

The Importance of Christ's Ascension and Intercession

By Jay Wegter

The ascension of Christ tends to be overshadowed by His resurrection. Yet the ascension has remarkable significance for our understanding of the work of Christ. Christ's ascension is His exaltation to glory (Ps 24; 47; 68; 110). Our Lord entered heaven for the purpose of giving us immortality. Why and how, because He brought our human nature to heaven. He is our man in glory and our hope of glory—for His ascension is the warranty of our eternal life (Heb 6:18-20). He left heaven 2000 years ago and acquired His humanity in the womb of Mary. And in the ascension, He has brought our humanity to heaven—now He is there to prepare a place for us. The doctrine of His incarnation and His exaltation is expressed in an early church confession in 1 Timothy 3:16. His ascension marks the end of His post-resurrection appearances and the beginning of His intercession. The ascension is an historical event; Christ now sits at God's right hand. Christ went to a place, not merely to a heavenly state of consciousness. Our final home will be with Him, but it will not be in a heavenly home away from this planet. Our final home will be in a new heavens and a new earth (Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, pp. 449-450). The ascension is synchronized with the sending of the Holy Spirit (Jn 7:39; 14:16-17, 26; 15:26; 16:7; Acts 1:8; 2:17). Believers worship Jesus who has overcome death and transcends the heavens. By that we mean that Christ spanned the infinite distance between the grave and the highest heaven. As such, the ascension marks the beginning of Trinitarian worship operating in the power of the Spirit. Christ's disciples genuinely worshipped Him after the ascension (Lu 24:52; Acts 2:38; 3:6). When we think of Trinitarian worship in the power of the Spirit, devotion to Jesus is inseparable from receiving redemptive benefits from Him. As John Owen has said, when we use Christ for the reasons God gave Him, we are communing with God (Ibid, p. 451).

The most common Psalm quoted in the New Testament is Psalm 110. It proclaims that the Messiah will be exalted to Lordship. This exaltation to Lordship is what took place at the ascension (Acts 2:34-36; 1 Cor 13:24-25; Heb 1:3). When Peter preaches the Pentecost sermon, He is stressing that God has made Christ Lord of all; the exalted Christ now controls the affairs of the universe. Polycarp summarizes the import of Christ's glorious ascension to Lordship.

We serve God in fear and truth . . . we believe that the One who raised our Lord from the dead gave Him glory and the throne at His right hand. To Him all things on heaven on earth were subjected, whom every breathing creature serves, who is coming as judge of the living and the dead (Phil 3:21; 1 Cor 15:28).

The ascension means that God has placed a human being as vice regent of the cosmos. This is at the heart of what 1 Timothy 3:16 refers to, ‘the mystery of godliness’. For, when the Son of God ascends to glory, He keeps His humanity. As believers, we walk under the reign of the One who is the God-man.

Christ as the last Adam restores redeemed sinners to their created purpose. That means that our cultural calling as the image of God is realized in the last Adam. Unfallen Adam was to rule over the creation on the behalf of God (Gen 1:28). Adam’s ruin by original sin was our ruin. But Christ takes the image of God and restores it to a royal rule over the creation. Theologian Michael Bird refers to this as, “The democratization of the Messianic idea.” In other words, Christ takes us from raging rebels to royal heirs. We are ultimately restored to our creational identity as ruling royally on God’s behalf (Ps 8). This restoration of our rule for God is foreshadowed in Daniel 7:13-14, **18** in which believers are said to ‘receive the kingdom’ (Ibid, p. 455). (See also Matt 19:28; Lu 2:19-30).

The ascension signals the completed work of mediation resulting in the full acceptance of those on whose behalf the sacrifice is made. The tearing of the vail in the temple at Christ’s death indicated that the way to God is no longer restricted to the mediation of a priesthood in Jerusalem. But, Christ as the mediator of all who believe opened a way to God to every person in every place who calls upon the Lord (Rom 10:9-10; Matt 25:5; Lu 23:45). (Ibid, pp. 456-457). In Hebrews 10:19-23 Scripture tells us that Christ’s ascension now means we have confident access to God (Eph 3:12; 1 Jn 5:14). This is because He appears before God for us (Heb 9:24). Christ Jesus representing us in the throneroom of heaven guarantees our justification is immutable. His prayers are His intercession, petitions made to God to act in our favor. This is why we are committed to pray to God the Father in Jesus’ name. God answers prayers of redeemed humans because of His Son. Our prayers are mediated through the Son to show that Christ is our high priest. God wants us to know that when we experience answered prayer, it is all for Christ’s sake. The prayers of Jesus are part of His communion with the Father and the Spirit (Jn 14:13-14; 15:16; 16:23-25). (Ibid, pp. 457-458).

