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## The Ascension

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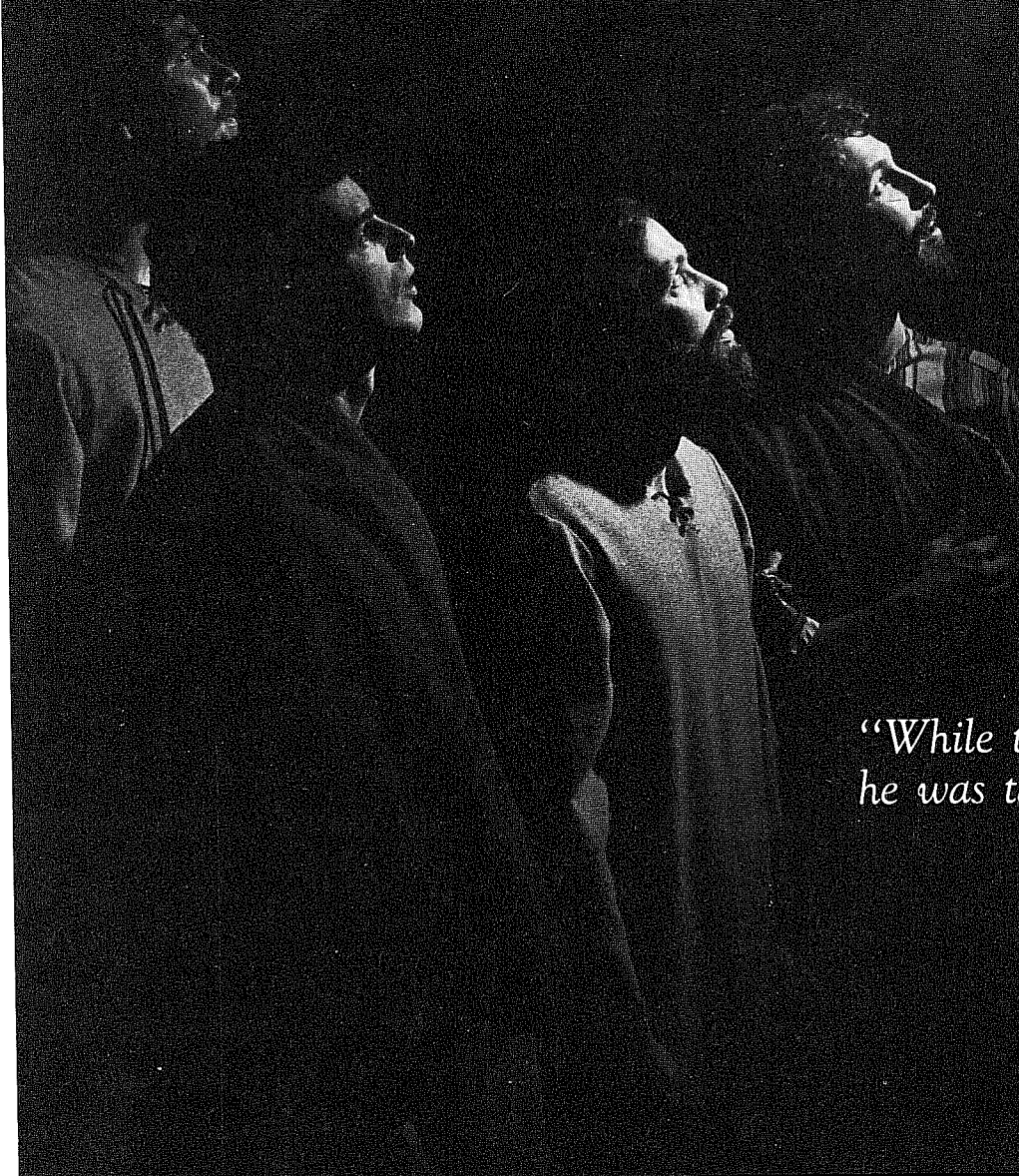
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# *The Ascension*

by Elmer L. Towns



*"While they beheld,  
he was taken up."*

*—Acts 1:9*

**T**he Ascension is the dividing line between the Christ of history (birth, ministry, death, Resurrection) and the Christ in heaven who now ministers to Christians. Paul describes that line, "Yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet henceforth know we him no more" (Cor. 5:16).

The Ascension involves two steps: He was received up into heaven, and He sat down at the right hand of God. Technically, these are called His Ascension and His Session.

