at a time. His ability to minister to every believer would have been impossible. However, the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus promised to send, is able to indwell every believer. Jesus reestablished the connection between God and humanity by His death, and thereby made it possible for God's presence to once again be with people, at least the people who believed in Jesus and were born of God.

Ten days after the ascension was the Day of Pentecost, and you know what happened on that day: The Holy Spirit came upon the followers of Jesus. In his sermon to the crowd Peter explained, "Exalted to the right hand of God, he (Christ) has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear" (*Acts 2:33*). Jesus had delivered just as He had promised.

On another occasion, when Jesus was teaching about the Counselor, He explained some things that His followers would see and know. He said, "The world cannot accept the Counselor, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you;" and "The world will not see me anymore, but you will see me ;" and "You will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you;" and "Whoever loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him" (*John 14:16-21*).

Shortly before His ascension, Jesus had stated, "Surely I am with you always, to the end of the age" (*Matthew 28:20*). Jesus is present with us in the Person of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, "When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears," and "He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you" (*John 16:13-14*).

Not only does Jesus live in believers through the Holy Spirit, but Jesus empowers the Church, the community of believers, through the Spirit. In the letter to the Church in Ephesus, Paul wrote that Christ apportions grace to every believer. Paul quoted from one of the Old Testament Psalms which states, "When he ascended on high ... he gave gifts to men." In the verses which followed that quotation, Paul described some of the gifts and why the Church needs the gifts. The reason is that "God's people would be prepared for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up" (*Ephesians 4:12; see also I Corinthians 12:27-28*).

The ascended Jesus sends His Spirit to every believer and also empowers every believer with unique abilities so that each one can be a resource for the Church. That special gift is needed by every other member of the Church so that every one will become mature in faith. All believers have a responsibility to serve others “for the Lord’s sake.”

Another aspect of the work of the ascended Christ is His intercession for believers. An intercessor speaks up on behalf of someone else. An effective intercessor has the authority and power to make requests and take action on behalf of another. The book of Hebrews explains what the exalted Christ does for us. The writer of this book compared the earthly priests of the Old Testament with the work of Jesus as the heavenly priest. The intercessory work of the Old Testament priest depended on his gaining access to the Holy of Holies, the room in the tabernacle/temple which represented God’s presence. The intercessory work of Jesus requires Him to be in the literal presence of God in the true tabernacle in heaven.

This is why the writer of Hebrews declares, “Christ did not enter a manmade sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God’s presence” (*Hebrews 9:24*); and “There have been many of the Old Testament priests since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely [this means “perpetually,” “to the uttermost”] those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them” (*Hebrews 7:23-25*).

In his letter, the Apostle John wrote, “If anybody sins, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense, Jesus Christ, the Righteous One” (*1 John 2:1*). When we sin, Jesus is our Advocate. The ascension of Jesus Christ guarantees that the people who have benefited from his atonement will also be protected by His intercession and advocacy. Jesus, through His death, invested Himself in His followers. It is only reasonable to assume that He will continuously protect His investment by representing us before the throne of the Father in heaven. We can, therefore, “approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (*Hebrews 4:16; see also Romans 8:34*).

There is one more benefit which I need to point out, and this is very exciting.

Ephesians 2:4-6

The Apostle Paul explained that all people who are “alive in Christ” are “raised up with Christ and seated with Christ in the heavenly realms.” Our identity as believers is closely linked with Jesus Christ. Notice how many times the words “with Christ” appear in these verses. God made us “alive with Christ.” Then He “raised us up with Christ” and “seated us with Christ.” This means that we are positioned “with Christ” “far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come” (*Ephesians 1:20-21*). Our identity with Christ should inspire us to “keep seeking the things above, where Christ is” (*Colossians 3:1*).

Because of the ascension, we know that God was pleased with the ministry of His Son on earth. The resurrection and ascension are proof that the Father accepted Jesus, and because the Father accepted Him, we can be assured that He will accept all those who trust in Jesus.

The angels announced that Jesus, who was taken up from the disciples into heaven, will some day come back in the same way they had seen him go into heaven (*Acts 1:11*). The ascension was the start of a new age, the age of the risen and enthroned Lord Jesus Christ. The conclusion of this age will be the return of Jesus Christ to rule as King over all the earth. But that is the topic for our next message.