

Title: Ascension

Acts 1:1 (Ascension reading)

First, Happy Mother's day to all mothers! Happy Mother's day to all who have fulfilled the role of "mother." Whenever a woman takes another person under her wing to protect and nurture, she is a "mother." I give thanks to God for all mothers, for all that you have done for us, for loving and supporting your children through the years. Amen. Second, I wanted to recognize our celebrations of the Ascension of Jesus Christ. Last Thursday was Ascension. Ascension commemorates the end of Jesus' ministry visibly on Earth.

I wanted to say a few words about Ascension and "what it is." Some people erroneously believe that Ascension marks the date that Jesus left this earth and that after that "the work of God" is nothing more than the things WE Christians accomplish, They believe that after Ascension anything Godly that was to be done on earth, would be by our human power only. But for two thousand years, the story of Ascension denies that. We believe that Christ continues to work here on Earth, and not just through us. We believe that Christ ascended to heaven for a purpose. As we confess in the Apostle's creed... about Jesus Christ "on the third day [He] rose again from the dead He ascended into Heaven and sits at the right hand of God the father almighty from thence he will come to judge both the living and the dead. Jesus ascends into Heaven to take his divine place in Heaven, to take rightful His place at the right hand of the father, a place of honor, a place of glory, a place of divinity. But he doesn't leave us, JUST to restore his "divine state." He ascends for our sakes as well. Because He ascended... He sent the Holy Spirit to dwell with us. (John 15:7) That presence, the Holy Spirit dwelling with us is precisely what makes US His Church! Hallelujah! Amen.

Acts 1:9 describes the ascension of Jesus. It has been 40 days after his resurrection, 40 days after Easter. He has shown himself to hundreds of people, that they might be witnesses to all the earth. He gives one last message to his disciples, who are gathered around him. Then it says: *[Jesus] was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. The disciples were left looking intently up into the heavens as he was going. You could imagine them standing there looking about... looking at each other... each with a puzzled look of "where did he go?" "where did he go?" And as the disciples apparently were not showing any signs of moving on God then sent angels to speak with them "Men of Galilee," the angels said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been received into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."* Essentially they were saying "Go Home!" "He'll come back when it is time..." "It is not His time." "Go home!"

Now I'd like to make a comment on the NIV translation of the bible. This is the common translation that we use in Bible study. I bring this up because there is a subtle implication in the way they translated Acts 1:9 into English. It says:

<sup>9</sup> *After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.*

It sounds like Jesus rose up into the sky through the clouds into space and somehow traveled past the moon to wherever Heaven is. It sounds like Jesus has physically abandoned us, that he has moved to some remote place away from us. It was the result of this type of translation that many people thought Christ is no longer working on Earth. They say that Christ's work is now only the work which his people (the church) does. But this in fact is not true. I mean, He does work through us... but that is not the **ONLY** way He works here on Earth. The continuing work on Earth is not only man's work. In fact, it is important to remember that Christ continues to work here on Earth, directly. This point, in fact, is actually best related in the King James bible. In the King James, *Acts 1* goes like something like this....

*<sup>9</sup> And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was **taken up**; and a cloud **received** him out of their sight.*

The words "taken up" can mean physically "lifted up" into the sky But it can also mean "subsumed"... "enveloped" "taken into"... Not only that but there is other symbolism going on too. It is a cloud which receives him. The "cloud" is a frequent symbol of the presence of God, the father, the glory of God. As at Jesus' baptism... a cloud comes forth and God the father speaks and says "This is my son." So when Jesus is taken up and received by the cloud, He is being "received" by God the father. But it is important to note this does not imply a physical movement away from Earth, to a separate location... like to a far away Heaven. In fact, the point is this... The focus of Ascension is not "Jesus leaving us." Ascension is not "Jesus leaving us..." but rather, Ascension is Jesus joining (or re-joining) God, the father, in Heaven. He has not left us. He has ascended into heaven. He has joined the Father, but Christ has not left us. He is still here. He still continues to minister to His people. He still continues to minister through His people. How do we know? How do we know that He continues His work on earth? How do we know that He is present here with us as we worship? How do we know?... We know, because he says so. Christ is here right now, maybe not in visible form, but he is here. In Matt 18:20 he promised that when two or more come together in His name "He is there." Not only that but Christ has promised that he is with us at the Lord's supper every Sunday. The real presence of Christ is there at the Communion table offering the forgiveness of sins which reconciles us with God. Christ is still here, maybe not visibly, to our physical eyes, but he is here, nonetheless.

