

Ascension Benefits

Text | Hebrews 4:14-16
Readings | Acts 1:6-11, Hebrews 4

40 days after Jesus rose from the dead, He rose from the earth until a cloud hid Him from the sight of the disciples.

And this is what we acknowledged together before when we said “I believe ... [that] Jesus Christ ... “Ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.”

And so, what we want to see today is **what His ascension means for us as His people**.

And to do that, let’s turn to Hebrews 4:14-16:

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

People of God, there are two aspects to these verses that we will focus on today.

As we seek to understand **what His ascension means for us as His people**, we will focus on the **explanation** of His ascension and the **application** of His ascension.

But before we do that we need to get something of a handle on the context of this passage.

The letter to the Hebrews is written to Jewish Christians who were considering abandoning the faith and reverting to Judaism.

In the face of intense persecution, they were starting to wonder if it was all really worth it. Maybe Jesus was not all that He was cranked up to be?

In response, the writer builds a painstaking case throughout the book that seeks to demonstrate the superiority of faith and life in Christ Jesus in comparison with the shadows and veils of OT Judaism.

He places various aspects of Jewish theology over here and trumps each one of them with the person and work of Jesus Christ.

And these verses in chapter 4 are part of that argument.

Now, one of the key aspects of the Jewish faith was the person and work of the High Priest.

And so, here, the writer wants them to see the superiority of Jesus over against the High Priests, including Aaron.

And one of the key aspects of Jesus' superiority to the High Priest is that as the great High Priest, He "has gone through the heavens."

With that in mind then, let's look firstly at the **explanation** of His ascension.

Now, the facts of His ascension, as we find them in Luke's Gospel and the words of Acts that we just read, are glorious in their simplicity.

One moment Jesus was talking with His disciples, and the next moment He was taken up into heaven.

Our concern today rests more with the significance of the ascension.

And the **explanation** that we find here centres on two aspects.

First of all, **who the Ascended One is**, and secondly, **what the Ascended One did**.

1. Well, in terms of **who the Ascended One is**, we read here that He is "Jesus the Son of God." And with this title we are immediately reminded that we are dealing with a person who possessed two natures.
 - a. The Ascended one is *Jesus*.
 - i. He is the male, human being, born to Mary, who was given the name Jesus.
 - ii. He is the one who had to learn to walk and talk; the one who brought a thrill to Mary's heart when He took His first wobbly steps on the floor at home and said 'mama,' or its Aramaic equivalent.
 - iii. He is the one who, as Hebrews 2:17 says, "had to be made like His brothers in *every way*."
 - b. But the Ascended One is also *the Son of God*.
 - i. After walking on water and rescuing a drowning Peter, He was the one whom Peter declared to be "the Son of God."
 - ii. After the darkness and earthquake that accompanied His death, he was the One whom the centurion declared to be "the Son of God."
 - iii. After announcing that He was the resurrection and the life, and before raising Lazarus from the dead, He was the One whom Martha declared to be "the Son of God."
 - c. And so, the Ascended One is both man and God – a fact we shall return to later on.
2. But this explanation also reveals much about **what the Ascended One did**.

- a. He is described, firstly, as “a great high priest.”
 - i. And so, let’s consider then what it meant to be a high priest.
 - 1. In Exodus 28 and 29 you can read about the High Priest’s garments and about how he was to cleanse himself, be dressed, and conduct the sacrifices.
 - 2. In Leviticus 16 we are told that Aaron, and the other High priests, were able to enter into the very presence of God. Once a year, they could enter the most holy place and approach the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant.
 - (a) And so, because of this, the High Priest was the highest of the high in Jewish society. Of all the Jews, he alone was able to go into the presence of the Almighty.
 - 3. But you will also read in Leviticus 16 that when his work was finished he had to leave.
 - 4. And on top of this, the Lord said to Moses, “Tell your brother Aaron not to come whenever he chooses into the Most Holy Place behind the curtain in front of the atonement cover on the ark, or else he will die.”
 - 5. And in addition, this same atonement needed to be made every year.
 - 6. And the atonement that was made was also made for the sins of Aaron himself and every other high priest as Heb 7:27 speaks of.
 - 7. And finally, when Aaron died, as all high priests eventually do, another high priest took over his duties until he also died, and so on and so on.
 - ii. But not so with Jesus.
 - 1. No, as the Great High Priest, Jesus does not go into a man-made tabernacle or temple. He goes up to what the temple represented – the very throne room of heaven.
 - 2. And once there, He stays there for that is where He truly belongs.
 - 3. And He has no need to offer atonement for His own sins, only for the sins of His people.
 - 4. And His death is not the end of His work; it ends His earthly work, but it only begins His heavenly work.
 - 5. And so, as our great High Priest, Jesus the son of God “has gone through the heavens!”
- b. But in terms of **what the Ascended One did**, He is also not “a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but ... one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet without sin.”
 - i. You know, in terms of Jewish religion, one of the great comforts for them was the fact that the High Priest was, in every sense, one of their own!
 - 1. A human being, just like them, despite all of his faults, some of which were very obvious at times, was chosen to be the one who entered into the presence of God to make atonement for their sins.
 - ii. And knowing this, the writer of Hebrews takes steps to remind His readers that the Great High Priest can sympathize with our weaknesses as one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are.
 - 1. Now, you need to note here that this verse is not suggesting that Jesus encountered every possible temptation there could ever be.
 - (a) Unlike you young people, Jesus was never tempted by a cell phone, for instance.
 - (b) As a young single man, those temptations specific to women, to the married, and to the elderly were not issues that confronted Him.

