

Week 4: Ascension, Session, & Reign; Conclusion

Introduction

Good morning everyone! Before we jump into the lesson, let's pray!

Well, today is the last day of our Sunday School class on the doctrine of Christology.

Today, we will wrap up by talking about the *rest* of what the Westminster Larger Catechism describes as Christ's exaltation: his ascension, current place seated at the right hand of the Father, and future return. As usual, we'll have short breaks between our discussion of each of those for questions. Then, at the end of the class, I'll *try* to sum up everything we've said in the last four weeks. (We'll see how that goes.) Because we've covered a *lot* of ground over the last couple weeks, I've left some a bunch of extra time at the end for questions about *anything* we've covered, so start thinking now!

Part 1: Ascension

The doctrine

I'll open our discussion of the ascension by simply quoting the Apostles' Creed: "He ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty."

Scriptural basis

This comes straight from Acts 1, where we read that the disciples asked Jesus about restoring Israel to what they thought was her place in the world, still not fully understanding what this Messiah was really doing. So he commissioned them, and then:

After He had said this, He was taken up as they were watching, and a cloud took Him out of their sight. While He was going, they were gazing into heaven, and suddenly two men in white clothes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up into heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come in the same way that you have seen Him going into heaven."

The angels' question here makes me laugh a little. Of course, the angels have the right of it: "Jesus told you what to expect. Get back to Jerusalem and wait for the Spirit, and then go to the nations!" At the same time, I suspect that if I watched Jesus ascend into the sky and disappear into the clouds, I would *also* stand and stare. I'm not sure it felt like *good news*.

In our lives

But it is. All the Reformation confessions and catechisms pick up on this; but the Heidelberg Catechism has my very favorite way of putting it:

Q49: How does Christ's ascension to heaven benefit us?

First, he is our advocate in heaven in the presence of his Father. Second, we have our own flesh in heaven as a sure pledge that Christ our head will also take us, his members, up to himself. Third, he sends his Spirit to us on earth as a corresponding pledge. By the Spirit's power we seek not earthly things but the things above, where Christ is, sitting at God's right hand.

That is: Christ's ascension is good news for us in three ways—

- First, because we have an advocate in heaven. I'll say *much* more about this in the next section.
- Second, he didn't just *junk* his humanity and leave it behind. He came to save us as human beings, so he remains human. We can be *confident* that will finish saving this humanity, all of it, soul and skin and bones alike, because (to go back to my favorite hymn): "...the incarnate God ascended / pleads the merit of his blood." God who became man, prophet, priest, and king of Israel, righteous sacrifice, rose from the dead—and then went bodily to heaven.
- Third, he sent us his Spirit to empower us to (as Colossians 3 says) "seek what is above, where the Messiah is, seated at the right hand of God." And why? "For you have died, and your life is hidden with the Messiah in God."

The Ascension is good hope for our full humanity to be saved, and strong exhortation to look to Christ and seek first the kingdom.

Now: what questions do you have?

Part 2: Session

All right, let's keep moving!

The doctrine

The second section today is what is sometimes called Christ's *session*. The word originally came out of Latin meaning "seated", and that's actually the short version of the doctrine! Again, from the Apostles' Creed: "He is seated at the right hand of the Father Almighty."

Scriptural basis

Many places in the New Testament use this phrase. Hebrews 1:3 reads:

After making purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

We heard it a minute ago in the exhortation in Colossians 3, to “seek what is above, where the Messiah is, seated at the right hand of God.” Ephesians 1:20 says:

He [that is, God] demonstrated this power in the Messiah by raising Him from the dead and seating Him at His right hand in the heavens—far above every ruler and authority, power and dominion, and every title given, not only in this age but also in the one to come.

So Scripture tells us over and over again that Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father. But... what does that mean for us, exactly? Part of the answer is that he continues doing what the Son has always been doing: he is the one through whom the Father created all things, and he is the one who sustains all of creation by his powerful word. But now, in Christ, the Son does more for us: he reigns as our good king, and he intercedes for us as our merciful high priest.

Kingship

First, Jesus is *ruling now*, even his reign is not *complete*. As Hebrews notes, “We do not yet see everything subjected to him.” But he is nonetheless ruling. That’s what the imagery of being seated at the right hand of the Father *means*. And that’s not just his rule over the church: as Ephesians tells us, “far above every ruler and authority, power and dominion.”

