

Ascension People

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 21 May 2023

Preacher: Rev. Jeff Simpson

[0 : 00] Good morning again, my name is Jeff, and I'm one of the pastors here at Advent, and as Tommy said, this morning is Ascension Sunday, and that is what we are gonna be focusing our attention on this morning, the ascension of Jesus.

And it's this doctrine of the ascension is this thing that we often overlook. We often think about the life, the death, the resurrection of Christ, but we often fail to think about the significance of the ascension in relation to all the other aspects of Christ's redemptive work.

And so we're gonna be looking at two questions this morning related to the ascension. We're gonna be looking at what happened in the ascension, and then why is that good news? What happened in the ascension, and then why is that good news for us?

So first of all, let's look at what exactly happened in the ascension. When you read the accounts of Jesus' ascension in Scripture, which come from the two passages that we just read, it's honestly a little underwhelming.

There are just two verses that talk about what happened in Luke 24 and Acts chapter one, which we just read. Forty days after the resurrection, Jesus gathered one final time with his disciples at the Mount of Olives.

[1 : 25] Luke 24, 51 says this, that while he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried into heaven. And then Acts 1, 9 says, and when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight.

That's it. Two verses, not many details, not much fanfare, not much explanation. And so we have to look beyond the accounts of the ascension to other parts of Scripture to understand the ascension's full significance.

For example, in Acts chapter two, the apostle Peter is preaching the gospel in Jerusalem on Pentecost. And in Peter's presentation of the gospel, he talks about the death and the resurrection of Christ, but he goes right into the ascension and talks about how Jesus has been exalted to the right hand of the Father.

Paul, in his letters, comments on the ascension more fully. For example, in places like Ephesians chapter two, Paul goes into the ascension in more depth. In Ephesians two, Paul says, God raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come.

And he put all things under his feet and gave him his head over all things. Now there are lots of other places in the New Testament that talk about the ascension, but those are just two examples. And so what does this tell us about Christ's ascension?

[2 : 58] These explanations of what happened, what do these tell us about what happened? They tell us pretty clearly and straightforwardly that Christ's ascension is his coronation as king.

It's his coronation as king. Some of you may have seen several weeks ago the coronation of King Charles in England. There was this large ceremony in London filled with lots of pomp and circumstance, sort of a once in a generation event.

There were several hours of media coverage from TV stations and media stations and journalists all around the world covering this thing. I saw the account on ABC News and Michael Strahan was covering it.

And he was a formal NFL player. And I just, I felt some cognitive dissonance with an NFL player covering the coronation of King Charles. I don't know. But King Charles in the morning traveled in a processional in a horse-drawn carriage from Buckingham Palace all the way to Westminster Abbey where the coronation took place.

And the climax of the service is when the Archbishop of Canterbury, of course, anoints him with oil, places a crown on his head, puts a sword and a scepter in his hands and he is crowned as king. [4 : 18] And then following the service, King Charles and his wife Camilla paraded out back into the streets where they were greeted with thousands of people celebrating and rejoicing. Now, maybe you got up at 5 a.m. to watch this or maybe you totally forgot it happened and you could totally care less.

But regardless of where you fall on that spectrum, what this shows us is that this coronation ceremony is a tiny picture of what happened in the ascension of Christ.

And just to be clear, it wasn't that Jesus was not a king before and then became king. But rather, it was the vindication and the authentication of his kingship.

After his incarnation, after his life, after his suffering, after his death, it was the vindication that Christ really is the king that he claimed to be.

He really is who he claimed to be all along. And so in this way, the ascension is the coronation. It's the capstone of all that Jesus accomplished through his redemptive work on earth, not only as a king, but as a prophet and a priest as well.

[5 : 36] If Jesus' incarnation, if his life, his death, his resurrection, if all those things were the check, then the ascension is the proof that that check has cleared, that there are sufficient funds in the account, that redemption has been paid for and accepted.

So, for example, if we think about the death of Christ on the cross, which is something that we can and should celebrate as the center of our gospel, Jesus' death on the cross actually would not be complete without the ascension.

Because in the Old Testament, a priest would make a sacrifice of an animal on behalf for the sins of the people, but sacrificing the animal alone did not complete the process in order for atonement to be made for sin.

