

**Southport Presbyterian Church**  
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**Why Jesus Ascended to Heaven**  
**Acts 1:1-11**

<sup>1</sup>In my former book, *Theophilus*, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach <sup>2</sup>until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. <sup>3</sup>After his suffering, he showed himself to these men 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. <sup>4</sup>On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. <sup>5</sup>For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

<sup>6</sup>So when they met together, they 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.” (Acts 1:1-11, NIV)

This past Thursday was Ascension Day, the day Jesus ascended to Heaven 40 days after Easter.

Why did Jesus ascend to Heaven? What makes this important? Or as one Christian writer notes: “Would it not have been better if the Ascension had never happened? If Jesus had stayed on earth, he could answer our questions, solve our doubts, mediate our disputes of doctrine and policy” (*The Jesus I Never Knew*, Philip Yancey, p. 229).

Perhaps you have never reflected on the ascension yourself.

Concerning the Ascension of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ into Heaven, and I wish to share why He ascended to Heaven because it is important that He did so.

The first major reason Jesus ascended to Heaven was in order to send the Holy Spirit. Jesus says in **John 14:16-17, 26**: “**And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever — the Spirit of truth.... But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.**”

Jesus in **Acts 1:8** says, “**But you shall 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.**”

When Jesus ascended to Heaven, He sent the Holy Spirit on Pentecost several days later in all of His fullness to be with all of His disciples and followers forever. The Holy Spirit would help the disciples remember all Jesus had taught them. This was very important in the writing of the Gospel - that the disciples were able to recall and write down what Jesus taught. The Holy Spirit helped them.

The Holy Spirit would also give the disciples power to evangelize the world - boldness to preach the Gospel. We can see an example of this in Peter's great boldness and good preaching ability on the first Pentecost when he preached to the great crowd in Jerusalem that had gathered. The people also were amazed at hearing the disciples speak in the different languages of those in the crowd. We also see the Holy Spirit's guidance of Paul on his missionary journeys - opening and closing doors - guiding him to the countries and cities in which he was to preach the Gospel.

Today - as all through the history of the Christian Church - the Holy Spirit is still at work. He still gives men and women the power to preach and teach the gospel. He still calls men and women into the ministry and He still guides them to where they are to minister. He still touches and changes peoples lives as he did on the first Pentecost when He touched 3,000 people's lives through Peter's preaching - and these 3,000 became Christians.

This past week Bob and Maria Hill, our missionaries to Greece, shared at the Global Impact Team meeting how receptive the Iranian people living in Greece are to the Gospel - to the point where when Bob speaks about Jesus, the people applaud. Many of these Iranians have seen Jesus in dreams and visions, and their hearts are open to receiving Him as Lord and Savior. The Holy Spirit is still touching people's hearts today.

And the Holy Spirit still gives gifts to Christians including miraculous gifts which we see so evident today in the charismatic movement - all to be used in service for Jesus Christ.

So the Holy Spirit is present with every Christian today as he was almost 2,000 years ago - protecting, guiding, and helping every Christian to do and to become all that Jesus wants them to do and to become.

As part of this, witnessing for Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit helps us remember what to say.

**In Luke 21:12-15, Jesus says: "They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. This will result in your being witnesses to them. But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict." (Luke 21:12-15, NIV)**

The Holy Spirit helps us as witnesses of Jesus to give us the words and the wisdom we need to be a witness for our Lord.

The late Catherine Marshall in her book on the Holy Spirit called, The Helper, writes concerning the Holy Spirit's help on this: "It happened towards the end of a trip... to Australia. The British Commonwealth edition of my book *Beyond Our Selves* had just been released, and I had been asked to make some bookstore, press, and television appearances in Sydney and Melbourne. Among these was the televised program "Meet The Press" seen all over Australia and noted for its tough approach.

No hint of the questions was allowed ahead of time. The visitor faced a panel of press men and women who could ask anything they wished, and who had acquired a reputation for ruthlessness...

