

The Importance of Christ's Ascension and Intercession

By Jay Wegter

Christ is 'our man in glory'.

The importance of the ascension of Christ tends to be overshadowed by His resurrection. Yet the ascension also has remarkable significance for our understanding of the work of Christ. The resurrection and the ascension were miraculous and historical events which were beheld by eyewitnesses. Both the resurrection of Christ and His ascension are vital to our redemption (Rom 4:25; 1 Cor 15). Our status before God depends upon these events, for we are accepted *in the Beloved* (Eph 1:6).

In the miracle of the resurrection, the body and soul of Christ were reunited and His dead body was fully vivified without decay or corruption. In the ascension of Christ, His incorruptible resurrection body effortlessly overcame gravity and travelled through the heavens into the very presence of God.

Christ's ascension was His exaltation to glory (Ps 24; 47; 68; 110). Our Lord entered heaven for the purpose of giving us immortality, 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 (Rom 8:23; 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 (Jn 14:2-3).

The doctrine of Christ's incarnation and His exaltation is expressed in an early church confession in 1 Timothy 3:16. "By common confession, great is the mystery of godliness: He who was revealed in the flesh, was vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, **taken up in glory.**"

His ascension marks the end of His post-resurrection appearances and the beginning of His intercession. The ascension is an historical event witnessed by the Apostles; Christ now sits at God's right hand. Christ went to a place, and 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 heaven and a new earth (2 Pet 3:13; Rev 21:1).ⁱ

Christ's ascension was synchronized with the sending of the Holy Spirit. "But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet *given*, because Jesus was not yet glorified" (**Jn 7:39**; 14:16-17, 26; 15:26; 16:7; Acts 1:8; 2:17). By reason of His finished work Christ 'purchases' the ministry of the indwelling Spirit for the redeemed, and Christ receives the right to bestow spiritual gifts upon His church:

But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says, "When He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives, and He gave gifts to men." Now this *expression*, "He ascended," what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, so that He might fill all things (Eph 4:7-10).

In His ascension Christ spans the infinite gap between heaven and earth.

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 defiled dust to endless 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).ⁱⁱ

The glorified Christ is our man in glory who guarantees that every believer is headed for glory. By spans or 'transcends' we mean that Christ bridged the infinite distance between the grave and the highest heaven. He bore our death and wrath that He might reconcile us to God. As such, the ascension marks the beginning of Trinitarian worship operating in the power of the Spirit. Believers worship Jesus who has overcome death and transcends the heavens. Christ's disciples genuinely worshipped Him after the ascension (1 Cor 12:3; Acts 2:38; 3:6; Titus 2:13). When we think of Trinitarian worship in the power of the Spirit, devotion to Jesus is inseparable from receiving redemptive benefits from Him.ⁱⁱⁱ As the eminent Puritan John Owen has said, when we use Christ for the reasons God gave Him, namely cleansing from sin and the reception of His righteousness, we are communing with God.

The most common Psalm quoted in the New Testament regarding Christ's glorification is Psalm 110, for it foretells Christ's exaltation to glory.

- 1 The LORD says to my Lord:
 "Sit at My right hand
 Until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet."
- 2 The LORD will stretch forth Your strong scepter from Zion, saying,
 "Rule in the midst of Your enemies."
- 3 Your people will volunteer freely in the day of Your power;
 In holy array, from the womb of the dawn,
 Your youth are to You as the dew.
- 4 The LORD has sworn and will not change His mind,
 "You are a priest forever
 According to the order of Melchizedek."
- 5 The Lord is at Your right hand;
 He will shatter kings in the day of His wrath.
- 6 He will judge among the nations,
 He will fill *them* with corpses,
 He will shatter the chief men over a broad country.
- 7 He will drink from the brook by the wayside;
 Therefore He will lift up *His* head.

This Psalm proclaims that the Messiah will be exalted to Lordship. This exaltation to Lordship is what took place at His ascension (Acts 2:34-36; 1 Cor 13:24-25; Heb 1:3). When Peter preached the Pentecost sermon, He was stressing that God has made Christ Lord of all; the exalted Christ now controls the affairs of the universe. Polycarp, an early church father and disciple of John the Apostle summarizes the importance 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 in heaven and 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).^{iv}

The ascension of Christ 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.

As the ‘last Adam’ Christ reverses the ruin caused by original sin.

Christ as the ‘last Adam’ restores redeemed sinners to their created purpose. This indicates that our cultural calling as the image of God is realized in Christ who is the last Adam. Unfallen Adam was to rule over the creation on behalf of God (Gen 1:28). Adam’s ruin by original sin was our ruin. But Christ as the last Adam takes upon Himself the image of God and restores it to a royal rule over the creation.

