

# *The Ascension*

CSI: Jerusalem

Message 4

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Kempsville Presbyterian Church

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*“... where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf.”<sup>1</sup>*

Beachhead Story

Today we are going to talk about the Beach head that God established for us in heaven. That is what the Ascension is all about *“... where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf.”<sup>2</sup>* Will you pray with me?

PRAYER

READ ACTS 1:1-11

## *I. The Event*

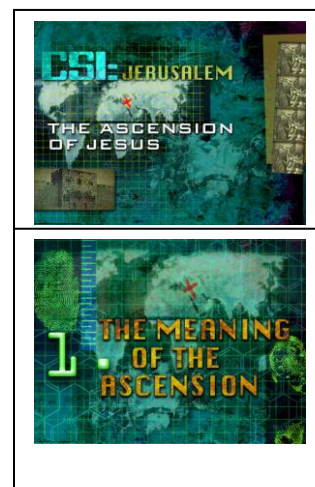
In a few minutes we'll talk about the evidence for the The Ascension. First of all, let's talk about the event itself.

Let's be honest about it. It's crazy. Jesus is talking to them and then suddenly he begins to drift upwards into the sky. As he is doing so, he's still talking to them. The fact that it's hard to get your head around it is implied in the passage we just read. Let's revisit verse 11, <sup>11</sup>“Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky?” <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996, c1984 (Heb 6:20). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

<sup>2</sup>*The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996, c1984 (Heb 6:20). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

<sup>3</sup>*The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996, c1984 (Ac 1:11). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.



“Standing there, looking into the sky.” I guess so. I’m not sure anything could prepare you for a moment like that. I love what Bob Mumford the Bible teacher used to say about this, “You could always tell who the disciples were. They were the guys with the sunburn inside of their mouths, standing their gaping as Jesus suddenly ascended.”

Before we ever get to the question of evidence, first of all, we’ve got to ask the question of meaning. What’s this event mean?

I want to point two things out to you:

- 1) Jesus ascended into heaven in bodily form. That’s huge.
- 2) Jesus ascended into a “cloud”. That’s . . . maybe, weird.

Let’s start with the cloud . . . “a cloud hid him from their sight.” Let’s start with the cloud. What kind of cloud? Cumulus? Stratus? Nimbus?



None of them. This was a “God cloud”. Let’s do a little Old Testament remembering and New Testament confirmation.

Moses. Leading Israel through the wilderness. Check out Exodus 33:7-11 . . .

***<sup>9</sup> As Moses went into the tent, the pillar of cloud would come down and stay at the entrance, while the LORD spoke with Moses. <sup>10</sup> Whenever the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance to the tent, they all stood and worshiped, each at the entrance to his tent. <sup>11</sup> The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend.<sup>4</sup>***

You know the story. God would show up and speak to Moses and when He did there was this God cloud present.

Let’s talk New Testament. Mark 9. Jesus and Peter, James, and John are on top of Mount Tabor in Israel. Suddenly, Jesus is transfigured and his clothes and face take on the appearance of lightning. Incredible. And then . . .

***<sup>7</sup> . . . a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!”<sup>5</sup>***

Same as Moses, right? So now let’s return to the story at hand, The Ascension. What kind of cloud did Jesus disappear into? It wasn’t a natural cloud because this was no mere natural event. Bishop John Spong ridicules the whole story of The Ascension by

<sup>4</sup>*The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996, c1984 (Ex 33:9-11). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

<sup>5</sup>*The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996, c1984 (Mk 9:7). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

saying that if Jesus ascended literally on that day then even now, 2000 years later, he wouldn't even be out of our galaxy. He misses the point. The cloud was God. God's immediate Presence just as it was with Moses or on Mount Tabor.

Jesus ascended into God. The Presence of God. Heaven. That's the point of the story. Jesus has gone back to be with God in heaven, just as he said he would. Where else would you expect the Son of God to end up?

