

## **We believe in His exaltation to heaven Sunday 22 October**

‘He ascended into heaven. He is seated at the right hand of the Father.’

### **Introduction**

The Apostles Creed here links two statements of belief about the Lord Jesus that were affirmed by the Early Church. One was an event that took place then and was temporary –the Ascension, and the other refers to something that took place that continues to the present time. The first event marked the ending of the life and ministry of Jesus here on earth while the second is the (from our perspective of time) more lengthy preparation for the return of Jesus in glory as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. It refers to what Jesus is doing now at the present time in heaven. It would be mistaken to view it as simply a time of waiting for the main event to take place. It is referenced and assumed in a number of New Testament passages that will be mentioned in this message. What is really important for us to grasp is that God’s plans for His world are on track for their fulfilment. Human beings may make an absolute mess of our planet with endless violence and wars and a lack of care for our environment, but this should never cause us to give up hope or to despair for the future. God is on the throne and we should be encouraged to keep on living the way He has called us to live because of the ultimate triumph of good over evil; of godliness over wickedness or of hope over despair. From a mere human perspective, leaving God out of the equation, listening to the daily news on TV or online can be deeply depressing. The focus, more often than not, is on what is going wrong or the latest crisis in the world, but this is never a telling of the whole story. There is much good happening in the world too, but newspaper sales or ratings for listeners or viewers on our screens are much higher for bad news than good. It is as if there is something in the human psyche that takes good news for granted and is constantly fearful of bad news overwhelming us. By contrast, the child of God should be able with the help of the Holy Spirit to view things differently. However things look just now, we are on the winning side – not God on our side - but we on His. Do you need to grasp more clearly this bigger perspective on life at this time? Let us look at what the Bible teaches on this article of faith that was important to the Early Church.

### **1. The Ascension into heaven** ‘He ascended into heaven’

(a)**The fact of the Ascension** The ascension is not a major issue for discussion in the New Testament. It is simply recorded as a fact. John for example allows us to know of his awareness of this event through the words of Jesus to Mary Magdalene in John 20:17: <sup>17</sup> “Don’t cling to me,” Jesus said, “for I haven’t yet **ascended to the Father**. But go find my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” (NLV) Peter makes reference to the ascension in I Peter 3:22. After mentioning Jesus’ resurrection, he writes: <sup>22</sup> *who has **gone into heaven** and is at God’s right hand— with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.* Paul is also aware of the ascension of Jesus and in his quotation of an early Christian creed in I Timothy 3:16 declares that Jesus was *taken up in glory*. Luke alone of the Gospel writers records a significant amount of information about it, not because he was the only one who knew about it, rather because the others were concluding their accounts with a focus on the Resurrection of Jesus and the Great Commission. At the end of his gospel there are these words of conclusion regarding this last day of Jesus’ ministry on earth. <sup>50</sup> *When He had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, He lifted up His hands and blessed them.* <sup>51</sup> *While He was blessing them, He left them and was **taken up into heaven**.* <sup>52</sup> *Then they*

worshipped Him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.<sup>53</sup> And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God. Luke planned a second book to account for the first three decades of the life of the Christian Church and the ascension of Jesus, and the teaching He gave on that occasion, is the ‘hinge’ that links his two books. The actions of the apostles and other Christians in the time prior to the Day of Pentecost are only explicable in the light of their obedience to the teaching of Jesus prior to His ascension. Their acts of obedience were honoured and rewarded with the amazing and wonderful outpouring of the Holy Spirit on that unforgettable occasion. It was natural for Peter to make reference to the ascension in his powerful sermon at the launch of the Christian Church. In Acts 2:32-36 after a reference to the resurrection, he declares:<sup>32</sup> *God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact.*<sup>33</sup> ***Exalted to the right hand of God, He has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear.***<sup>34</sup> *For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said, 'The Lord said to my Lord: Sit at my right hand'*<sup>35</sup> *until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.*<sup>36</sup> *Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.* The ascension is a fitting climax to the earthly ministry of our Lord, but was equally a reminder that the best is still to come in His second coming as King of Kings and Lords of Lords and reigning in His glory.

#### **(b) The significance of the Ascension**

The Ascension back to heaven brought to an end a time of forty days during which Jesus made many appearances to His closest followers. We can list the named appearances of the risen Lord to His followers before the Ascension, but we cannot be certain that the gospel writers included every single one. However, it is worth noting that there was a period of forty days at the start of His ministry in the desert resisting the devil’s temptations to depart from the Father’s plans for His life and work on earth. Do we see this as forty days of triumph as the ‘bookend’ of His ministry in contrast to the forty days of testing at the beginning of it? Is there a stated reason recorded in the New Testament as to why we have all these resurrection appearances? Acts 1:3 is surely the answer to that question: *After His suffering, He presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that He was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.* Why? This event was unique in human history. The disciples were human beings who needed time to begin to process what had taken place. The physicality and intentionality of these encounters was so important to impress upon these women and men that Jesus had risen from the dead. It was not a dream; it had really happened! The graciousness of the Lord in taking the time He did before the Ascension was for their benefit to help them come to terms not only with what had happened but also its significance for the future launch of the Christian Church.

