

Thursday 21 May 2020 is marked, in what is called the liturgical calendar, as 'Ascension Day'. But have you ever considered why the Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ was really necessary? Maybe the thought has crossed your mind at some point that Jesus, having risen from the dead, could have stayed on earth and gone around doing so much more good. During the three years of His public ministry, He had demonstrated the amazing blessings He could bring into the lives of all sorts of people. That's why the crowds kept flocking to see and hear Him – to be helped and healed, to be taught and saved. Why could He not have gone on doing that, gradually visiting every part of the world?

Yet Jesus specifically told His disciples, "*it is for your good that I am going away.*" (John 16:7 NIV). He was telling them, in effect, that He would do them far more good by going than by staying! And not just for their good, in fact, but everybody else's! Had He stayed, however, the results would not have been any different to those experienced during His previous ministry. In the end, "*He was despised and rejected by men*" (Isa 53:3). He knew very well that people "*will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead*" (Luke 16:31), as He Himself did. There would still be those who would want to kill Him all over again!

So what good would be achieved by His leaving earth and returning to heaven? The first and most important good was:

FOR HIS OWN GLORY

Our Lord's ascension back to His Father in heaven resulted in the:

- a. confirmation of His Messiahship. In a discussion with the Pharisees, "Jesus asked them, "*What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?*" "*The son of David,*" they replied. He said to them, "*How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord'?*" Then Jesus quoted Psalm 110:1 – "*The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet."*" (Matt 22:41–44). The fact that Jesus ascended to heaven, and now waits as all His enemies are put into total subjection to Him, clearly demonstrates that He is 'great David's greater Son', the Messiah of God – and that is to His glory.
- b. confirmation of His deity. During His trial before the Sanhedrin, Jesus stated very plainly, "*from now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God*". They all asked, "*Are you then the Son of God?*" He replied, "*You are right in saying I am.*" Then they said, "*Why do we need any more testimony? We have heard it from his own lips.*" (Luke 22:69–71) The fact of Jesus being ascended and seated at the right hand of Almighty God confirms what the members of the Sanhedrin understood Him to be claiming – that He was none other than the very Son of God – which is also to His glory.
- c. conferring of His Father's glory: In what is often called our Lord's high-priestly prayer, Jesus prayed, "*Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.*" (John 17:5). Later on, Paul was inspired to write that the "*glorious Father ... raised him from the dead and seated him at his 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.*" (Eph 1:17–21). Being placed in such universal authority was a very obvious demonstration of His return to that glory which Jesus shared with the Father before His incarnation. Peter confirmed this further by stating that "*Jesus Christ ... has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand – with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.*" (1 Peter 3:21,22). This means that Jesus has the glory of sovereign rule over heaven's inhabitants as well as earth's.

Stephen, at the time of his martyrdom, "*looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God*" (Acts 7:55) – that is, he saw the ascended Jesus in heaven resplendent with God's glory.

Another element of our Lord's ascended glory will be powerfully demonstrated in the ultimate recognition of all created beings in submission to He who is "*exalted ... to the highest place*" and given "*the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*" (Phil 2:10,11). Father and Son will receive the glory due, even from enemies and rebels, atheists, idolaters and all the inhabitants of hell!

- d. restoration of His heavenly joy. Jesus was far from joyless while here on earth. On the night of His betrayal He prayed that His disciples would "*have the full measure of my joy within them.*" (John 17:13). However, the greatest of joy is only experienced in heaven, either for us or for the Lord Jesus. That is why He looked forward to "*the joy set before him*" after he had "*endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*" (Heb 12:2). This was a fulfilment of Psalm 16:11 – "*You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.*" Which is exactly what happened following our Lord's resurrection and ascension. So all the Lord's saved people are able to say, with the eye of faith, "*we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honour*" (Heb 2:9).

The greatest glory of heaven will be to see our Lord Jesus Christ, who was once crucified in shame for us, full of the glory of God. Resplendent and radiant, He will be "*dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes like blazing fire. His feet like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice like the sound of rushing waters*" (Rev 1:13–15).

The second glory of heaven will be that, on seeing Him, “*we shall be like him*” (1 John 3:2). It is true that we shall not be like Him in absolutely every respect, for He will still be more glorious than us; even so, “*the righteous will shine like the sun in kingdom of their Father.*” (Mt 13:43). Surely that will be unimaginably so amazing and exciting!

In the meantime, however, there are very great blessing that flow to us from Jesus as the ascended Lord:

FOR HIS CHURCH'S GROWTH

This is true both numerically and in terms of maturity. One of the most important reasons for the Ascension was so that Jesus should present His blood as an atonement for the salvation of sinners and so build His church throughout the world. The Old Testament high priest was “*selected from among men and appointed to represent them in matters related to God*” (Heb 5:1). The pinnacle of his work was to offer the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement and then, just once each year, go into the Holy of Holies to present the blood.

This is exactly what Jesus came into the world to do: “*he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, not part of this creation. 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, having obtained eternal redemption.*” (Heb 9:11,12). Then, “*when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.*” (Heb 10:12).