The historical narrative of the Ascension is barely mentioned in the Gospels (Mark 16:19, Luke 24:31), not because it is unimportant but because it would have emphasized the importance of the termination of His earthly life. Obviously the emphasis is on the continuation of what Christ began on earth. The main reference to the Ascension is given at the beginning of Acts, emphasizing it as the gateway to Pentecost and the point from which Christ sent the Holy Spirit to the church.

The Ascension is described by Luke, "until the day in which he was taken up" (Acts 1:2). Next he describes the Eleven, "while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight" (Acts 1:9). Then Luke describes the Ascension, "Whom heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things" (Acts 3:21). Stephen saw Christ, "Who is gone into heaven, and is on the right hand of God" (1 Peter 3:22). Paul adds, "He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens" (Eph. 4:10), and then, He was "received up into glory" (1 Tim. 3:16). The writer of Hebrews notes that Christ was "a great high priest that is passed into the heavens" (Heb. 4:14), and Christ entered "... into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us" (Heb. 9:24).

The Ascension should not have come as a surprise to the disciples. Jesus had predicted: "What and if ye shall see the Son of man ascend up where he was before?" (John 6:62). "I go to my Father, and ye see me no more" (John 16:10). "I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God" (John 20:17).

The word *ascend* comes from the Latin word *ascendit* which implies "the going up" of the Son of God. But the Scripture also notes "He was taken up," as though the Ascension was an assumption. The first implies Christ entering the presence of the Father in a triumphant display of power and majesty. The second emphasizes the Father's act, who is exalting His Son and putting heaven's seal of approval on all that Christ did on earth. The first reveals Christ as the sinless man who is able to ascend into heaven on His own righteousness (Ps. 24:3). The second is tied to the *kenosis* where the Son who is

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perfect, yields to the Father who exalts Him into heaven.

When Jesus ascended He went beyond the earthly atmosphere. Paul notes the plural for heavens: He "that ascended up far above all heavens" (Eph. 4:10). The author of Hebrews observes that Christ "passed into the heavens" (Heb. 4:14) and was "made higher than the heavens" (Heb. 7:26). The Eleven saw Him go into heaven (singular, Acts 1:9); perhaps this is only describing the disciples' point of reference.

When Christ entered heaven, He was the triumphant Son of God who now was given "the glory [He had with the Father] before the world was" (John 17:5). But He was not simply the restored Son of God who was returning to take up where He left off when He came to earth. Christ returned as the eternal God-man; He was eternally joined to flesh. He was now the man in the glory (Heb. 7:24-28), with a new priestly ministry of intercession and advocacy.

After the Ascension, Christ entered the presence of the Father and became seated at His right hand. Jehovah further assures Christ that in the future He will have complete victory over His enemies. The author of Hebrews describes this

scene, "We see Jesus... crowned with glory and honour... from henceforth expecting till his enemies be made his footstool" (Heb. 2:9; 10:13).

The picture of Christ sitting is one of rest and calm. Just as God rested after His six days of work in Creation (Gen. 2:2), the Son rested after His work on earth. There were no chairs or furniture on which the priest could sit in the Tabernacle, because he was there to work, to carry out His work of atonement. On Calvary, Christ finished His work of atonement. Now as the prototype, He is seated in glory. To the overcomers He promises "I will grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne" (Rev. 3:21).

### **The Nature of the Ascension**

The disciples who witnessed the Ascension of Christ probably did not completely understand what they were seeing, for it involved more than His physical return to heaven. There are five different aspects of the ascension.

**The end of self-limitation.** Technically called the *kenosis*, the self-limitation of Christ ended at the Ascension. Jesus Christ in the flesh was the omnipotent God who spoke the world into existence (John 1:3; Heb. 11:3), yet during His earthly life and ministry He chose not to exercise that power (John 18:36ff; Acts 10:38). Jesus Christ in the flesh was the omniscient God who understood all the intricacies of our immense universe, yet during His earthly ministry there were some things He chose not to know (Mark 13:32). Jesus Christ in the flesh was omnipresent, meaning He was everywhere present in the vast universe, yet during His time on earth He chose to limit Himself to the confines of a human body (John 1:14). At the Ascension of Christ these self-limitations were ended.