A second step had to happen. The priest had to enter the sanctuary, had to enter the Holy of Holies behind the curtain, and offer the sacrifice to God in order for the sacrifice to be effectual for the sins of the people.

And that points us to who Jesus is and what he did in his ascension. As our great high priest, he offered his perfect and sufficient sacrifice once for all and all the fruits of his heavenly ministry in the heavenly sanctuary to God the Father on our behalf.

[7 : 03] And God the Father received it and accepted it so that there is no longer any sacrifice needed for sin. And you can draw out all the different aspects of Jesus' redemptive work and how the ascension is the capstone of that work.

And so this is why the gospel and our view of salvation is not complete without the ascension. It's the coronation of King Jesus and it marks the capstone, the completion of his redemptive work on earth.

Now that actually raises a question for us because if we're honest, we living in modern America today have a complicated relationship to human kings.

We might enjoy watching the coronation of King Charles on TV. We might enjoy hearing stories about kings and queens and mythology. But as Americans living in a modern democratic republic, most of us are probably pretty skeptical of absolute monarchies.

And that's because we've seen throughout human history that if one person, one human being gets absolute power, that power can often be abused to harm others. And so the founders of our country in wisdom organized our entire structure of government with checks and balances to make sure that no one person had all the authority, had all the power.

[8 : 28] And so as modern democratic people who are generally skeptical of absolute monarchies, we have to ask this question. If the ascension of Christ is the coronation of Christ the King, then why is that good news?

Why is that good news for us? And why is that good news for the world? And so that's the second half of what I wanna look at today about the ascension.

Why is the ascension good news for us today? And I wanna look at three aspects of this. Three aspects of why the ascension is good news. Here's the first. The first is that as the ascended savior, Jesus raises our humanity to heaven.

As the ascended savior, Jesus raises our humanity to heaven. The passage that we read earlier in Ephesians chapter two talks about Jesus being seated in the heavenly places.

I don't know if you've ever thought about this language of being seated as you've read the New Testament, but it is the language of kingship. In the ancient world, a king would leave his throne to go off and fight a battle against his enemies.

[9 : 42] In his throne, his seat would be empty as he went off to fight the war. And if he was successful, if he was victorious in battle, he would come home to his people and he would sit back down on his throne as a sign that the victory was won.

And not only could he rest from the work of battle, not only could he rest secure from his enemies, but his people could rest secure from their enemies as well. And this is part of what it means for Jesus to be seated.

His work of conquering his enemies of sin and death and Satan is over, it's finished, it's done. And the incredibly good news of the gospel is not only that Christ is seated, but also that he shares his victory with us by seating us with him in his ascension and glory with the Father in heaven.

This is what Ephesians chapter two says when it says that, and God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms, in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace.

Colossians three, one puts it this way, since then you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

[11 : 07] The reality of being seated with Jesus is not something that we often think about and yet it is central to our understanding of how we think about our salvation and our union with Christ.

And so I just want us to think about this and meditate on this together for a moment. That right now in heaven, there is a human being, fully God, fully man, but a human being with a physical human body who is in perfect, loving communion and fellowship with God the Father.

And somehow, mystically, spiritually, in a way that we don't fully understand, we are united to him, those who have faith in him are united to him by the Holy Spirit so that we have, we share in his status and we share in the communion with the Father that he has.

Now, if thinking about that makes your head hurt, that's okay. Because it makes my head hurt too. I don't fully understand how that works. But I believe that it's true because scripture bears witness to it.

But even though it may be, even though it may make our head hurts, may make our heads hurt to think about that, it is also intensely practical.

[12 : 33] The implications of thinking about that a human being with a physical human body is ascended in glory in heaven has vast implications. Let me talk about one.

And it's this. There is no greater affirmation of human dignity and the sacredness of the human body than the ascension of Christ's physical body in heaven.

We believe in the dignity and the worth and the value of every person not just because it seems to be common sense or because it seems to be intuitive or obvious and not even because our government or our society has agreed on it together.

But because in the ascension of Christ, the human and the divine are inextricably and inseparably and eternally bound up together in love.

And so to be ascension people, to be people who are marked by the ascension, means that we should be the first to uphold the dignity and the value and the worth of every human being in every sphere of life and to be the first to protest wherever it is dishonored and wherever it is denigrated.

