

# **The Significance of the Ascension**

**Scripture: Acts 1:1-11**

**By Pastor John H. Noordhof  
Williamsburg Christian Reformed Church**

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People of God: Ascension Day. It's a neglected holy day, falling as it does always on a Thursday. It's completely ignored by our secular world, and even overlooked in the life of the church. Even we have shifted our commemoration of this day to today, rather than having a special service on Thursday, as we have done in the past. But at least now, a larger number of people will be reminded of the importance of the Ascension.

Because the ascension of Jesus into heaven, forty days after his resurrection is very important to the life of the church and our understanding of who is really in control of this world. In particular, I want to highlight this morning three reasons why the Ascension is important: First, it marks the completion of Jesus' earthly ministry. Second, it allows Jesus to send his Spirit upon the church. And third, it marks the beginning of Jesus' heavenly ministry.

First of all, the ascension is important because it marks the completion of Jesus' earthly ministry. But it doesn't merely mark the end of that phase of Jesus' work; it marks the validation of that work. It is a sign that the work of Jesus on earth wasn't merely over; it's a sign that his work was successful. He had accomplished his goal.

You see, the Ascension is the opposite of what took place at Christmas. At Christmas we celebrate the descent of the Son of God from heaven to earth. God took on human flesh. God became like one of us. That's the great news of Christmas. And its counterpart is the Ascension. The Son of God, now with a human nature, returns back to heaven.

Though the Son of God was only upon this earth for a very short period time—just over 30 years, a small time compared to the history of

humanity, the Son of God could return to heaven having achieved his goals of securing the salvation of God's people and this world.

Christ returns to heaven having completed his mission on earth. Christ came to earth to proclaim God's favor towards humanity. Jesus revealed God's mercy and grace through his ministry of healing and teaching. But above all, Christ came as the Lamb to take away the sins of the world. This led Christ to the cross and to the grave. Then through his resurrection, Christ broke the chains of death. And so Christ defeated the enemies of God, our enemies as well. Sin, death, and the devil were struck down in the ministry and work of Jesus Christ.

By returning to heaven, Christ could say: it is finished. All what Christmas represents, all what his healing and teaching ministry represents, all what Good Friday represents, all what Easter represents, gets God's sign of approval through the Ascension. Christ could return home to his heavenly Father, having accomplished his earthly task.

The Ascension is like a victory parade. We see victory parades when a sporting team wins a championship, whether that be the World Series or the Stanley Cup. The team is paraded through the city, to cheers of the crowd. Mission accomplished. Victory achieved. The Ascension is Christ's victorious entry into heaven, with the angels and the saints of the OT cheering him on.

We read heaven's perspective of the Ascension in Revelation 5. There the question was raised: Who was worthy to open the scroll? Who could open the book of life? Who could unseal God's plan of salvation? There was only one who was able to do this. It was Jesus Christ, pictured as the Lamb, who had been slain. He was worthy to take the scroll and open it up. Why was he worthy? Because of his sacrifice on the cross, where he redeemed humanity by his own blood. As a result, Christ returns to heaven as one able to open the scroll because he had defeated the enemies of God.

That's what makes the ascension so important. It marks the completion of Jesus' earthly ministry. It marks God's sign of approval on that work.

That's the first reason why the Ascension is important. Second, it is important because it allows Jesus to send the Spirit upon the church so that the church can be equipped for her ministry in this world. The Ascension is what allows Pentecost to take place. And Pentecost is the beginning of the worldwide spread of the church.

Many times Jesus told his disciples that he would have to leave them. But this departure was for their own good. Because when Jesus left, he would not abandon them. Instead, he would give them the Spirit. And

through the Spirit, he would be with them always. Jesus promised us: I will be with you always to the very end of the age. He is with us through the Spirit.

The disciples did not understand this when Jesus tried to explain it to them throughout his ministry. Even as he was ready to depart, the disciples still didn't get it. They asked: are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel? This question seems to indicate that they expected Jesus to stick around. Wouldn't that be better than him leaving?

We could easily think the same thing. Wouldn't it be great if Jesus was still with us, as he was with the disciples? To be able to see him, to hear him, to touch him. It would make it so much easier to believe in him, to follow him, to tell others about him. If only Jesus would walk upon the earth as he did in his earthly ministry—then, the church would be so much stronger.

That's what we might think. But it wouldn't be the case. It is for our benefit that Jesus ascended into heaven. We are better off with Jesus in heaven, then if he remained on the earth. Jesus had to return to heaven as the victorious Lord. He had to open up the scroll. From heaven, he could send the Holy Spirit upon the church and thereby equip her for her mission on her earth.