Theologian Michael F. Bird refers to this as, “The democratization of the Messianic idea.” In other words, Christ takes us from raging wanton rebels to royal heirs—restoring our coregency over the creation. We are ultimately restored to our creational identity as ruling royally on God’s behalf (Ps 8).^v This restoration of our rule for God is foreshadowed in Daniel 7:13-14, **18** in which believers are said to “receive the kingdom.” (See also Mt 19:28; Lu 2:19-30).

The ascension also signals the completed work of mediation resulting in the full acceptance of those on whose behalf the sacrifice is made. The tearing of the veil in the temple at Christ’s death revealed that the way to God was no longer restricted to the mediation of the priesthood in Jerusalem. But Christ has become the mediator of all who believe (1 Tim 2:5-6)—He opened the way to God to every person in every place who calls upon the Lord (Rom 10:9-10, **13**; Mt 25:5; Lu 23:45).^{vi}

Christ’s finished work and ascension is the basis of our access to God.

In Hebrews 10:19-22 Scripture tells us that Christ’s ascension now means we have confident access to God. “Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since *we have* a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled *clean* from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (see also Eph 3:12; 1 Jn 5:14).

Our confidence to enter the presence of God in prayer and worship is because *Christ appears in the presence of God for us* (Heb 9:24). Justified persons are divinely accepted persons. Christ Jesus representing us in the throne room of heaven guarantees that our justification is immutable. We are righteous in Him “from Easter (the resurrection) until the end of the world.”^{vii} When I am explaining this glorious truth to a new believer, I will use the example of a co-signer (one who becomes surety) who willingly assumes the liability of another. But Christ has done infinitely more—He has assumed our debt to the law of God and made it His so that He could pay it in full (Col 2:14; Heb 10:10, 14).

Our Lord's prayers at the Father's right hand 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. Many young believers imagine that this order in prayer—to the Father in the name of the Son and in the power of the Spirit is somehow arbitrary. Not so, for 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. If we did not have our Savior's representation, our efforts to approach God would be mere arrogance and presumption. As the apostle Paul states of God's burning purity: "He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see. To Him *be* honor and eternal dominion! Amen" (1 Tim 6:15-16).

God wants us to know that when we experience answered prayer, it is all for Christ's sake—it is because of our heavenly Intercessor. "Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it" (Jn 14:13-14; 15:16; 16:23-25).^{viii}

In Acts 1:11, as the disciples watched Jesus ascend to heaven, two angels tell them that He will return in the same way to consummate the kingdom. "They (angels) also said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.'"

"For since by a man *came* death, by a man also *came* the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive" (1 Cor 15:21-22). Christ's *descent* in His incarnation, in which He was born of a woman, born in a manger, born under the law, born mortal, is ultimately our *ascent*. For in His initial descent He takes on our nature in order that He might redeem and glorify it.

In His next coming He will return for His people to bring all of them to glory. And He will return in judgment of the wicked. "And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this *comes* judgment, so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time for salvation without *reference* to sin, to those who eagerly await Him" (Heb 9:27-28). "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, **by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself**" (Phil 3:20-21).

Theologian Louis Berkhof suggests that there is a three-fold significance found in 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 redeemed 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. And we shall sit down on His throne with Him forever (Rev 3:21).^{ix}

When we preach Christ's ascension, we are proclaiming it in association with His triumph over principalities and powers. "When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him" (Col 2:15). Every knee shall bow to Him (Phil 2:10-11). Bruce Metzger has aptly said that the ascension proclaims that there is no sphere however secular in which Christ has no rights.^x

Our boldness in ministry is anchored in Christ's administration of power.

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. "And He put all things in subjection under His feet, **and gave Him as head over all things to the church**, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all" (Eph 1:22-23). "Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, **to Him be the glory in the church** and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen" (Eph 3:21).^{xi}

The Intercession of Christ

Wayne Grudem notes that in Christ's humiliation during His earthly ministry, He could not hear the prayers to God coming from all over the nation of Judah. But now in His exalted state, He hears all prayers simultaneously from all over the world. Hundreds of millions of prayers are offered up by the saints all over the world on any given moment. In His divine nature He can bring them to the Father.^{xii}

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 (Heb 4:15-16). He entered our existential situation under the curse as suffering mortals and became the 'man of sorrows' for our sake (Is 53:3). He understands our situation from firsthand experience (Heb 2:18; 4:15). Now He is exalted above the heavens (Heb 7:26). He is infinitely qualified—all His work is perfect vicariousness. His manhood, deity, character of His mission, and His finished work all plead for us so that the Father can regard us with the same favor that is due the Son Himself—this is a matchless feature of His grace toward believing sinners (Jn 17:23, 26).^{xiii}

Christ's intercession on our behalf is His 'unfinished work'.