[13 : 58] Some people might criticize Christianity for having too low of a view of humanity because our doctrine of original sin. That the idea of original sin is too negative, it's morally regressive, it's unhelpful.

That a more enlightened view is to see that people are basically good deep down or at least they're morally neutral. But the ascension shows us that nothing exalts and affirms and honors and protects the dignity of being human and the sacredness of the body like Jesus.

He has exalted our humanity to the right hand of the Father and it's not just that He's up there and we're down here but that those who trust in Him by faith are actually seated with Him in the heavenly places.

And this has profound implications for how we think about our salvation and for how we live our lives. So that's the first thing. That as the ascended Savior, Jesus raises our humanity to heaven.

The second thing is this. That as the exalted Lord, Jesus empowers His people for a global mission. He empowers His people for a global mission.

[15:15] This is what Jesus says in Acts chapter 1 verse 8. He directly ties His ascension to the mission that He gives His disciples. He says, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.

Before Jesus ascends into heaven, He commissions His disciples and He promises to send the Holy Spirit in order to empower them for a global mission of taking the gospel, the good news of His reign to every language and culture and people and nation. and then He leaves. Now, why on earth would He do it? Why would He give such a mission to His disciples and then leave?

I mean, have you ever thought about this? I mean, think about this just for a second that He gives them this insanely huge mission that is strategically challenging, radically counter-cultural. it will inevitably involve sacrifice and risk. It may even involve costing them their lives and then He just peaces out.

[16:30] See you later. It's like if parents were to tell their kids this afternoon, all right kids, you know, we're going on vacation for a week but you know, we are actually going to leave you here at the house.

And oh, by the way, as we leave on vacation and as you stay here at the house, we would really love the kitchen and the bathroom to be remodeled by the time we're done and we'd really love the landscaping and all of the carpet to be replaced.

We'd love for all the paint to be redone and all the walls of the house and if you could just throw in some new hardwood floors, that'd be great. All right, see you later. We'll be back in a week. If you're a kid, you'd be like, what on earth is happening? First of all, why aren't we going on vacation with you? You're abandoning us and secondly, how do you expect all of us to do this without you?

How do you expect us to fulfill this commission that you've given us without you here? It's crazy. I don't know if you've thought about this but don't you think that the mission of the church would be more successful if Christ was physically here on earth?

[17:41] I don't know about you but I would kind of like Jesus to be physically with me as I go about my daily life. I mean, that would be super helpful to have him physically right beside me as I try to live my life but because, this is what it helps us to see, that because Jesus is ascended and exalted as the Lord over all things, it makes it crystal clear to us that even though he has a physical human body that the power and the efficacy of his ministry is not confined to one geographic physical place.

If Jesus was physically here on earth then we would want to be wherever he was and we would be tempted to believe that wherever Jesus was that's where the real ministry was happening. That's where the real spiritual power was.

You had to go to Jesus where he was physically. But the ascension helps us to see that Jesus empowers his people for his mission wherever they are. You know, if Jesus this morning was in Cincinnati or in Istanbul or in Nairobi we would tell people who want to learn and know about Jesus to go and be where he is.

But Jesus is not in Cincinnati or Istanbul or Nairobi. He has ascended to the Father's right hand in glory. which means that you and I don't get to opt out of our role in his mission.

To be ascension people is to remember that he has empowered us by his spirit to be his presence among our neighbors, among our coworkers, among our friends, and among our family.

[19:22] And so all of a sudden everything that you and I are doing tomorrow morning at 9 a.m. just got a thousand times more significant. Because the Holy Spirit in us is better than Jesus beside us.

The Holy Spirit in us is better than Jesus beside us. And Jesus tells himself, he tells the disciples that this is true in John 16. He says, it is to your advantage that I go away.

For if I do not go away the helper will not come to you. But if I go I will send him to you. And the fact that the Holy Spirit in us is better than Jesus beside us focuses on our mission and it focuses us on the global scale of the mission he has entrusted to us.

He says, you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. And this shows us not only the geographic but the cultural scope, the cross-cultural scope of God's mission.

The good news of Jesus' victory over sin and death is good news for every nation and people and language and culture. It is because Christ ascended to the throne in heaven that we can send missionaries to places like Thailand and the Middle East and Central Asia and all over the world because the power of the Holy Spirit is not confined to one physical place because Christ is ascended.