"Before the program began, quietly - within myself - I asked the Helper [the Holy Spirit] to take over. "This panel isn't exactly 'kings and governors,' "I told Him, "but they might as well be. Since there's no way I can meditate beforehand on how to answer, this is the perfect setup for You to handle. I am helpless; You are adequate. Please manage everything for me."

"And He did! Never have I had a prayer more gloriously answered. The first part of the answer was that the representatives of the press were not antagonistic. But on top of that, the Helper revealed Himself a brilliant Rememberer. I heard myself calmly giving dates, place names, quoting portions of

[my late husband] Peter Marshall's Senate prayers verbatim, even (most surprising of all) providing some sports data – I, who pay little attention to professional sports!

“So I could never doubt that this was all the Spirit's work” (The Helper, Catherine Marshall, p. 88-89).

The Holy Spirit is here to help us be good witnesses and remember all Jesus taught if we call on His help.

Second, Jesus ascended to Heaven for our sakes. Here is what this means for us. It means Jesus is our advocate before the Father. We read in **Hebrews 1:3**: “**He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.**” And in **I John 2:1-2**: “**My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense - Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.**”

When we sin, we are “in the wrong with the Father”, and we need help. Our case is not good. We need a friend at court. (TNBD, p.1262) We need an advocate.

And that person is Jesus Christ. He defends us when we sin. You see, we are guilty, and we need Him to plead our case. He does not rationalize our wrong. No, rather He paid the penalty for us, and we are forgiven. He tells the Father we believe in Him and that we have come to Jesus to seek forgiveness and be forgiven.

Jesus also ascended to Heaven to prepare a place for each of us, His followers. He said in **John 14:2-3**: “**There are many rooms in my Father's house; otherwise, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And 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.**”

Jesus is preparing a place for each of us, and one day He will return to take us to be with Him. Each of us will have a place of our own in Heaven, and when we die, Jesus will take us to the place He has prepared for us. And should He return for His Second Coming while we are still alive, we will still join Him in His Heavenly Kingdom.

Our greatest comfort, however, is not just that we'll have a place in heaven. No our greatest comfort, in fact, “the most satisfying definition of Heaven” as one person has said, is found in these words, “**that you also may be where I am.**” (**John 14:3, NIV**) “Where I am,” “Where Jesus is” – the best definition of Heaven. To know each of us will be with Jesus – that is our greatest comfort and hope in life and death.

Jesus also ascended to heaven so we would believe in Him by faith not sight. The disciple Thomas doubted that Jesus rose from the dead. Not unless he saw and touched Jesus would he believe. When Jesus did appear to Him, Thomas did believe. He had to believe by sight - not by faith. Jesus said to Thomas, “**Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.**” (**John 20:29**)

If Jesus had stayed on earth, people would believe in Him because they could see or touch Him. Such faith or belief based on sight or touch would be easy. But faith as the writer of Hebrew states “**is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.**” (**Hebrews 11:1**)

“Ultimately true faith must always be independent of sight” (TNBC, p. 966). Faith which believes without seeing or touching is much nobler than that of the Thomas variety which needs visual and physical proof before receiving. Jesus wants us to have faith in Him.

A third major reason for Jesus' ascension to Heaven is that it is all part of God's plan for history. It is now the disciples' responsibility to evangelize the world and tell about Jesus and His love. The Holy Spirit will be with them and help them.

One day the whole world will have heard the Gospel. Not all will believe. But all will have heard it and had the opportunity to respond. Then Jesus will return to earth as part of God's plan, and like the angels said to the disciples after Jesus ascended into Heaven, "This same Jesus, . . . , will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

Jesus will descend to the Mount of Olives and begin the process of setting up His Kingdom here on earth. Jesus ascended to Heaven in order to fulfill God's plan of evangelization of the world through Jesus' followers and in order for Jesus to return to earth to set up His Kingdom.

Jesus also ascended to Heaven to show His disciples and to show you and me something very important - something you pick up when you read **Acts 1:1-11** very carefully. Jesus ascended to Heaven to show us that He trusts us to fulfill the Great Commission in **Matthew 28:18-20** where He tells us: to **"go and make disciples of all nations,"** and also in **Acts 1:8**: to be His **"witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and the ends of the earth."**

Few of us may realize Jesus trusts us. We are to trust Him but we don't realize how much He trusts us! Jesus could have stayed on earth and done all the evangelizing Himself. Or He could even have had His angels do it if He had so chosen. But He did not.