He is the only Person in the universe who can be our heavenly High Priest (Heb 7:25).^{xiv} The priestly work of Christ did not end at His resurrection. His work as our High Priest continues (1 Jn 2:1). His finished work at Calvary and the resurrection is the foundation for His unfinished work of interceding for us. His prevailing intercession secures the benefits of His redemptive work. As our Advocate He pleads the cause of another (i.e. each elect sinner), 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 (Is 53:12). If He interceded for all, all would certainly be saved.^{xv}

Christ's intercession for believers is a continuation of His office as Priest. His priestly office has two parts. **1)** The satisfaction He made at Calvary's cross, and **2)** His ongoing intercession. In the satisfaction He made, He is both Priest and sacrifice itself (Heb 9:14). Apart from that sacrifice we would have resided in hell forever. God did not spare Him, Christ parted with His life for us (Rom 8:32). In

speaking of the sinners whom Christ would save, He says in His high priestly prayer, “For their sakes I sanctify myself.” In this context, it speaks of His willingness to undergo a bloody death under crushing wrath for us (Jn 17:19). Thus, the perfection of Christ’s priestly offering was the cost of our reconciliation to God (Heb 10:14).^{xvi}

What Christ does in His intercession for us is plead the merits of His blood. This means that He’s addressing 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 as our Advocate He calls for our acquittal knowing that God’s justice is pacified by His blood (1 Jn 2:1). As frequently distressed creatures, believers must find daily solace in their High Priest who represents them and answers for their sins in His own Person.^{xvii}

Christ’s love is expressed in His priestly work as intercessor. He intercedes according to the will of God; He does so freely without offerings and gifts on our part. He is a tender-hearted sympathetic and merciful High Priest (Heb 2:17-18). 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).^{xviii}

Believers ought to know the benefits of Christ’s intercession for them.

Puritan Thomas Watson lists six major fruits of Christ’s intercession for us: **1)** first 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)** His intercession is 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, and 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 (Eph 3:12). **5)** The 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 guarantees absolution in the Day of Judgment. Christ shall judge the world and return as Judge (Heb 9:27; Jn 5:22). Those for whom Christ 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 Thess 5:23-24).^{xix}

Thus we must observe how sad the unbeliever’s case is. There is none in heaven to speak a word for them. Jesus says, “I do not pray 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 (Esther 7:8). Wicked Haman is like the condemned sinner, for the Law, the

conscience and the Judge all agree upon the just verdict of condemnation. There is nothing left for the criminal but to be led 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.^{xx}

A genuine believer meditates by faith upon Christ's priestly intercession.

How may professed believers test themselves to see if they have Christ as their intercessor? Ask this question of yourself, "Do I frequently pray for myself in Christ's Name?" Prayerfully appealing to Christ in the care of your own soul is a mark of salvation. Also, search your own heart to see if you find a spirit of sonship there. 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 Christ their High Priest. They speak to their own hearts saying, "His blood is my sacrifice, His Person and work are my meeting place with God (my altar). Here I rest. My case is safe with Christ." When exhorting Timothy, Paul cites his own faith in Christ's work: "For this reason I also suffer these things, but I am not ashamed; for I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day" (2 Tim 1:12).

Faith in Christ's unfinished work of intercession instills holy boldness in us. He appears in heaven for us to plead before the throne of God. We speak for Him on earth. The child of God is characterized by confessing Christ before men (Mt 10:32-33). The true believer is not ashamed of the gospel (Rom 1:16). For the faithful child of God, the Lord's cause is his or her 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 against the truth (Mt 10:32-33).^{xxi}

What is the use of this doctrine of Christ's intercession? **First**, we must exercise a renewed faith to behold Christ pleading His finished work on our behalf. Faith in His promises in the Word places us in the arms of Christ—outside of Christ there are only variations of the theme of despair. Christ is interceding even for the weakest believer. **Second**, as we behold Him in His offices of Prophet, Priest, and King, 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, feet, and sides for us (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 yourself. The depths of His love and compassion 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; Heb 2:14-15; Rev 12:10).

Sinners are like traitors guilty of a capital crime. But Christ takes the believing sinner by the hand and leads him to the King where pardon and favor are found because our Redeemer is the King's Son who gave His blood to make friends out of enemies.

End Notes:

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- ⁱ Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, pp. 449-450
ⁱⁱ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* p. 626
ⁱⁱⁱ Bird, p. 451
^{iv} Ibid. p. 455
^v Ibid.
^{vi} Ibid. pp. 456-457
^{vii} Ibid. p. 458
^{viii} Ibid. pp. 457-458
^{ix} Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* pp. 350-351
^x Metzger in Bird, pp. 459
^{xi} Ibid. pp. 352
^{xii} Grudem, p. 628
^{xiii} C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology II*, p. 655
^{xiv} Grudem, p. 628
^{xv} Hodge, pp. 592-594
^{xvi} Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity* pp. 172-175
^{xvii} Ibid. pp. 178-179
^{xviii} Ibid. pp. 180-181
^{xix} Ibid. pp. 181-183
^{xx} Ibid, pp. 183-184
^{xxi} Ibid. pp. 184-185