2. And yet having said this, at the root of every temptation that exists are the same basic trials and tests. And Jesus met each one of these victoriously.
 - (a) We see this, most noticeably, in the temptations set before Him by the devil in the desert.
 - (i) He felt the temptations associated with hunger.
 - (ii) He felt the temptation to impress others.
 - (iii) He felt the temptation to please Himself rather than trust in God.
 - (iv) He felt the temptation to try and manipulate God.
 - (v) He felt the temptation to raise up a false god in place of the true God.
 - (b) But right throughout His life He experienced the same basic temptations common to you and me: The temptation to doubt and despair. The temptation to disobey. The temptation to be selfish. The temptation to be lazy. The temptation to be loveless. The temptation to be hateful. The temptation to steal. The temptation to lose control and let them have it. The temptations of desire.
 - (c) He knew sorrow. He knew fear. He knew what it was like to be tired. He knew what it was like to be unloved, to be laughed at, to be bullied, and to be mocked. And He knew the dread of death.
3. And before you respond and say, "Well, it was different for Him because He couldn't sin." Let me remind you that His sinlessness only enhanced the magnitude of the temptation.
 - (a) Whereas you give in to the first hint of temptation, He experienced the fullness of its lure all the time.
 - (b) As one commentator says, "His whole life was one of temptation, and the very fact that He had powers and abilities which we do not possess only added to the stress. He was the fullest and most vivid personality that this world has ever known, and the very richness of His human nature exposed Him all the more fully to the assaults of temptation."
4. Brothers and Sisters, young people, and boys and girls, Jesus, the Ascended One, says to you today, "I know! I know! I know your life and your struggles. I am like you. I too have known your hurt and your sorrow. I too have known your fear. You have my sympathy, Dear one, because I am like you."
5. Is this then how you approach Him, as your sympathetic Saviour?
 - (a) In your prayers, do you pour out your heart to one who knows your human weakness and the lure of temptation?
 - (b) Are you comforted in knowing that your flesh is now in heaven, in the person of Jesus Christ?
6. You know, it's true, isn't it, that we find great comfort from being able to share our struggles with someone who has been where we are now.
 - (a) If we struggle with doubt, it helps us to talk with someone else who has struggled with doubt.
 - (b) If we struggle with addiction, it helps us to talk to someone who has struggled with addiction.

- (c) If we struggle with spiritual laziness, it helps to be able to talk with someone else who has those same struggles.
- 7. But when you think about it, while that person may be able to help us because they have been there too, they have also given in to temptation and sinned, most likely in the very same areas where you struggle. And so, their help can only go so far.
 - (a) But Jesus Christ, the Ascended One, is able to sympathize with each of your weaknesses, as one who has been tempted in every way, just as you are – and yet, as one who never sinned.
- 3. And so, because Jesus has ascended into heaven as the sinless one, He is able to encourage you with these words from 1 Corinthians 10:13, “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”

Let’s look then at the way out of temptation that enables us to stand up under it, by moving on to consider the **application** of His ascension.

Once again, there are two specific applications made in the text, and both of them begin with the words, “Let us...”

