

**Hid From Our Sight:
The Meaning Of The Ascension**
Acts 1:1-11
May 12, 2024

It was just over 60 years ago last month when what was then known as the Soviet Union took the lead in the race for space by successfully launching the first human being into orbit. Cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin spent 108 minutes in space making one trip around our planet.

In the years following, Gagarin became famous for something he *supposedly* said upon returning. It was widely reported that Gagarin told the Soviet leadership, “I went up into space, but I did not encounter any God.” The problem with that statement is Gagarin never actually said it. Those words came from Soviet Premier, Nikita Khrushchev, during a speech touting the communist party’s anti-religious policy. It was Khrushchev who said, “Gagarin went up into space, but he didn’t encounter any God.” To give those words more popular weight, the communist propaganda machine falsely placed those words on Gagarin’s lips.

Meanwhile, here’s a fun fact: Yuri Gagarin was a Christian. He was a faithful member of the Russian Orthodox church, where he raised his own children in the faith. General Valentin Petrov, Professor of the Russian Air Force Academy and a personal friend

of Gagarin said, “He always confessed God whenever he was provoked, no matter where he was.”

But aside from being falsely attributed to the wrong person, that statement is interesting because it raises a curious question. Where exactly is heaven, and how far would we have to travel to get there? When we were children, we likely thought of heaven as being up there beyond the clouds, but given what we now know about how our universe is put together, about how our planet spins on its axis, making one complete revolution every 24 ours as it revolves around the sun, we can’t even say for sure where “up” is. So, if I wanted to travel to heaven, which direction should I go?

I ask that question because Acts 1 tells us that 40 days after the resurrection, Jesus ascended into heaven. Verse 9 says he was “taken up” until a cloud hid him from the disciples’ eyes, sort of like a rocket blasting up from a launching pad. But where did he go, exactly? How far would a rocket have to fly in order to get where he is?

Such questions are based on a wrong assumption. Heaven is not a location that exist within the material universe, so that we could get to it if we could only develop the technology to travel far enough. The way the Bible describes it, heaven is a completely different realm that exist apart from the material universe that you

and I know. Heaven and earth are connected in that both are the province of God, but heaven is not a particular location within our solar system or within our galaxy or even within our universe. Heaven is the realm of God – the God who created the material universe, but who is not contained within the material universe.

If you compare the Biblical account of creation with other ancient creation myths, you will find one very stark difference: while other creation stories talk about the god or the spirits emerging from within the known universe, the God of the Bible transcends the known universe. He was here before the universe existed, and he brought everything that universe into existence through his purposeful word, and his power and his nature is not dependent upon anything that happens within the universe. If it were possible to travel from one far corner of the cosmos to the other, you still would not exhaust the fullness of God, because God exists outside of it all.

So, the point of the story of Jesus' ascension is not that Jesus blasted off in some particular direction, as though he headed to Mars and then took a sharp right toward the next galaxy over. The point of the ascension is that the crucified and resurrected Jesus has gone back to the heavenly realm from which he came. The point of the ascension is that the Jesus who was dead is not

only alive again, but he is seated at the right hand of God the Father, from where He now reigns over heaven and earth.

If all this talk about outer space is too much, maybe this will help: in the Bible, the idea of “going up” doesn’t necessarily always refer to a direction. It refers to being elevated to a place of authority. Here is a more “earthly” example. On September 8, 2022, the man who was once Prince Charles ascended to the throne to become King Charles of England. When we say he ascended, we are not interested in how many steps he climbed to get to the big chair. We are interested in the fact that he has now assumed a new, higher level of authority. That’s what the Bible has in mind when it says in Acts 1:9 that Jesus was taken up from before their very eyes. It is not trying to get us to think purely in the sense that Jesus is now somewhere on the other side of rainbow. It is trying to get us to see that Jesus has now assumed his rightful place of heavenly authority, from where he reigns over all things.

I realize none of this explains the mystery of how the ascension happened; not even the Bible tries to do that. It is far more important that we understand why it matters. What difference does it make that the resurrected Christ has now ascended into heaven? **The ascension of Jesus Christ is critically important to us for at least three reasons.**

First, as we've already said, the ascension tells us who is ultimately in charge of the universe. Last in week in the Great Commission we heard Jesus announce that all authority in heaven and earth now belongs to him. In the ascension, Jesus goes to assume the place of authority that belongs to him. Listen to how the Apostle Paul puts it in Ephesians 1:

“[God’s] power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at this right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way. (Eph. 1: 19b-23)”

Notice the use of the present tense in the verbs of that passage. It does not say that God will one day place all things under the authority of Jesus; it says that he already has. Jesus already has all power and dominion. All things already are under His feet.

This does not require us to take a naïve view of the world that pretends there are no bad things that happen. The lingering effects of sin are still with us, so in this world we will have trouble

and sorrow. Jesus himself told us as much. But the majestic words of Ephesians and the ascension to which they point us do require us to understand that the same Jesus who walked the dusty roads of Israel is the same Jesus who is directing the flow of history. And the story of this universe will turn out the way He intends it to, because Christ our Lord has taken his place at the right hand of God the Father. Through Jesus, God is exercising his providential power over the world on the plane of history.