The importance of seeing Jesus alive with their own eyes after Easter Sunday was linked in with the first disciples seeing the ascension of Jesus into heaven. Acts 1:6-11 gives the details of what happened: *Then they gathered round Him and asked Him, 'Lord, are You at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?'*<sup>7</sup> *He said to them: 'It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by His own authority.'*<sup>8</sup> *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'*<sup>9</sup> *After He said this, He was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid Him from their sight.*<sup>10</sup> ***They were looking intently up into the sky as He was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them.***<sup>11</sup> *'Men of Galilee,' they said, 'why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen Him go into heaven.'* Luke in Acts 1 emphasises that Jesus’ departure into heaven was clearly visible to these disciples. They did not see Him come out of the tomb on resurrection day morning, but of course they had opportunities to see Him in the approximately six weeks after the resurrection. It is only stating the obvious that it was

essential that they see Him ascend to know that He had left them, not for a day or two, but until His return in glory as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

In Luke's Gospel chapter 24 vs 44-49 we have the account of Jesus' explanation of the events of that first Easter in the context of their future mission. <sup>44</sup> *He said to them, 'This is what I told you while I was still with you: **everything must be fulfilled that is written about Me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.**'* <sup>45</sup> *Then He opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.* <sup>46</sup> *He told them, 'This is what is written: the Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day,* <sup>47</sup> *and **repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.*** <sup>48</sup> *You are witnesses of these things.* <sup>49</sup> ***I am going to send you what My Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.***'

The **first** key thing was the fulfilment of Scripture relating to the prophetic messages relating to His life. God keeps His Word. We can trust the Bible. The majority of the recipients of that message would later become martyrs, killed for their faith in Jesus. They needed to be certain that they could trust the reliability of the Scriptures they possessed. The **second** key thing was their calling to take the gospel to *all nations*. We are familiar with the wording of the Great Commission in Matthew 28, but I am sure Jesus expressed similar sentiments in other messages to His disciples, though until His resurrection from the dead, I think it likely they did not truly grasp what they were being called to do as His disciples. It is obvious to us with hindsight, but at a time when most people rarely left their home villages, let alone their countries for any reason, it was an incredible calling to these ordinary Galileans. The **third** key thing, of course, was the coming of the Holy Spirit to equip and empower them for the mission ahead of them. They were not going to be left alone to complete this task then, neither will believers alive today, in the mission entrusted to us to proclaim Christ be expected to do it in our own strength. What we accomplish will be through the power of His Spirit at work within us.

## 2. The exaltation in heaven 'He is seated at the right hand of the Father.'

(a) **What happened?** Was this predictable or unexpected? The answer comes from a messianic Psalm 110. *The Lord says to my Lord: 'Sit at My right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for Your feet.'* (Psalm 110:1). Jesus raises this Scripture verse in a discussion with the Pharisees. <sup>41</sup> *While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them,* <sup>42</sup> *'What do you think about the Messiah? Whose son is he?'* *'The son of David,' they replied.* <sup>43</sup> *He said to them, 'How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him "Lord"? For he says,* <sup>44</sup> *"The Lord said to my Lord: 'Sit at My right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.'"* <sup>45</sup> *If then David calls him "Lord", how can he be his son?'* <sup>46</sup> *No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions.* (Matthew 22:41-46). The Messiah they agreed came from the line of King David. The genealogy in Matthew chapter one demonstrates that truth. But Jesus then goes on to ask a very difficult question. There was no doubt that *the Lord* is God the Father, but to whom does God the Father give this remarkable invitation? It is of course the promised Messiah, the Son of David, as the majority of Jewish Bible commentators acknowledged, though they did not necessarily understand the passage as describing a divine Messiah. Up to this point, there was likely agreement at the gathering, but David gives equal honour to the second person who is invited to *Sit at My right hand until I put your enemies under your feet*. The Son of David is equally the Son of God, a subject that the vast majority Pharisees did not wish to address prior to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The figure to whom God the Father addresses these words has a great and glorious day to come when He will reign in glory. The first followers of Jesus declared that this Psalm was speaking prophetically of the Lord Jesus Christ. The New Testament in a number of places confirms the truthfulness of this claim in the Apostle's Creed. In Mark 16:19, it states: *After*

the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, He was taken up into heaven and **He sat at the right hand of God**. We remember that the first Christian martyr Stephen before His death uttered these amazing words in Acts 7:56: 'Look,' he said, 'I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.' The apostle Paul wrote in Romans 8:34: *Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.* The apostle Peter makes the same point in I Peter 3:22: *It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, <sup>22</sup> who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand – with angels, authorities and powers in submission to Him.* In the Book of Hebrews, in Hebrews 1:13, Psalm 110:1 is cited with reference to the divinity of Jesus, contrasted with the angels who were certainly not divine. Again in Hebrews 12:2, it states: *...fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy that was set before Him He endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*