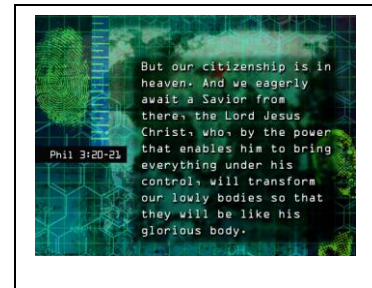
Now, let's talk about the second incredible piece of this story. Jesus ascended in bodily form. Now here's the way most of us think about it . . . sure, Jesus may have started out the Ascension in bodily form. After all, he was raised from the dead. Bodily. It was a literal Resurrection. Physical. Just like what's coming our way at the end of the Age.

But . . . many of us cut it off there and have this idea that somehow Jesus' body "de-particularizes" once he gets to heaven. It's sort of like Star Trek . . . you know. "Beam me up, Scotty". Once Jesus gets on the other side of this world, gets into heaven, his body somehow diffuses into some great cosmic something or other. Some great Spirit . . . or something. You see, we have this idea – it comes from Greek philosophy – that somehow flesh and heaven do not mix.

Really? Why do we take that face value? Let's see what the Bible says about that in the person of Jesus.

Check out this verse:

***<sup>20</sup> But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>21</sup> who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. <sup>6</sup>***



Check out that final phrase . . . ***“will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.”*** What word shows up twice? Body.

We have a body here. As did Jesus. But check this out. He has a body there. A “glorious body” . . . but a body nonetheless. Kind of makes you wonder, doesn't it, what that “glorious body” might look like.

The Bible tells us. Revelation 1 . . .

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<sup>6</sup>*The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996, c1984 (Php 3:20-21). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

*and among the lampstands was someone “like a son of man,”<sup>a</sup> dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. <sup>14</sup> His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. <sup>15</sup> His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters . . . His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.*

Mmmm. So here’s the deal about that body of Jesus. It is very different, but it is also very much the same. His hair is white like wool . . . but he has a head. And hair. His eyes are like blazing fire . . . but he has eyes. His feet are like bronze glowing in a furnace . . . but he has feet. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance . . . but he has a face.

Now check out this verse . . .

*<sup>17</sup> When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: “Do not be afraid.”*

A hand will welcome us into heaven. A glorified hand. The hand of the Son of God. But, still, a human hand.

Am I just weird? Am I just giving you some weird and personal interpretation of Scripture. No. John Knox in the Scot’s Confession writes that Jesus returned to heaven still wearing our flesh . . . “the self same body”. How about early church fathers?

Justin asserted Jesus’ resurrection and ascension “in the flesh in which he suffered.” Tertullian asserted that “Jesus is still sitting there at the right hand of the Father, man, yet God . . . flesh and blood, yet purer than ours.”

If you’re still working on getting your head around this then let me ask you about Christ’s return. What kind of return will it be? The answer is simple. Bodily. We put it this way in our EPC Essentials of the faith . . . “*Jesus Christ will come again to the earth – personally, visibly, and bodily – to judge the living and the dead.*”

So here’s the deal . . . if he went to heaven in a body and is coming back in bodily form . . . then it would seem like during the in-between while He is in heaven . . . the Son of God would still have a body. You see . . . he is forever the God-man. As we sing it in the hymn, “rich wounds yet visible above, in beauty glorified”.

“Okay”, you say. “I get it . . . I think . . . Jesus ascended in bodily form. He’s in heaven in his resurrected and now glorified body.”

“Now tell me why I care.”

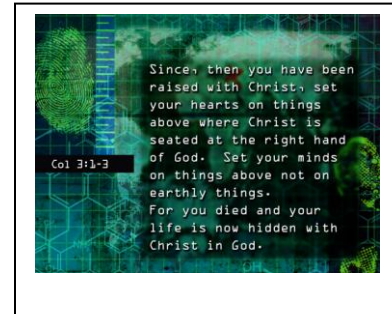
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<sup>a</sup> Daniel 7:13

I'm so glad you asked. Let's look at some Scripture . . . and then let's get radical.

***Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup> Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. <sup>3</sup> For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.<sup>7</sup>***

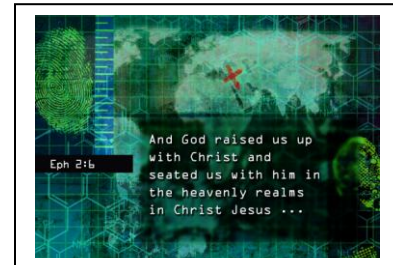
***("your life is now hidden with Christ in God.")***  
Wow. I wonder what that means.



Now check out this verse:

***<sup>6</sup> And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus,***

Let me put this in human terms. Helen and I have seven kids and the fact of the matter is that our DNA is in those seven kids . . . in every one of them and in every one of their cells. You might say that Helen and I are "in them". Wherever they go, they take us. Crazy, and maybe a little bit weird for our kids if they think about it too much, but from a certain perspective and in a very real way . . . true.



While they are their own people. But they carry the essence of who we are with them. And they will carry us with them, wherever they go as long as they carry that human flesh. The only way they could lose us would be to lose that body.

Our connection with them is a very real connection because it's a very physical connection.

This is exactly the kind of connection that Jesus has with the human race. Physical. Why do I say that? He became a man. A person. Flesh and blood. That's what the Bible clearly teaches and why it's the Church rejected various heresies such as which suggested that Jesus took on the appearance of man, sort of like a really good make up job, but he wasn't really a man.

No. Jesus became fully man and at the same time was still fully God. Our connection to Him is that he not only came to us – God had been doing that a lot in the Old Testament – but he became one of us. And it was in becoming one of us that the whole redemption thing happened. God becomes a man and pays for sin. God becomes a man and reunites mankind and himself in the person of Jesus. God becomes a man and can identify with us.

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<sup>7</sup>*The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996, c1984 (Col 3:1-3). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

The new thing in Jesus, the whole New Testament, is that God becomes one of us and that changes everything. So . . . if God ceased to be one of us when he left planet earth and headed back to heaven . . . wouldn't that change everything back? All of a sudden this union between man and God in the person of Jesus . . . shredded.

I don't know what would have happened if Jesus didn't maintain his humanity as well as his deity . . . but what I do know is this . . . it didn't change back because the Bible is clear that Jesus still is in human flesh. Just like Tertullian wrote, "Jesus is still sitting there at the right hand of the Father, man, yet God . . . flesh and blood, yet purer than ours."

All of this stuff messes with you. Big time. Jesus ascended and ascended in bodily form blows a lot of stuff away. First of all it explodes , the idea that there is Jesus is just one of many options. Hey, look if Jesus, that Jesus, Jesus of Nazareth is the one in heaven seated at the right hand of God then forget this idea that Jesus is somehow a metaphor for true spirituality (whatever that might be). Forget that Jesus was just the next in a series of men who had the "Christ spirit" . . . before him it was Aristotle and after him it was Mohammed. (Whatever that might mean). Forget that Jesus is just one option among many and that all paths lead to God.

Hey, look, if you when you get to heaven the One you bump into is Jesus of Nazareth, resurrected, yes. Glorified yes. But still that Jesus then . . . I got news for you . . . he's not one option among many. He is exactly what he said he was . . . "the way, the truth, and the life and the only way to the Father."

Here's another thing it messes with. The world. It does that because the world believes that it contains the ultimate reality. You meet that every day when you talk to people who says things like, "What matters is what we can see." "What's real is what I can wrap my hands around."

You see, Jesus ascended brings a counter claim against the arrogance of this life that says it's what's of ultimate significance. Jesus ascended means that there is a whole 'nother world. A different reality which is infinitely larger and infinitely more important. Heaven. And that reality is no mere idea but it is a real world, a real place and it is from that place that the affairs of this life are directed and given meaning.

Jesus ascended means that we don't look in for ultimate meaning. Or around us. But rather, we look up. You see, we live in era of the mundane . . . people looking for meaning in things like boats, and jobs, and beautiful bodies. Jesus ascended tell us that that the real meaning of this life is beyond this life . . . it's not in the mundane but in the transcendent. This is exactly what the Bible tells us in Colossians 3 . . .

***Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup> Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. <sup>8</sup>***

You can have your small view of life if you want it. I think I'll take the big view. God. And heaven. And eternity.

And here's another thing about that Jesus ascended truth that's a big deal . . . when Jesus got there he took his seat at the right hand of the Father. What's that about? "Right hand" in the Bible means authority. Power. The Hebrew name "Benjamin" means "son of my right hand" or "son of my power".

The towering truth is this . . . Jesus is in heaven and is the expression of God's authority and power. Check out another ascension verse . . . Philippians 2:9-11:

***Therefore God exalted him to the highest place  
and gave him the name that is above every name,  
<sup>10</sup> that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
<sup>11</sup> and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.<sup>9</sup>***

Jesus ascended means that He is Lord. Of everything. And that we owe him everything. That's not cool because we Americans think God exists for us. George Barna in his most recent research on the attitudes of Americans towards God discovered the following:

*To increasing millions of American, God . . . exists for the pleasure of humankind. Americans align with values that give them control.*

Said differently, the question is no longer "What is my duty?" but rather how can I get the greatest enjoyment out of life and how can I best succeed in dodging it's burdens.

The message of Jesus ascended, seated at the right hand of God, and so reigning as Lord of Lords hardly squares with such values.

I think I'm beginning to figure out why, after having been in church for 32 years, I have never heard a sermon on The Ascension.

But while the Ascension means all that challenging stuff, here's something else it means . . . I'm already there. <sup>3</sup> ***For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.<sup>10</sup>***

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<sup>8</sup>*The Holy Bible : New International Version.* 1996, c1984 (Col 3:1-2). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

<sup>9</sup>*The Holy Bible : New International Version.* 1996, c1984 (Php 2:9-11). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

<sup>10</sup>*The Holy Bible : New International Version.* 1996, c1984 (Col 3:1-3). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

It also tells me about the truth I get from observing life . . . about Helen and I and our seven kids. Our DNA is in them. In their bodies. Where they go. We go. The only way they could “drop us” would be by dropping their bodies. We’re stuck in them. Period. Forever.

And I don’t know what would have happened to us – you and me – those of us who have put our faith in Christ – if Jesus dropped that human body on his way back to heaven, de-particularized, sort of the “Scotty, beam up thing” and turned into some kind floating stuff never to be re-assembled.

But I do know this . . . since Jesus went back to heaven in his human body our connection with him is the same connection that started the whole story. God became a man. Mankind and God were joined together in the most literal fashion imaginable in the Person of Jesus. And I do know that when I put my faith in Christ that more happened than Jesus coming into me. I was put in Jesus.

Spiritually it happened, I have no doubt, but there is a huge meaning in what the Bible teaches when it insists that Jesus is back in heaven in human flesh . . . Jesus carries me with him wherever he goes just as certainly as our children carry us wherever they go.

And I know, for certain, that because Jesus did not drop his human flesh when he returned to glory he did not drop me. He carries me. I am in Christ. Hidden in him but there none the less. Jesus is seated at the right father and somehow, incredibly, I am seated there too.

That’s why this world never entirely feels like home to me. I belong somewhere else. I am already connected. And because Jesus went before me, I will join him there.

One more thing about Jesus, up there in heaven. Do you know what he’s doing. Yes, he’s reigning. Yes, he’s ruling. Yes, he’s in charge of everything . . . the good and the bad, the happy and the sad, working all things together for our good. Yes he’s building our home in heaven . . . preparing a place for us.

But do you know what I love especially about Jesus in heaven and what’s he’s doing for you and for me. He’s praying.