With the Spirit, Jesus is with us. He has not abandoned us. In fact, we can be closer to Jesus than the disciples ever were during Jesus' earthly ministry. How is that possible you ask? Sure we cannot see or touch Jesus directly as the disciples could. But the disciples often misunderstood Jesus. They couldn't figure out his parables or why he had to die. One betrayed him, another denied him. In the end, they all abandoned him. Even after the resurrection, they didn't fully understand why Jesus had to return to heaven.

But when Jesus did ascend into heaven and send the Spirit upon the disciples, then we see a great change in the disciples. Finally, they understood what Jesus taught them and why he had to die. They gained a boldness they never had before. Despite opposition and persecution, the church grew and spread over the earth. That's the difference the Spirit made. It was made possible because Christ ascended into heaven.

During his days on earth, Jesus was limited to a small geographical region of the world, maybe only a hundred or two in radius. But now, Jesus' influence is worldwide. During his days on earth, only a few people could hear him but now the gospel can be preached around the globe. During his days on earth, his teachings about the Kingdom of God would barely begin to change things, but now the church has had a huge influence on humanity.

All this is possible because Jesus ascended into heaven and unleashed his Spirit upon his people.

That's the second reason, why the Ascension is important. But there is a third reason for its importance. The Ascension marks the beginning of his work in heaven, as king, ruling over heaven and earth.

The Ascension marks the end of Christ's earthly ministry. It does not mean the end of Christ's work. Christ did not return to heaven in order to retire or take it easy. No, Christ continues to work. But in a different way than he did on earth. On earth, Jesus secured the victory over our enemies. Now in heaven, Jesus applies that victory to his church. He uses that victory to the final goal of making all things new.

Christ ascended into heaven in order to rule as King. It is a work that involves interceding for his people. We have a representative in heaven. We have our own flesh and blood in heaven. We have Jesus interceding for us. Not just the saints below. Not just the saints above. But Jesus himself. As Paul writes in Romans 8:34, *Christ Jesus, who died--more than that, who was raised to life is at the right hand of the God and is also interceding for us.*

That's what Christ is doing for us right now. When the devil attacks us with doubt, when the sinful world lures us into temptation, when our sinful nature tries regain control, we do not face the battle alone. We have the Word of God. We have the Spirit. We also have Christ working for us in heaven. When we depend on him, we will be able to stand our ground.

There may be times when we no longer know what to pray for, there may even be times when we ourselves can no longer pray, but do not fear that God won't hear our needs, because Christ is there. He is interceding for us. When we are overcome with sorrow and grief, when disease takes away our ability to communicate and even to think, do not think you will be left on your own. Christ is there. In heaven, interceding for us.

Jesus ascended to rule at the right hand of God. He is the king. It is a work that involves ruling over heaven and earth. He's not just in control over heaven, or the spiritual realm. He is in control over the whole earth as well. As our Contemporary Testimony declares: *Our World Belongs to God.* God directs our world through his Son. He is King and Lord over all.

It is this reason that makes Ascension Day so precious in the Reformed tradition. We stress the Lordship of Jesus Christ over all areas of life, not just Sunday but every day of the week, not just over church business, but all business. Whether in work or education, whether in sports or entertainment, we need to take the claim of Christ seriously. There is not one square inch of this world, that Christ does not say: This is mine. Christ

as king is working to bringing about his kingdom. He is working for that day when all things will be made new, when all evil will be erased from this world.

We often don't experience the world that way. We often don't see the world that way. Too often, we encounter the brokenness of the world. Too often, we get distracted by the concerns of daily life. Too often, it seems as if injustice and violence is the way things get done in the world.

But Ascension Day reminds us that Christ is King. He is bringing shalom, peace to this world—and he is doing this, not through the sword, but through His Spirit working in his church. Ascension Day reminds us that Christ is on the Throne and so all the details of our daily lives need to be shaped and fine-tuned by the principles of the Kingdom of God.

In 2001, a few weeks after the terrorists' attacks of 9/11, in going through the catechism and in dealing with this topic, I reminded God's people in Iron Springs that neither Osama bin Laden nor President Bush are in control of this world. Ten years later, bin Laden is dead and Bush is no longer in the White House. But Christ is still alive and he's still reigning in heaven over the earth.

The celebration of Ascension Day is meant to remind of these facts. Christ's work on earth was successful. Christ could launch his Spirit upon the Church. And he continues to rule, until all things are made new. Amen.