- 1. Firstly, in verse 14, we read, “Let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.”
 - a. As a Jew, your faith was aided by the work of the High Priest.
 - i. He would go into the Most Holy Place to make atonement for your sins.
 - 1. But as we have already seen, when He was done He had to come out again.
 - 2. He couldn’t stay in God’s presence.
 - 3. He couldn’t go into God’s presence whenever He wanted.
 - 4. And next year He had to do it all over again.
 - 5. And in actual fact, when the High Priest went into the Most Holy Place, he went in with a rope tied around his waist that trailed back all the way outside. Can you guess why?
 - (a) This was done in case he died in there. For if there was no rope, whoever went in to get him would be breaking God’s commandments not to enter the Most Holy Place. And so, the rope meant that if the High Priest died in the Most Holy Place, his body could be dragged out.
 - b. And despite what seem to us to be such obvious flaws and frailties in this method of making atonement, the Jews held firmly to their faith.
 - i. Don’t you then have greater reason to hold firmly to yours?
 - 1. Your great High Priest has conquered death and the grave!
 - 2. After making atonement, your great High Priest said, “It is finished!”
 - 3. Your Great High Priest needed no rope to haul Him out of death, for He himself burst the bonds of the grave!
 - 4. And your great High Priest has gone through the heavens!

2. But not only are we to hold firmly to our faith, it says also, "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace in our time of need."
 - a. Have you ever paused to wonder about what it was like to work as a High Priest?
 - i. In Luke's Gospel, we read the story of the events that led up to the birth of John the Baptist. I am sure you boys and girls know this story well. As Zechariah, John's father, was burning incense before the Lord, the angel of the Lord appeared before Him.
 1. Do you remember what happened to Zechariah then?
 - (a) It says that he "was startled and was gripped with fear."
 - ii. And I think this gives us something of an idea of how the Aaron must have faced his annual visit into the Most Holy place.
 1. He too had heard God thunder from Mt Sinai.
 2. He too had seen the fire of the Lord come out of the Most Holy Place to consume his sons Nadab and Abihu as well as Korah, Dathan and Abiram.
 3. How many times do you think he checked his calendar to make sure he had the right day before he went in?
 4. How do you think he felt as the 'just in case of sudden death' rope was tied around his waist?
 5. Do you think that Aaron went confidently into the Most Holy Place, thinking of the throne of God as a place of grace and mercy?
 6. I suspect that Aaron went in there frightened out of his wits; with knees knocking.
 7. I suspect that for Aaron, this was a throne of holiness and judgment.
 - b. Well, like Aaron, you too are summoned to come into the presence of the Lord.
 - i. But God Himself says to you that you are to approach the throne of grace with **confidence**, so that you may receive **mercy** and find **grace** in your time of need.
 1. In terms of **mercy**, the story has been told of a mother who sought from Napoleon the pardon of her son. The emperor said it was the man's second offense, and justice demanded his death. "I don't ask for justice," said the mother. "I plead for mercy." "But," said the emperor, "he does not deserve mercy." "Sir," cried the mother, "it would not be mercy if he deserved it, and mercy is all I ask." "Well, then," said the emperor, "I will show mercy." And her son was saved.
 - (a) Well, you too are a sinner who deserves the fires of hell. By your sins, you have offended God's justice.
 - (i) The only thing that can change this is God's mercy. And because of the work of the Ascended One, He has become to you a God of mercy.
 2. Some of you will have heard this illustration before. But in terms of **grace**, there was once an old Indian who came to faith in Jesus Christ. Friends asked him to explain the change in his life. Reaching down, he picked up a little worm and placed it on a pile of leaves. Then, touching a match to the leaves, he watched them smoulder and burst into flames. And as the flames worked their way up to the centre where the worm lay, the old chief suddenly plunged his hand into the centre of the burning pile and snatched out the worm. Holding the worm gently in his hand, he gave this testimony to the grace of God: "Me. . . that worm."

- (a) Well, you too are an undeserving sinner. Whatever good that may come to you can only come as a result of God's grace.
 - (i) And because of the work of the Ascended One, He has become to you a God of grace.
- 3. And the One whose earthly work has inclined God to be merciful and gracious towards you, continues His work in heaven right now.
 - a. Romans 8:34 tells us that "Christ Jesus ... is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us."
 - i. So when you are tempted and you need to know the way out of temptation, turn to Him in prayer.
 - ii. Approach the throne of grace with confidence and seek His mercy and grace in your time of need.
 - b. And when you want to do this but are confused about what to ask for and buffeted by the weakness of your flesh, know this extra comfort which comes to you in Romans 8:26, "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express."

40 days after Jesus rose from the dead, He "ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty."

He is not idly sitting there, Brothers and Sisters, just twiddling His thumbs.

No He is busy making intercession for you.

He is pleading your cause before our Father, begging Him to continue to be merciful and gracious. And because of this, you may be sure that you will receive mercy and find grace to help you in your time of need. Amen.