

“Basic Truth” series, #10

Understanding the Ascension¹

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God has always held ultimate power, and Jesus is God. But Jesus is also fully man. No man (or angel for that matter, including Satan) has ever held absolute power or been the ultimate sovereign over heaven and earth—that is, until the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. Jesus, the God-man, now sits at the right hand of God (a biblical figure of supreme power and authority; cf. Eph. 1:20-21; Heb. 1:3-4; 1 Pet. 3:22). Having saved His people, He rules over all things for their sake.

The End of Satan’s Rule

Prior to His crucifixion, burial, and resurrection, Jesus said, “Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out” (John 12:31). Later He said to His apostles, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth” (Matt. 28:18). There had definitely been a transfer of authority, and one of great significance. This must be carefully qualified, however. Realizing first of all that Satan’s power has always been limited and derived from God (that is, not absolute or self-initiated), we must also realize that Satan is not dead. He has not been stripped of all power or authority. He commands a strong spiritual force (cf. Eph. 6:10-12; 1 Pet. 5:8) and is even said in some places to retain power and authority over the world (e.g. 2 Cor. 4:3-4; 1 John 5:19).

The end of Satan’s rule might be best described as “the *beginning* of the end.” Think in terms of a military victory where *the* decisive battle has been won, but a strong force of resistance remains. In this light it could be said that Satan *has been* defeated and he *is being* defeated. Likewise, it could be said that Christ has both *defeated* Satan and *is defeating* Satan. As Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:25, “[Christ] must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet.”

Completion and Continuance

The ascension marks two other aspects of Christianity: 1) the completion of Christ’s work of atonement; 2) the continuance of His intercession. Once each year, the Jewish high priest would perform the animal sacrifice that symbolized atonement for sin. This sacrifice did not provide *actual* atonement, “For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins” (Heb. 10:4). This ritual foreshadowed the actual atonement that would be accomplished by Christ. True forgiveness, whether for Old Testament saints or New Testament saints, has always come through the blood of Christ.

The priest would slaughter a goat (symbolizing Jesus’ death on the cross), but the ceremony was not complete at that point. The priest would then take the blood of the sacrifice into the holy of holies—the part of the tabernacle that symbolized the presence of God with the people. He would sprinkle the blood of the sacrifice on the mercy seat, the cover of the ark of the covenant, which was kept behind the veil. Only when the blood of the sacrifice was presented to God by the high priest was God’s anger appeased (again, only symbolically). The sins of the people were then symbolically placed on a second goat (called “Azazel,” or “the scapegoat”) and carried far away into the wilderness (cf. Ps. 103:12).

Jesus fulfilled both the role of the High Priest and that of the sacrifice. After laying down His own life, He rose from the grave and ascended into heaven as our High Priest where He presented Himself to God. Without His entrance into heaven, it would have been as if the priest killed the goat but never went into the holy of holies with the blood. (Note: Important comparisons and contrasts between Christ and the earthly high priests are explained in the book of Hebrews, chapters 7-10)

Although Christ’s priestly work of intercession was completed in heaven, it also continues forever (cf. Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25; 1 John 2:1).

Our High Priest continually provides access for us to the Father.

When the New Testament speaks of believers drawing near to God, it is always through Jesus Christ (e.g. Heb. 10:19-22; 1 Pet. 2:5). This serves to remind us that Christians are forgiven people, but their forgiveness is in the blood of Christ. Christians are righteous in the sight of God, but their righteousness is not their own. It is the righteousness of Christ. Whether we are offering prayers of petition or worshiping God, we may only approach the Father through Christ our Mediator (1 Tim. 2:5)—our Great High Priest. Even forgiven, righteous people have no access to the Father except through Jesus Christ.

As our High Priest, Jesus prays for us.

Moses, the mediator of the Old Covenant, prayed to God on behalf of the Israelites (cf. Exodus 32:11-13). Jesus, the Mediator of the New Covenant, prays for all true believers. He demonstrated this even when on earth (cf. John 17). But this is also what is in view in passages like Romans 8:34 and Hebrews 7:25. The language used in these passages indicates that the intercession of Christ is active and ongoing. Jesus is not merely standing in the presence of the Father presenting Himself as our sacrifice, He is actively and specifically praying for believers.

¹ This material adapted from the commentary section of the catechism for Christ Fellowship of Kansas City entitled, *Questions and Answers for Learning and Living the Christian Faith*, Copyright © 2004, Christ Fellowship of Kansas City.