(b) What was its significance? **The Kingship of Jesus** The One who wore a crown of thorns is now the King of Glory (Psalm 24:7-10). *But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honour...* (Hebrews 2:9a). Hymn 366 in Mission Praise begins: 'Jesus is King and I will extol Him, give Him the glory and honour His name, He reigns on high, enthroned in the heavens, Word of the Father, exalted for us.' The **description of His reign** is given in Ephesians 1:20-22: *... He raised Christ from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly realms, <sup>21</sup> far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. <sup>22</sup> And God placed all things under His feet and appointed Him to be head over everything ...* This is no ordinary regent or ruler that can be compared or contrasted with human rulers in any other age. It is different in kind not just different in degree. How long will this reign go on for? The **extent of His reign** is given in the angel Gabriel's message to Mary, recorded in Luke 1:31-33: *You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call Him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David, <sup>33</sup> and He will reign over Jacob's descendants for ever; His kingdom will never end.* One reason for that is given in I Corinthians 15:25: *For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under his feet.*

**The priestly ministry of Jesus** The exaltation of Jesus also highlights His priestly work in heaven. CMP 366, in verse two declares: 'We have a hope that is steadfast and certain, gone through the curtain and touching the throne. **We have a priest who is there interceding**, pouring His grace on our lives day by day.' In Biblical times, the work of the priests was to offer sacrifices in the place of sinners as their substitute. Yet Jesus was both priest and sacrifice on the cross. In Hebrews 9:12 we read: *He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but He entered the Most Holy Place once for all by His own blood, so obtaining eternal redemption.* He was the sacrifice in our place. Yet Hebrews 9:24 also states: *For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; He entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence.* Notice those words: *for us*; Jesus is praying for you and me in heaven. What effect does His intercessory prayer ministry have? Hebrews 7:25 declares: *Therefore He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them.* Are you a child of God by faith in Him? If you can answer 'yes' to that question, then this promise belongs to you today. Do you need divine assistance to help in your daily life? In I Timothy 2:5, the apostle Paul reminds us why we must pray in Jesus' name. *For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus...* Jesus is our advocate with God the Father. *But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.* (I John 2:2). Is this not greatly encouraging that Jesus is praying for you and for me in heaven? What impact should that have on our

prayer life? The answer is given in Hebrews 4:14-16: *Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.* <sup>15</sup> *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to feel sympathy for our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet He did not sin.* <sup>16</sup> *Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.* Do you and I need to exercise more holy confidence in our petitions when we pray to God? Jesus has done it all for us, we are reconciled to God by faith and He to us because of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross.

(c) **The purpose of the exaltation of Jesus:** It gets even more exciting and amazing: Ephesians 1:22-23 states: *And God placed all things under His feet and appointed Him to be head over everything for the church,* <sup>23</sup> *which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills everything in every way.* The ascension and exaltation of Jesus was carried out for our benefit. Paul goes on to say in Ephesians 2:6-7: *And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus,* <sup>7</sup> *in order that in the coming ages He might show the incomparable riches of His grace, expressed in His kindness to us in Christ Jesus.* I don't for a moment know what that will involve. I don't think the Bible gives us the detail we would like, but I think it might have been one of the things Paul mentioned in his prayer for the Ephesians in Ephesians 3:20-21: *Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us,* <sup>21</sup> *to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.* Do you know what that means in any detail? No neither do I; but it is something truly extraordinary that God has planned for us in Him in the future. The ascension and exaltation of Jesus is the powerful visible symbol of the fulfilment and continuation of God's plans for His creation. During the reign of Queen Victoria, Queen of the United Kingdom and the (then) British Empire countries, she attended a performance of Handel's *Messiah* in Westminster Abbey. The whole congregation rose to their feet when at length the organ began to play the Hallelujah Chorus; they all stood as one –except for the Queen. She alone was seated as was the custom. But as soon as the choir began to sing: 'He shall reign for ever and ever, King of Kings and Lord of Lords...for ever and ever...Hallelujah! Hallelujah! At those words, the Queen rose from her seat, not to stand with the rest of the congregation, but to kneel in humble worship before the throne of the ascended Redeemer [Marcus Loane, *Do You Now Believe? A Short Introduction to the Christian doctrine based on the Apostles' Creed*, pp.66-67.] Because of His exaltation, His people are encouraged to play our part in the fulfilment of His purposes in the coming of His eternal kingdom. *Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.* <sup>11</sup> *Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with Him, we will also live with Him;* <sup>12</sup> *if we endure, we will also reign with Him* (2 Timothy 2:10-12a). I hope and pray that like the apostle Paul, we are motivated to give our very best for Him in His service in the remaining days, months or years, to the praise of His glorious name, Amen.

**Question for Reflection:** In the light of what Jesus has done and is doing for you now in heaven, does this inspire you to give your best for Him in His service? If not, why not?

**Song for Reflection:** 'Jesus is king and I will exalt Him'  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uRfAD7gQPoo>