The whole basis of the salvation of the world depends exclusively and entirely on Jesus’ sacrificial death and then His being raised and ascended into heaven to present His blood as the only means of atonement for sin. Without the Ascension, our salvation would be impossible! But “*the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit, offered himself unblemished to God, [can] cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death*” (Heb 9:14).

It was all done so that the church could become the church! Without the Ascension there would be no people of God. No wonder Jesus told His disciples, “*it is for your good that I am going away.*” The disciples would have been an abandoned and disillusioned bunch of men if Jesus had not risen from the dead and then ascended. There would be no church for them to belong to!

The first blessing sent from the ascended Lord was for His church’s guidance, gifting and empowering and is the person of the Holy Spirit. “*Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.*” (John 16:7) And so He did. Just as Peter confirmed, in preaching about Jesus on the Day of Pentecost, “*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.*” (Acts 2:33) If it were not for the gift of the Holy Spirit, sent from the ascended Lord, Christianity would – like so many sadly-discarded church buildings in our country today – be a purposeless empty shell in the form of a rabble of ignorant and utterly ineffective ritualists, just like followers of all other religions! Praise God that this is not the case!

Having been sent from heaven, the initial work of the Holy Spirit, as the Spirit of truth, was to guide the disciples “*into all truth*” (John 16:13) by inspiring the writers of the New Testament. Then enlightening the minds of their listeners and readers as “*the Spirit of wisdom and revelation*” (Eph 1:17). Without His help, the Bible would be an utterly misunderstood book to unenlightened minds! No-one would ever be converted, for it is only as a result of the gift of the Counsellor from the ascended Lord that “*he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgement*” (John 16:8). Jesus’ ascension and gift of the Holy Spirit was essential for Him to build His church on earth.

The other great blessing that flows from the throne of the ascended Lord, is the maturing of His church. The presentation of His blood in the heavenly Holy of Holies, in order to cleanse His people’s consciences “*from acts that lead to death [was] so that we may serve the living God!*” (Heb 9:14) Christians “*have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ*” (1 Peter 1:2). Any ability to serve and obey the Lord would be impossible without the empowering of the Holy Spirit.

Without the gift of the Holy Spirit from the ascended Lord we could never “*grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.*” (2 Peter 3:18). Our ability to do any effective work for God would be impossible without Him.

Therefore, we constantly depend on our ascended Lord for all the support and grace we need in seeking to serve and obey Him. “*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.*” (Rom 8:34). All the help we need comes from Him. How grateful we should be that “*he always lives to intercede*” for us (Heb 7:25).

The church’s continued existence and growth in the world depends on her Saviour having ascended. Being enthroned in glory as sovereign Lord, God His Father “*placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church*” (Eph 1:22). Jesus is ascended as ruler over all for the purpose of building His church.

When the Lord has built His church, her heavenly home results from the Lord’s ascension: “*I am going to prepare a place for you.*” it would be a very strange situation if God’s people found themselves homeless in heaven! So the ultimate result of the Ascension will be found in our Lord’s glorious return after preparing His people’s home. His promise was that, “*if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.*” (John 14:2,3)

All true Christians should be so thrilled and grateful to belong to the the church of the ascended Saviour. Make sure you do indeed belong to Him.

There is just one more thing I want to share with you. The Lord's ascension is also

FOR THIS WORLD'S GOOD

The world continues largely in a state of total ignorance of its utter dependence on the ascended Lord Jesus Christ. People fail to realise that "*The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word ... [and is] sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.*" (Heb 1:3) The result of the Ascension is that, from heaven, Jesus sustains the world, maintaining its existence and life, from which everyone benefits. This is often called **common grace**. That was Paul's point in preaching about the Lord Jesus in Lystra: "*He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.*" (Acts 14:17)

The Lord's ascension and reign in heaven guarantees that the fallen world is not much worse a place than it is. Perhaps we ought to remind our non-Christian friends of this fact more often! However, the greatest good that this world can enjoy is through the ascended Lord's **saving grace**. The world's greatest benefit, by far, is by souls being saved and transformed into godly citizens – just like the Thessalonians, to whom "*the gospel came ... not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction.*" (1 Thess 1:5) That was only possible because the ascended Jesus had been "*exalted as Prince and Saviour that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel*" (Acts 5:31) – and not just to Israel, of course. How much we need to see the Lord working like that again in our land!

What wonderful encouragements come to all true born-again members of the ascended Christ's Church. Let's keep looking up to Him: "*Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who ... sat down at the right hand of the throne of heaven.*" (Heb 12:2) Let us do that in these difficult and somewhat threatening times by looking up to Him for all we need, in every way, for every day and all the day.

Let that awareness dominate your life each day: "*set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.*" (Col 3:2). No matter what difficult times may come, and whether this virus pandemic will abate or surge again, let us remember always to trust continually in our living Saviour and keep going to Him as our ascended Lord, our "*high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven*" (Heb 8:1).