*<sup>34</sup> Who is he that condemns? 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.<sup>11</sup>*

Charnock said that he who sways the scepter also has bowels of compassion. I love that Jesus prays for me. Sometimes I struggle wrestling against Satan and all that he throws at us . . . we are in a war my friends and our enemy is powerful . . . and sometimes when I

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<sup>11</sup>*The Holy Bible : New International Version.* 1996, c1984 (Ro 8:34). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

do not know what I will do this I remember something. Jesus prays. I say, “Jesus, thank you for praying for me. Thank-you that you are my priest. My high priest.”

Think about that . . . the authority of the universe is also the Great Intercessor, he who is the power is also the priest, the King is the compassionate one, the Lord, the lover of our souls. Even now he remembers that we flesh . . . for even now he is also flesh Himself.

Some of you need to hear that right now because life is crushing you down and you wonder if you will make it through. Let me tell you something. You will. Why? Because Jesus prays for you. Intimately. Constantly. Personally. Get this . . . even right now Jesus is praying for you.

So you asked me, don’t you remember, why you should care about this stuff. Why it would matter that Jesus was ascended and ascended in bodily form. I hope you’re getting at now. At least a little bit. There is so much more to tell you . . . but the hour is late.

## II. Evidence

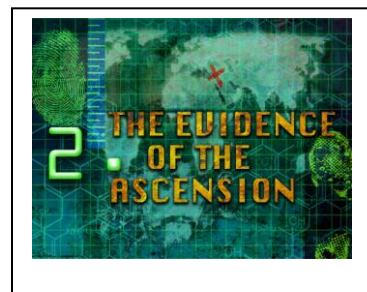
So how do you prove something like that? Jesus went to heaven in his body. I don’t think anybody got a photo and I looked on YouTube but nobody got a video.

But there is evidence.

If you’re a nonbeliever have you ever considered how many Christians there are? Over a billion. And here’s something interesting about Christians . . . they are incredibly different and yet they all have the same story. And the story is not that of adopting a belief system. The story all these Christians have is of a personal encounter with Jesus Christ.

Listen to this story of a Muslim who became a believer, Adel Mohammed:

*Several weeks later, however, I attended another meeting, where once again I heard the Gospel being preached, and it was there that God granted me the ability to repent and the power to believe in the Person and glorious works of Jesus Christ. I knew, without a shadow of doubt that my sins were graciously pardoned, and sensed an internal transformation and an awakening to God and a desire to know, love, serve, obey and worship my most blessed Creator and Redeemer.*



So you might say that there is a billion – or more – pieces of evidence out there of people with a personal encounter with Christ.

It's also true that these people come from every part of the world. You see, sometimes people suggest that Christianity is just a Western thing. As if it were just a product of our culture. Really? The fastest growing Christian population in the world today is in China. 100,000 a day coming to faith in Christ. The second fastest is in India – roughly 40,000 a day coming to Christ. China and India are not Western cultures. In fact, China is an anti-Western culture. Every nation, every culture. Christianity is not a Western thing . . . it's a God thing.

Chinese or American. Indian or Arab. Jew or Gentile. Muslim or atheist. Man or woman. Young or old. Every Christian tells the same story . . . Christ came to them. Became personally real to them.

So what's the evidence for this thing we cannot see . . . The Ascension? It's what we can see. People of every possible description who all have the same story. They have met Christ.



If you're a nonbeliever it's important for you to consider. Something's going on with an awful lot of people. Is it not only reasonable to consider faith in Christ. At least to begin asking questions. To at least begin asking God is He is really there and if Christ is His Son.

And if you're a believer there's another side of the evidence to consider . . . we've talked about some of the evidence for faith in Christ over the past four weeks. And do you know what some of the best evidence is? It's you. It's how you live your lives and your own faith in Jesus Christ. Here's what Paul had to say about that:

***<sup>2</sup> You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. <sup>3</sup> You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. <sup>12</sup>***

So . . . be the evidence. Be the living letter. Be willing to let people investigate your own lives as you live your faith out in front of them. The ancient evidence is strong and compelling. But just as compelling is the evidence of your life and you live it devotedly for Jesus Christ.

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<sup>12</sup>*The Holy Bible : New International Version.* 1996, c1984 (2 Co 3:2-3). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.