In Acts 1:11, as the disciples watched Jesus ascend to heaven, an angel tells them that He will return in the same way to consummate the kingdom. Christ’s descent is our ascent. In His initial descent He takes on our nature. In His next descent He will return for His people to bring all of them to glory. When we preach Christ’s ascension, we are proclaiming it in association with His triumph over His principalities and powers. Every knee shall bow to Him (Phil 2:10-11). Bruce Metzger has well said that the ascension proclaims that there is no sphere however secular in which Christ has no rights (Ibid, pp. 459).

Louis Berkhof suggests that there is a three-fold significance the ascension of Christ: 1) It signaled the completion of the sacrifice to God presented in the inner sanctuary. 2) It is prophetic, even exemplary

of all believers who are already positionally seated in the heavenly places (Eph 2:6). The saints will be with Him forever (Jn 17:24). It reveals the restoration of the initial kingship of man (Heb 2:7-9). 3) The ascension is our Lord's activity in preparing a place that He might bring a redeemed humanity to heaven where we shall have perfect representation forever (Heb 6:20). And we shall sit down on His throne with Him (Rev 3:21). (Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* pp. 350-351).

Christ is now at the right hand of God, a place of honor and authority. As the God-man, He receives the government of heaven and earth and the church. An administration of power is committed to Him. But He is not a mere passive recipient. He is actively engaged in ruling, protecting and perfecting His church by His Spirit. In both of Paul's prayers in Ephesians, Christ's power is for the purpose of His Glory in the church (Eph 1:22; 3:21) (Ibid, pp. 352).

Christ's ascension spans a distance of unfathomable magnitude, for it says in Hebrews that this Jesus 'passed through the heavens' (Heb 4:14). Consider what this means; that by going from the grave to glory, He has done what was necessary to bring us from dust to glory. He has gone into the heavenly equivalent of the holy of holies to appear before God for us (Heb 9:24). His entrance into this inner shrine is as the role of a forerunner (Heb 6:19-20). (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* p. 626). Our man is glory guarantees that ever believer is headed for glory.

The Intercession of Christ

In Christ's humiliation during His earthly ministry, He could not hear prayers to God coming from all over the nation the nation of Judah. But now in His exalted state, He hears all prayers simultaneously from all over the world. 100's of millions of prayers are offered up by the saints all over the world on any given moment. In His divine nature He is able to bring them to the Father (Ibid, p. 628).

In His intercession for us, Christ expresses our petitions to the Father from the vantage point of a sympathetic High Priest. He is touched by our infirmities. He entered our existential situation and became the 'man of sorrows' for our sake. He understands our situation from first hand-experience. He is exalted above the heavens. He is infinitely qualified—all His work is perfect vicariousness. His manhood, deity, official character of His mission, and His finished work all plead for us so that the Father can regard us with the favor due the Son (Jn 17:23, 26) (C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology II*, p. 655)—He is the only Person in the universe who can be our heavenly High Priest (Heb 7:25) (Grudem, p. 628).

The priestly work of Christ did not end at His resurrection. His work as our High Priest continues (1 Jn 2:1). His prevailing intercession secures the benefits of His redemption. As our Advocate He pleads the cause of another, presenting His redemptive work as the ground of our justification (Mt 26:64; Acts 2:33ff.). Christ fulfilled all righteousness and the Father is well-pleased with the work His Son has performed. Christ intercedes solely for the elect—that is for those who accept Him as Priest. If He

interceded for all, all would certainly be saved (Hodge, pp. 592-594).

Christ's intercession is a continuation of His office as Priest. His priestly office has two parts. 1) The satisfaction He made at Calvary's cross. 2) His ongoing intercession. In the satisfaction He made, He is both Priest and sacrifice itself. Apart from that sacrifice we would have resided in Hell forever. God did not spare Him, Christ parted with His life for us. In speaking of the sinners, Christ would save, He says, "For their sakes I sanctify myself" (which speaks of His bloody death (Jn 17:19). The perfection of Christ's offering was the cost of our reconciliation (Heb 9:14; 10:14) (Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity* pp. 172-175). What Christ does in His intercession for us is plead the merits of His blood. This means that He's answering the legal guilt of His people in His own person. His priestly pleading is a petition to God that for the sake of His blood the following would be accomplished: 1) That God would be propitious to elect sinners, granting them grace, favor, forgiveness, acceptance and justification. 2) That the charges of indictment against the elect would be found to be groundless (Rom 8:33-34). 3) That He calls for acquittal as our advocate knowing that God's justice is pacified by the blood of Christ. As frequently distressed creatures, believers must find daily solace in their High Priest answering for their sins in His own Person (Ibid, pp. 178-179). Christ's love is expressed in His priestly work as intercessor. He intercedes freely without offerings and gifts on our part. He is a tender hearted sympathetic and merciful High Priest (Heb 2:17). He is a diligent High Priest. He will not lose what He has purchased (Jn 10:28-29; 17:6, 12). Christ never lost any case He pleaded. The Father will grant His only begotten Son His requests. Jesus says that the Father hears Him always (Jn 16:42) (Ibid, pp. 180-181).