**The Transfiguration of Christ.** The celestial glory that Jesus had from the beginning was temporarily hidden during His earthly life. As Jesus approached the Cross, He prayed, "And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was" (John 17:5). When Jesus hung on the cross He looked forward to the glorification of Himself, "Today shalt thou be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). The glorification of Christ innately involves who He is and what He has

accomplished. People recognize Him and worship Him, giving honor and worth to the Son of God. The transfiguration of Christ involves the celestial (shining, bright, illuminated, etc.) appearance that He gives.

At the Ascension, Christ was both glorified and transfigured. "Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name" (Phil. 2:9). Whereas the previous glory of Christ in heaven was dependent upon His person, this added dimension of glory is based upon His completed work. He was transfigured, in that when John saw Christ on the Isle of Patmos, he saw Him in all His glory (Rev. 1:13-18).

**The exaltation of Christ.** Closely related to His glorification was the exaltation of Christ to His new position of authority as the God-man. Peter quoted Psalm 110:1 in his message on the day of Pentecost, emphasizing Christ's Resurrection. Then he concluded by pointing out the lordship of Jesus Christ, "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36). The apostle Paul also cited the Ascension of Christ as the point of His exaltation. "Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name" (Phil. 2:9). Those around His throne cry out, "Worthy is the Lamb" (Rev. 5:12).

**The entrance of humanity into heaven.** Jesus was the first man to enter heaven with a glorified body. At His Ascension, He became the man in the glory (Heb. 7:24-28). The first to enter God's presence without dying were Enoch and Elijah (Gen. 5:24, 2 Kings 2:11). But, Christ's entrance was first in glory and in priority because of its significance.

**The beginning of a new ministry.** When Jesus ascended into heaven, He did not cease from His labors, but added a new ministry. On earth Christ finished His task of dying for the salvation of the world (John 19:30), but now He lives for the saved as their intercessor and advocate. As an intercessor Jesus is con-

tinually mediating for Christians (Heb. 7:25), becoming their advocate before God (1 John 2:1). As such, Christ forgives the sin, based on His sacrifice, and restores the Christian after he sins.

### **The Results of the Ascension of Christ**

Everything Jesus accomplished impacts the life of the believer. As a result of the Ascension of Christ, Christians have a number of benefits for a fulfilled life and successful service.

**The sending of the Holy Spirit.** Christ ascended to heaven and provided

from on high" (Luke 24:49). On the day of Pentecost, the disciples received spiritual power to witness. The power is continuously present in their lives as they continued to be filled with the Holy Spirit. The Christian does not need to plead for the Holy Spirit because he already dwelt with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is available to those who yield to obey (Rom. 6:11-17). The Christian does not need more of the Holy Spirit; the reverse is true. The Holy Spirit is more of the Christian.

**The preparation of a heavenly home.** The Ascension involves Ch-

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the ministry of the Holy Spirit for the church. Jesus promised, "Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you" (John 16:7). This promise was again repeated by Jesus on the last recorded meeting with His disciples on the day of His Ascension (Acts 1:5). After they tarried in the upper room, the Holy Spirit came in mighty power upon the disciples (Acts 2:1-4). Today the Holy Spirit lives in all Christians (1 Cor. 6:19), giving them the ability to live for God (Gal. 5:25).

**The giving of spiritual gifts.** When a person is saved he not only receives the Holy Spirit he also receives spiritual gift(s) (1 Cor. 12:11, 1 Peter 4:10). Spiritual gifts were given initially by Christ. "When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men" (Eph. 4:8). These spiritual abilities were given after the Resurrection/Ascension when the Holy Spirit was made available to the church in general and to believers in particular. Spiritual gifts are abilities that the Holy Spirit gives to Christians to serve the Lord and edify the church.

**The imparting of spiritual power.** At His Ascension, Christ promised spiritual power to His disciples. He instructed them to "tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power

preparation of heaven for Christ. Jesus said, "In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you" (John 14:2). Jesus ascended to His Father's house, to prepare a heavenly home for those who believe in Him.

**The standing of the believer.** "He hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:6). Because of their identification with Christ, Christians are raised up and stand before God as copartakers in the Ascension of Christ.

### **The Ascension Provides Answers**

There is very little Scripture reference to Christ's Ascension. While only a few references are needed to verify the truthfulness and importance for the doctrine, the little space given to this doctrine affirms God's priority toward the truth of His exit, but His death is efficacious. However, if the Ascension were not mentioned at all, many questions would linger. Was the Atonement fully acceptable to the Father, or does the sinner need to do good works to please the Father? What will happen to the Christian at death? Where are those today who have died in Christ? But these and other questions are answered by the Ascension and present Session of Jesus Christ in glory.



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