[20 : 53] And wherever Jesus the power of the Holy Spirit is wherever Jesus dwells through his people. So we see that the good news of the ascension is that Jesus raises our humanity to heaven.

We also see that he empowers his people for a global mission. And thirdly, finally, we see that the good news of the ascension is that as the returning king he promises to bring true justice and renewal to the world.

As the returning king Jesus promises to bring true justice and renewal to the world. Acts chapter 1, verse 10 says, And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes and said, 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 going into heaven. The ascension not only marks the completion of Christ's redemptive work on earth, it also anticipates his return.

And the return of Christ as king and judge assures us that final justice belongs to him and that he will make all things new. As we say every week in the creed that he will come again to judge the living and the dead.

[22 : 07] And this is incredibly good news for the world and it is incredibly good news for people who live and work in Washington, D.C. Part of what I love about living in the city is that so many people come here to live and work because they want to make a difference in the world.

This is a good and beautiful thing about so many of you and about so many of our neighbors. But how many of you and how many of our neighbors have ever gotten jaded in the frustratingly difficult sometimes painful slow process of making a difference in the world?

Maybe you come to work in government and you over the years get frustrated with the bureaucracy. Maybe you come to work for a non-profit and you get frustrated with the inefficiencies and the lack of funding and the lack of vision.

Maybe you come to work in the school system and you realize how complicated it is to teach a kid math and science and history when they don't have a stable family or safe housing or a good food to eat.

There's a famous quote by Martin Luther King Jr. And King says that the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice.

[23 : 26] The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice. And I think this is a line that we love to quote but it's not always easy to believe. Some days it can feel like the arc of the moral universe bends towards injustice and disorder and frustration and decay.

Maybe you've felt like that this week or perhaps the past several months. And whether you're a Christian or not whether you believe in God or not whether you are religious or not this is an experience that is common to all of us.

And so what do you do? What do you do on days and weeks where it feels like that the arc of the moral universe bends not towards justice but away from it?

The beauty of being a Christian on days like that is the ascension. Is the ascension. The more frustrated we get as we try to make a difference in the world the more that we need to meditate and contemplate and remember the ascension with Paul in Colossians 3.

If then you have been raised with Christ seek the things that are above not on things that are on earth for you have died and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

[24 : 40] When Christ who is your life appears then you will also appear with him in glory. To set our minds on the ascension of Christ is not to neglect or forget or ignore earthly realities but rather it's to remind ourselves of the hope that we have in the ascension and the assurance that we have that the arc of the moral universe although it is long it does in fact bend towards justice and it bends toward justice because Christ is a king whose coronation has already taken place and as this victorious king Jesus reigns and rules over all things and one day he will return to make all things new.

True justice is in his hands and rather making us passive this actually leads us to actively pursue the missions and the callings that God has placed in our lives.

After Jesus ascends into heaven the two angels essentially say to Jesus' disciples they essentially say to him what are you still doing standing here? Why are you still looking up into the clouds? You have the assurance of Jesus' return so get after the work and the mission and the calling that he has given you to do in the meantime. As ascension people who are seated with Christ and raised with him we don't just have the longing the desire the hope that the arc of the universe is long but that it bends towards justice but we have the assurance that it in fact will because Christ is king and because he will return and make all things new and because of the ascension true justice is rooted in a story of hope and so to bring all this together as we think about the ascension as we think about what happened the ascension is this great coronation of King Jesus it's this cornerstone this capstone actually of Christ's redemptive work on earth and that's good news for us because we think about how he has raised our humanity to heaven and how that affirms and dignifies not only our humanity but all of the humanity of our neighbors he has empowered his people by his spirit for a global mission his Holy Spirit in us is better than him physically right beside us and finally he will return to bring justice and make all things new you know several weeks ago millions of people spent hours and perhaps days watching King Charles' coronation celebrating it rejoicing in it and this is a man who just being honest has mostly symbolic authority but the ascension of Jesus is a coronation that is worth spending our entire lives celebrating and reflecting on and contemplating and declaring to the whole world let's pray together our Father in heaven we pray that you would lift our hearts and lift our minds to the ascended and seated Christ and we pray that through the power of your Holy Spirit that we would be able to worship you and to be faithful to the mission and the callings you've placed in our lives by the power of your Holy Spirit
Amen