Thomas Watson lists seven major fruits of Christ's intercession for us: 1) We have justification by faith; our guilt is remitted and righteousness is imputed to our account (Jer 33:6; 2 Cor 5:21). 2) Anointing by the Holy Spirit, Christ sends His Spirit to seal us, comfort us, and teach us (Jn 7:39; 2 Pet 1:4; 1 Jn 2:20).. The comforting work of the Spirit in a world of sorrow is such a great help to the believer (2 Cor 1:22). 3) The purification of our spiritual duties and exercises. Christ prays our prayers over again according to the will of God. All we touch is contaminated with corruption. We have mixed motives—we don't know how to pray as we ought. Christ's intercession in our prayers is pictured as fragrant incense to God (Lev 16:16; Rev 8:3). 4) Christ gives bold access to the throne of grace. We need to be reminded that an attempt to approach God in our own nature is presumption. God dwells in unapproachable light and our access to Him is only in our High Priest (Heb 4:16). 5) Perseverance of the saints is the result of Christ's intercession. In His high priestly prayer, Christ indicates that He was keeping them in "Thy Name" (Jn 17:11). Christ perseveres in keeping us so that we do not fall away. We are kept by faith (1 Peter 1:5) because He prays that our faith would not fail (Lu 22:32). 6) His intercession for us means we will have absolution in the Day of Judgement. Christ shall judge the world

and return as Judge (Heb 9:27; Jn 5:22). Those for whom Christ has prayed will be absolved when He sits at His bench of judgement. Christ prays for His own spouse for whom He laid down His life. He holds her in His heart of love. He will not condemn her (Jn 17:24; Eph 5:25-27; Jude 24-25; 1 Thes 5:23-24) (Ibid, pp.181-183).

Thus we must observe how sad a condition unbelievers are in. There is none in heaven to speak a word for them. Jesus says, “I pray not for the world” (Jn 17:9). Those who are shut out of Christ’s prayer are shut out of heaven. We recall wicked Haman in the book of Esther. There was no friend to speak for him before the king. Like the condemned sinner, the Law, the conscience and the Judge all agree upon the verdict. There was nothing left but to be lead away to the sentence. By contrast, how wonderful it is that Christ points to the redness of His blood when the blackness of our sin is revealed (Esther 7:8) (Ibid, pp. 183-184). How may professed believers test themselves? Ask this question of yourself, “Do you pray for yourself in Christ’s Name?” Don’t attempt to appear into heaven to determine if Christ is praying for you. Rather peer into your own heart and see if you find there a spirit of sonship. Every true believer is given a relationship of sonship to God the Father. The spirit indwelling them is the spirit of sonship (Gal 4:6). Sons of God cry to God day and night (Lu 18:7-8). True believers exercise self-renouncing trust in their High Priest. They speak to their own hearts saying, “His blood is my sacrifice, His Person and work are my meeting place and altar. Here I rest. My case is safe with Christ” (2 Tim 1:12; Heb 13:10).

Faith in Christ unfinished work of intercession instills holy boldness in us. He appears in heaven for us to plead the throne of God. We speak for Him on earth. The child of God is characterized by confessing Christ before men (Matt 10:32-33). The child of God is not ashamed of the gospel (Rom 1:16). For the faithful child of God, the Lord’s cause is our cause. The best of our time, talent and affection belong to Him. We are agents for Him. We stand up for His honor even in times where the winds of apostasy are blowing fiercely (Ibid, pp. 184-185).

So what is the use of this doctrine of Christ’s intercession? First, we must exercise a renewed faith in Christ pleading His finished work on our behalf. Christ is interceding even for the weakest believer. We must not make an atonement out of our guilt, shame, tears or resolutions. Second, as we behold Him in His offices, we will love Him more. He is our truest closest friend. He brings out of our troubles and brings us all the way to God. He opened His hands and feet for you (Is 53:12). We must repent of our distrust in His blood; repent of our abuse of His love, repent of grieving His spirit and doubting that He is interceding for us personally. Christ does not intercede for you based upon your merits. You are ever unworthy in yourselves. The depths of His love are a source of marveling. He prayed even for those who crucified them. His intercession is a work of free grace. He pities us (Ps

103:10-14). Christ has vanquished our enemies. He took their weapons away (Col 2:15). And He will cast down the accuser of the brethren (Rev 12:10).