Instead He chose His disciples and people like you and me who believe in Him to go out and tell the world about him. He did this not only so people would believe in Him by faith and not sight but also because He trusts us.

Concerning this aspect of Jesus' ascension, Philip Yancey writes: "... it seems obvious he planned this departure from the beginning. Nothing pleased Jesus more than the successes of his disciples; nothing disturbed him more than their failures. He had come to earth with the goal of leaving again, after transferring his mission to others..."

"Jesus left few traces of himself on earth. He wrote no books or even pamphlets. A wanderer, he left no home or even belongings that could be enshrined in a museum. He did not marry, settle down, and begin a dynasty. We would, in fact, know nothing about him except for the traces he left in human beings..."

"... As Augustine put it, 'You ascended from before our eyes, and we turned back grieving, only to find you in our hearts.'

"The New Testament declares that the future of the cosmos is being determined by the church (see **Romans 8:19-21; Ephesians 3:10**). Jesus played his part and then left. Now it is up to us.

"When Jesus departed, he left the keys of the kingdom in our fumbling hands..."

"... In the name of Jesus, St. Francis kissed the beggar and took off his robes, Mother Teresa founded the Home for the Dying, Wilberforce freed the slaves, General Booth established an urban Army of salvation, and Dorothy Day fed the hungry... God's hands on earth have reached wider since the Ascension..."

"... Jesus takes full responsibility for the constituent parts of his body... I think of Peter, whose [and his] bluster, love, hot-headedness, misdirected passion, and faithless betrayal... [Yet] On "rocks" like him, Jesus built his church, and he promised that the gates of hell would not prevail against it" (The Jesus I Never Knew, Philip Yancey, pp. 227-229, 233-236).

Jesus Christ has placed a great trust in our hands. May we as Christians not let our Lord down. Let's fulfill that trust and allow Him to build His Church through us.

And so, for all the above reasons, to send the Holy Spirit, to be our advocate before the Father, to prepare a place for us, to have people believe by faith and not by sight, to fulfill part of God's plan for history, and to show He trusts us, because of all the above reasons, it was important for Jesus to ascend to Heaven.

But there is one more major reason why Jesus ascended to heaven: He was going home.

Remember back in December I gave a sermon on The Son of God Became the Son of Man – that God became a human being in Jesus and experienced everything a human being experienced except sinning – though He was tempted in every way as we are.

That meant Jesus had to give up the beauty and grandeur of Heaven to be born, to grow up, and to die on this planet with all its problems. He had to leave his Father's side. He left the comforts of Heaven – a pain free, sorrow free existence – to be our Savior, our Rescuer here on earth.

But His job is done. Finished. Mission accomplished. He had experienced human life as He was supposed to. He died on the cross for our sins and brokenness, and He had risen bodily from the dead – conquering forever death, sin, and the evil one and his forces. Now His work is ended, and He is going home.

Concerning this beautiful part of the reason for the Ascension Philip Yancey writes: “If Easter Sunday was the most exciting day of the disciples’ lives, for Jesus it was probably the day of Ascension. He the Creator, who had descended so far and given up so much, was now heading home. Like a soldier returning across the ocean from a long and bloody war. Like an astronaut shedding his spacesuit to gulp in the familiar atmosphere of earth. Home at last.

“Jesus’ prayer at the Last Supper with his disciples reveals something of this point of view. “I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do,” Jesus prayed, “And now, Father glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.” Before the world began! Like an old man reminiscing – no, like an ageless God reminiscing – Jesus, who sat in a stuffy room in Jerusalem, was letting his mind wander back to a time before the Milky Way..., Jesus was making preparations to return home, to assume again the glory he had set aside” (The Jesus I Never Knew, Philip Yancey, p. 226).

Amen.

Well done, good and faithful servant. Welcome home, Son. Welcome home.