The Westminster Larger Catechism says:

Q54: How is Christ exalted in his sitting at the right hand of God?

Christ is exalted in his sitting at the right hand of God, in that as God-man he is advanced to the highest favor with God the Father, with all fulness of joy, glory, and power over all things in heaven and earth; and does gather and defend his church, and subdue their enemies; furnishes his ministers and people with gifts and graces, and makes intercession for them.

So Jesus’ rule as king means that he gathers us into his church in the first place, and then he protects us afterward! He’ll never lose us. Because, as he told us in John: he doesn’t lose *anyone* the Father has given to him. He also has the right to give us the gifts and graces we need as his people—and he exercises that right!

I also love that it calls out that he has “all fulness of joy, glory, and power over all things in heaven and earth”! The one whose earthly life was so marked by grief now gets to reign in *joy*, because he finished the task. And we can rejoice in that, too!

We'll come back to this in the final section today, because, again, his reign is not yet *complete*. But it has *begun*. And that's good news for us because it means that whatever comes our way—and if we're honest life is full of things that can make us wrestle with this, but it remains the truth—Jesus is king. That's the first thing we see: Jesus is king.

Priesthood

The second thing we see is that last phrase in Westminster's answer; "and makes intercession from them"—straight out of Hebrews, which says that by the merit of his death and resurrection he *is* our high priest, and as our high priest he helps us when we are tested. He sympathizes with our weaknesses. He calls us to come his throne when we need mercy and grace, and he will give them. And he remains our high priest forever. He never dies, so "He always lives to intercede for them." For *us*.

Here again, I think the Westminster Larger Catechism just nails this: > > **Q55:** How does Christ make intercession? > : Christ makes intercession, by his appearing in our nature continually before the Father in heaven, in the merit of his obedience and sacrifice on earth, declaring his will to have it applied to all believers; Answering all accusations against them, and procuring for them quiet of conscience, notwithstanding daily failings, access with boldness to the throne of grace, and acceptance of their persons and services.

How could it possibly get better than this? Jesus Christ, God the Son incarnate, *prays for us*. Says we are his. Defends against every accusation—from Satan, from our own consciences, from our own *real* failings. "I dealt with that," he says. "It is finished." Sweet, sweet, deep, deep comfort to our souls. You are never alone. Christ is always praying for you. When you are asleep, he's praying for you. When you feel too spiritually weak to pray, he's praying for you, praying for you to come to him and get the grace you need. When you feel too guilty to pray, the one who took *all* your sins is praying for you. *Forever*, God the Son in Christ Jesus—the king!—is serving us as our high priest, praying to God the Father for us. That is good, good news!

Thanks be to God in Christ Jesus, who is our

Part 3: Return & Future Reign

For our very last doctrine, let's look at Jesus' return and future reign. Before we get into this, though, I want to note that I am *not* going to get into the specific details today of things like the tribulation or the millennium. If you care to know, I'm an amillennial guy at this point and I'm happy to talk to you about that outside of this context. For our purposes *today*, those distinctions are all secondary, because we all agree on this doctrine:

The doctrine

Jesus is coming back as the glorious king of the universe; and when he does he will raise everyone from the dead, some to eternal judgment and some to eternal life with God; and he will remake all things—new heavens and new earth, renewed together in glory. As the creeds and confessions say it: *he will come again to judge the living and the dead.*

Scriptural basis

There are a number of places Scripture teaches us this. Philippians 3:20–21 reads:

...but our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humble condition into the likeness of His glorious body, by the power that enables Him to subject everything to Himself.

And 1 Thessalonians 4:16 tells us:

or the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the archangel's voice, and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are still alive will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

In our lives

The Heidelberg Catechism reflects on this doctrine by asking:

Q52. How does Christ's return "to judge the living and the dead" comfort you?

In all distress and persecution, with uplifted head, I confidently await the very judge who has already offered himself to the judgment of God in my place and removed the whole curse from me. Christ will cast all his enemies and mine into everlasting condemnation, but will take me and all his chosen ones to himself into the joy and glory of heaven.

The first thing here is the comfort that this provides for God's people when they are suffering: our suffering will end, and when our suffering is at the hands of people who hate God, he will do justice. If they repent, then justice has been done at the cross; and if they do not, judgment is coming. This is especially good news to our brothers and sisters in places where they can be jailed or killed for following Christ. Remembering God's justice is part of how we're able to follow Paul's instruction in Romans 12: "for your part, live at peace with everyone." We *don't* avenge the blood of the saints—because God *will*.