So why did Jesus ascend? Jesus ascended for a reason,... a good reason. He didn't "ascend" just to get away from this sinful Earth, He didn't just "ascend" so he could finally attain his divine seat in heaven at the right hand of the father, there to judge both the living and the dead. He ascended for our sakes too. Jesus ascended so that He could send the Holy Spirit back to us. As a result, the Holy Spirit has come to live in us. That is the big thing about Ascension! It was the prerequisite for Pentecost, (when the Holy Spirit first came upon the church.) Ascension and Pentecost are like two sides of the same coin. Because of Ascension and Pentecost scripture says that the Holy spirit now dwells within us.

What does that mean... "The Holy Spirit came to live in us?" When Christ died on the cross, all our sins were forgiven. We were made "right" with God. But the problem was that we were

still stuck with our sinful human bodies. We were made into the children of God, but we didn't have the power to act like the children of God. So, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to us. When the Holy Spirit came to live within us, He created a new part of us which is from God, the new creation, the new Adam.

What is this new creation that scripture speaks of? It means that because of Jesus you are more than just a sinful human being. When you became a Christian, God transformed you into something more than just a sinful human. That's the big deal! We have been transformed....! Scripture says You were once only a sinful human, who could do nothing which pleases God. Now you are a child of God! You have been transformed into a being which pleases God. God has given us a life-changing power. He has sent his Holy Spirit to work within us, and it will be by this power we will be able to do His will. All this because the Holy Spirit has come to live within you. At your baptism, God made a promise that the Holy Spirit has come to live within you. Being a Christian, having faith in Christ, automatically means you have the Holy Spirit. It means you have been given the power to live a life pleasing to God. It is a miracle! This is what we celebrate on Ascension Day. This is what makes "walking in faith" exciting. We are living out a miracle!

But it's more than that.... Being empowered by the Holy Spirit is more than just personally following God's laws. God has promised that through His Holy Spirit each of us has been given a gift, a talent to serve our fellow believers. from 1Cor 12:4

*There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.*

As a group of Christians scripture calls us "the body of Christ." Each of us was given a different talent, to serve the body of Christ. no "one" talent better than the other... all equally important. Each gift to be used to uplift and serve God's people. Each Christian and the gift of the Spirit he wields is an important part of the working of God's church. The very thing that makes you a Christian, that ensures you eternal life in Heaven, calls you and empowers you to a life of holiness, to live a life pleasing to God. The very thing that makes you a Christian calls you to a community and calls you to serve that community. Because Jesus sent back the Holy Spirit.... Because the Holy Spirit dwells within us... you have purpose.... and you have the power to carry that purpose out.... God will use you.

God will use us??? In what way does God do that? The Holy Spirit is the one who first brings conviction and faith. That same Holy Spirit is also the one who challenges us... who challenges us to share that conviction and faith with others. The movement and growth of the Church has always been to seek the lost, to share the good news of Jesus' salvation. That movement and growth has always been the result of the movement of the Holy Spirit. When we share the words of the Gospel with others it will not be our charm, or our good looks or good personality which will bring faith to others. It will be the Holy Spirit using us to seek the lost. The very thing that makes you a Christian also calls you to share that great news to those outside your community. The Holy Spirit who gives us our identity, who calls us to Holiness,

who calls us to be part of and to serve the community of believers, also calls us to be His instrument for bringing eternal life to others. God is calling you to share that message with those who do not know him. God is calling you to be the carriers of the Holy Spirit to others by telling them about the love of God. What an exciting thing it is to know that you are personally being called by God to do His work, that you are part of a miracle. YOU have a calling. The Holy Spirit of God... God the Holy Spirit, is with you. teaching you, empowering you. calling you to serve calling you to share. Blessed Ascension brother and sisters, May God use you strongly. Amen