

“Ascension to the Throne”

by Pastor Steve Hammond on 5/24/2020
Text: Mark 16:19-20 at FBC of Newport, NH

//19 After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God. 20 Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it.//

—Mark 16:19-20 (NIV)

Now we come to the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry. His redemptive work at the cross is “Finished!” He has risen on the third day, just as he said. Over the past forty days he has made numerous appearances to his disciples, in Jerusalem and in Galilee, proving to them that he is alive and teaching them from the scriptures that all this was necessary for the Messiah to go through in order to establish salvation for the repentant. And now he is back in Jerusalem with his followers gathered around him at the Mount of Olives where he’s set to leave them—and yet be with them like never before, come Pentecost.

It is here that Jesus was questioned by his disciples as to when he would make Israel the center of the Kingdom of God. And it is here Jesus answered this way:

//7 He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. 8 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.”//

—Acts 1:7-8

After this Jesus literally rose up in the air right in front of them. This was not a vanishing like the other times such as on the road to Emmaus and the upper room. Nor was this a mere riding off into the sunset. This was an ascension up to the clouds of heaven, not just into a sky with the appearance of heaven. This time the clouds were reflecting the real thing. Jesus was ascending to the very throne of God.

//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.// —Romans 8:34

//9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,//
—Philippians 2:9

//24 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.// —Hebrews 9:24

And that’s not all. As the disciples were staring up into the sky where Jesus ascended, two angels spoke to them to redirect their focus. Instead of looking for where he’s gone, they should be assured of his return, with the implication they should carry on as Jesus had instructed them.

11 “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.” —Acts 1:11

What is going on here? What is the ascension? And why is it important?

The simple answer is this: The ascension of Jesus is the return to his proper place at the throne of God. Simple right? We all know about thrones and the power that goes with them to rule over a kingdom. And we know what it means for a person to “ascend to the throne.” So we could stop right there.

But the complicated answer is far more interesting.

Jesus of course was, is, and always will be God. But in order to save humanity he also *became* human through the incarnation. And that meant taking a station in life which was well below that of God’s throne. In fact, he took the station of a servant, one willing to die for our sins, even death on a cross. Only from this human station in life and in death could the Son of God be in the right position from which to save us, to forgive our sins and pay our debt once and for all. (See Philippians 2) Then he did it. And he did it perfectly, as only the God/Man could do—to the perfect satisfaction of God and of our otherwise hopeless situation.

Once this was done, you might think Jesus was then ascending back to the throne of God simply because his work was done here and it was time for him to go home. Not quite. He was indeed going back to his home, but he wasn’t leaving his humanity behind him either, for this is now his home too. He’s not leaving us behind like old work clothes. Jesus’ humanity, work and sacrifice of redemption was not a temporary thing for him. It was permanent. And he was bringing all this with him back to heaven, back to God and right into the very throne of God.

Now think about it from heaven’s perspective. Jesus left heaven in order to come to earth and save sinners. Heaven was without Jesus for a period of time. That means when Jesus ascended there was probably something of a big ‘coming home’ party for him, with great drama, cheers and meaningful embracing. (Speaking in human terms now.)

But there is something very different with this returned Son of God. He’s human, a man as well as God. And he is bringing this reality with him all the way as he takes his rightful position on that throne. Just as the position of the cross enabled Jesus to forgive us and pay for our sins, so too, now from the position of the throne of God Jesus can elevate us in his prayers of intercession, he can bring us into the love of God’s embrace, and he can glorify us, even in our lowly position, with the glory Jesus has had with the Father from the beginning.

And the stories! We can’t forget the stories. Returning to heaven and now at the throne of God, Jesus is able to tell about what he has done, what he is doing, and what he will do. He does this in the form of a great scroll, which all of heaven was just dying to hear. But no one in all of heaven was worthy to read it. Then came Jesus: the Lion, looking like a Lamb—Jesus, our crucified Savior! He alone is worthy to open that scroll. And there are cheers and praise and glory bursting forth in heaven!

I believe we see all this and more in John’s book of Revelation. Chapter four and chapter twelve capture the essence of that drama and glory of Jesus’ ascension. And both are astoundingly powerful. This is not simply Jesus going up to heaven to get a crown put on his head. This is the crowning experience of everything Jesus has done to save you and to save me and to reveal God in a whole new light of redemption.

“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!” (Revelation 5:13) Amen.