The second bit here is where I want to camp out for the rest of this discussion—and that is the mix of *holy fear* and *sure hope* that helps us hold fast to the faith. This is what both Hebrews and Revelation are about! When we are tempted by the apparent goodness of the world, or buffeted by trials, they call

us to hold fast. And they do so not least by looking to the hope of Christ's return as both *warning* and *comfort*. We need both of those refrains to keep walking with Christ. They remind us *judgment is coming* as a means of grace; they're part of how God keeps us.

So: Revelation is not concerned with *last things* for their own sake. The book opens with letters to the seven churches for a reason, and it closes the way it does—offering living water and warning side by side—for a reason. Wherever we land on the material in between, it's there to encourage God's people to hold fast: because Jesus is victorious—over temptation, and over Satan; over sin, and over the enemies of God's people. He wins! So hold fast! Don't end up under that judgment; overcome through Christ, and receive your reward when he comes in glory.

Hebrews does the same. It exhorts us to “hold on to the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful” (10:23). It reminds us that if we reject Christ or if we fall away, there is only “a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire about to consume the adversaries” (10:27). The book is this constant back-and-forth: showing how *good* Christ is, and warning at what happens if we fall away. “It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God!” as 10:31 says; and “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us hold on to grace” (12:28) —“for our God is a consuming fire” (12:29), but in Christ “we have this hope as an anchor for our lives, safe and secure” (6:18), because he *is* our high priest. The book teaches us that Christ “is better than the angels, he is better than Moses, he is better than the prophets, he is better than the Levites and the offerings they made—he is better than them all”¹—so don't fall away: his judgment is fiercer than theirs but his grace is sufficient to keep you! Christ is better—so hold fast!

Part 4: Conclusion

And now we have come to the end! Before we transition into questions, I want to take a few minutes to fit this all together because we have covered a *lot* of ground over the last few weeks.

I want to emphasize here how we are adopted into the family of God. As the Westminster Larger Catechism tells us:

all those that are justified are received into the number of his children, have his name put upon them, the Spirit of his Son given to them, are under his fatherly care and dispensations, admitted to all the liberties and privileges of the sons of God, made heir of all the promises, and fellow heirs with Christ in glory.

This is ours because first of all, Christ is the Son of God eternally. The Father's fatherhood, remember, is not something tacked on, something that came later. Instead, the Father in his his very being, eternally, the Father of the Son, and the Son is in his very being, eternally, the Son of the Father. And the Spirit who comes, eternally, in his very being, from the Father through the Son has sealed us everlastingly into that eternal, joyful life!

How? The Father sent the Son into the world as Israel's Messiah—God's anointed one:

- who was prophet, priest, and king, the fulfillment of Israel’s hope and her calling
- who strikes the serpent’s head
- who is a prophet showing us God perfectly
- who is a priest who does not have to offer sacrifices again and again, does not have to sacrifice for his own sins, but atoned once and for all
- who is a righteous king in David’s line, doing justice and loving mercy
- who is himself a light to the nations as Israel was called to be

This man Jesus is God with us, God for us; “God of God / Light of Light / Very God of Very God / by whom all things were made / who, for us and our salvation / came down from heaven.” He is fully human and fully God: so that we are wholly redeemed: our human souls and human skins alike, because he too had human skin and a human soul.

He never sinned, not even once—but he took our sins, bore the weight of justice we deserved, died the physical and the spiritual deaths of our curse. But he did not stay dead! He rose, he conquered death, he defeated hell, he put Satan under his feet, he ascended in power to sit at God’s right hand until he shall come again—and there he prays for us and gives us his Spirit until he *does* come again and make all things new, judging evil once and for all, and raising us to eternal life with him! Hallelujah!

Now, I’ve left us about ten minutes here for questions about any and all fo this.

All right, we are out of time. Let’s end by hearing from Revelation, and then praying!

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man.
 He will dwell with them,
 and they will be his people,
 and God himself will be with them as their God.
 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes,
 and death shall be no more,
 neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore,
 for the former things have passed away.

Even so, come Lord Jesus! Amen!

1. “Further Up, Further In”, *Hebrews*, Psallos, 2017. ↩