Think of all the chaos and turmoil of the last few years. Social upheaval. Political chaos at home and abroad. Wars in Europe and the Middle East and Africa. A global pandemic. Record inflation. All of which is accompanied by the personal struggles so many of us have had to endure. If the ascension has not happened, there is no reason to expect that all that chaos will lead to anything useful or good. But the fact that Jesus has ascended means that God is directing all of that towards his good outcome. In Christ, God is exercising his power in and through the affairs of nations and the affairs of individuals to make all things new. The ascension means Christ has all authority.

Second, the ascension of Jesus Christ means that God's priorities must be the church's priorities. Like we said a moment ago, heaven is more than some blissful place just on the other side

of the clouds. Heaven is that realm where God's perfect will finds complete expression. Heaven is that place where Father, Son, and Holy Spirit dwell together in perfect unity and harmony. Heaven is that place where the ascended Christ sits in authority over all things. Heaven is that place where things are as God intends them to be.

Obviously, then, heaven is a different kind of place than this world with all its brokenness and fallen ness. But that does not mean that heaven and earth have no connection to each other. As unlikely as it may sound, you and I are called to be that connection. That is the role of the church in the world. What is it that we pray in the Lord's Prayer? "*Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.* (Matthew 5:10)" We are taught to pray that God will have his way, that His heavenly reign will become more evident and more visible right here among us. We are taught to pray that earth will become more like heaven.

But what exactly does this mean? When we utter those words from the Lord's Prayer, we are praying that God will have his way with us, the church. We are praying that God will transform us into the kinds of people who live by heaven's priorities. We are praying that God will make us into a little

outpost, a little colony of heaven, right here in the midst of an unheavenly world.

When you understand the ascension of Jesus in this way, then you begin to see things like, say, the Sermon on the Mount in a different light. All throughout the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says things that make no logical sense, at least not when held up against worldly values. Blessed are the poor in spirit? Blessed are those who mourn? Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness? If someone strikes you on the right cheek give him the other cheek also? Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you? It makes you wonder what planet Jesus is talking about, because this planet does not appear to operate by those values.

But the church should. These are statements of God's priorities. This is the ethic by which heaven operates. And Jesus Christ, the Lord of the church, has now ascended into heaven and assumed his place of rule and authority, from where he is directing the whole cosmos toward that day when God's way of doing things finally prevails. And because we are his church, his people, we are to bear witness to that through lives that mirror these priorities. We are to make heaven's values our values because the risen and reigning Lord has shown us that this is the true end of all things.

Why do we pray for the sick and care for the dying or feed the hungry? Because Jesus Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father. Why do we seek to protect the unborn or work to lift up those our culture might ignore? Because Jesus Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father. Why do we offer words of hope and encouragement to each other? Because Jesus Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father. Why do we forgive each other when we hurt each other? Because Jesus Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father. Why do we preach salvation to a lost and hurting world? Because Jesus Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father. Why do we do any of the things that occupy our time and energy as a church? Because Jesus Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father. The ascension means that Jesus is ruling the universe, so therefore His priorities should be ours.

But there is at least one more reason why the ascension matters, and without it we fail to understand the ongoing significance of Jesus' work on our behalf. According to Scripture, the resurrected Jesus right now is in the Father's presence, actively interceding for the sake of his people.

Romans 8:33-34 says, *"Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. 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 author of *Hebrews 7:23-25* says something similar when he writes, *“Now there have been many priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.”* These verses tell us that Jesus is actively working right now to intercede on our behalf.

That’s necessary, because you and I continue to struggle with sin, even after we have been saved. Every day we fall short of God’s glory even after we come to faith and are born again. The good news is that right now Jesus is continually going before the Father’s presence to plead with the Father on our behalf. Have you ever been in a situation where your character or your competence was being doubted, and someone spoke up on your behalf to vouch for you? That is what Jesus is doing right now. The ascended Jesus is with the Father in the heavenly realm, advocating for us, interceding for us, telling the Father that because we are marked with His blood, we belong to Him for eternity.

There is much attention being given these days to the growing mental health crisis in our land. This is a real thing, and

we should be grateful for all the resources that are now available to us in dealing with it. But somewhere at the root of some of our biggest emotional and psychological challenges is a spirit of shame and unworthiness. We don't have time to explore that in any detail this morning, but we can say that for the believer, our ultimate release from that is found in the fact that the resurrected Christ is now seated at the right hand of the Father interceding for us. The born again believer is one who can say that no matter what I have done and no matter what has happened to me, I am a child of God, because the same Jesus who died for me is the same Jesus who now reigns over me, continuously claiming me as his own. So, anytime we begin to wrestle with doubt or with guilt or with shame, we need to remember the ascended Christ is now interceding for us.

Take all these reasons together and we realize that the ascension of Jesus is as critical to his story as his birth, his death, and his resurrection. The ascension reminds us the church is not a community of people who come together every week to remember dear ole' dead Jesus. The fact that Jesus ascended means that He is alive right now, ruling from heaven, setting the priorities for his church, and interceding for his people. And according to Scripture, just as we saw him go into heaven, one day he shall return, and all

things shall be made new, and heaven and earth shall joined together forever and ever.

Amen.