

# Help Our Unbelief

## The Apostles' Creed

*I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth,  
And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost,  
born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead,  
and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead;  
he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father  
Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.  
I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic church; the communion of saints; the  
forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.*

### Part 6: “Risen and Ascended”

#### I. **Scripture:** Hebrews 11:13-16

- The author compares the Christian, hoping and walking by faith, to the ancient people of God. We are like them. How? How does the ascension of Jesus both encourage this hope and make it difficult?

#### II. **What this doctrine does not mean:**

- That Jesus became **dis-Incarnate**.
  - “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe” (John 20:27).
  - “After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight” (Acts 1:9).
- That heaven is “**Up**.”
  - “But what is ‘heaven’? Is it in the sky or outer space? Does the Creed mean that Jesus was the first astronaut? No” (Packer).
  - In the Bible, “heaven” means (1) the dimension of God’s beginningless, endless, self-sustaining life; (2) the state of creatures “as they share the life of God”; and (3) the sky “as an emblem in space and time of God’s eternal life. ... Withdrawal had to take place somehow, and going up, down, or sideways, failing to appear or suddenly vanishing were the possible ways. Which would signify most clearly that Jesus would henceforth be reigning in glory? That answers itself” (Packer).
- That Jesus isn’t **Present**.

- “Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt 28:20).
- Don’t forget also: Christ said he was present long *before* his incarnation. “Before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58).
- That Jesus is inactive (John 14:1-3).
- That Christians are “too heavenly-minded to be of any earthly good.”
  - “‘Heaven’ refers to the day when love of God and neighbor reign unhindered” (K Strobel).
  - “There is a kind of happiness and wonder that makes you serious” (Lewis).

## II. What this doctrine *does* mean:

- Jesus **Fulfills** the Old Testament’s “ascensions”! (Cannata)
  - Abraham ascends Mt Moriah to sacrifice Isaac in worship of God (Gen 22).
  - Moses ascends Mt Sinai to meet God and receive his Word (Ex 19, 24).
  - Both orthodox and idolatrous worship sites were set on hilltops.
  - The “Psalms of Ascent” (120-134) were sung while pilgrims “went up” to Jerusalem for feasts.
  - Jesus himself “ascends the hill of the LORD” (Psalm 24): he is the true sacrifice, better than Isaac; the true worshipper, better than Abraham; the true liberator-prophet, better than Moses; preparing the true feast, better than OT festivals; by climbing the true temple mount, better than Jerusalem.
- Jesus *is* **Absent** (in the **Flesh**).
  - “You will not always have me with you” (Matt 26:11).
  - “The ascension of Jesus gives us language to speak about both Jesus’ absence and presence—his absence from us in the body, and his presence with us through the Holy Spirit. Being honest about Jesus’ absence is the first step to being open to God’s empowering presence with us in the Holy Spirit” (Witvliet).
- Heaven is a place for **Resurrected Bodies** (Witvliet).
  - Not only Jesus’ **Spirit**, but his **Body** and **Spirit** ascended.
  - “The dust of the ground on the throne of heaven!” (Kelley)
- Though he bore our **Sin**, he was declared **Righteous**, having paid fully for those sins, and ascended in that same body.

- “Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? ... He who has clean hands and a pure heart” (Psalm 24:3-4).
- “He could not have [risen and ascended] if even one of our sins had not been atoned for. [He could not] have entered into that great and inaccessible light, which nothing impure can penetrate ... unless he had been fully justified for our sins, and we in him, when he ascended on our behalf” (Olevianus).
- **Lordship** and **Sovereignty** are good.
  - “‘Ascended’ is, of course, a picture-word implying **Exaltation** (“going up!) to a condition of supreme dignity and power. ... The message of the Ascension story is: ‘Jesus the Savior Reigns!’” (Packer).
  - “When the NT writers speak of the ascension, they are not describing Jesus’ **Absence**, but his sovereign **Presence** throughout creation” (Myers).
  - “When the writers of the New Testament and the early church were using the term ‘gospel,’ they were talking about more than the forgiveness of sins. They were talking about the coronation of a King!” (Cannata; Phil 2:9-11).
  - He gives **Gifts** (Eph 4:7; Ps 68:18).
  - “‘The right hand of God’ signals not a palatial location but a regal function” (Packer). See Acts 2:33ff; Rom 8:34; Eph 1:10ff; Eph 4:10; Phil 3:21; Heb 2:8.
  - Stager: The Son of David *has* taken David’s throne in the true and better Jerusalem. This is not an anti-Jewish theology, but the true hope of every Israelite: to have their king ruling through which every nation might be blessed. All that is left is for the New Jerusalem above to come down out of heaven and establish itself finally, visibly, and gloriously on earth (Ps 110; Rev 21:2. Note: Ps 110 is the most quoted OT passage in the NT).
  - “The ascension of Jesus helps us see lordship and sovereignty as good and gracious. In this sad world, power is equated with bullying or coercive force. In contrast, fusing the words ‘reigning Lord’ and ‘Jesus Christ’ transforms our understanding of power and helps us envision the kind of power that is purely good and altogether life-giving” (Witvliet).
- Heaven is a place that is very concerned with human **Frailty** and **Weakness** (Witvliet).
  - “We have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven. ... We do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses” (Heb 4:14-15).

- “Ascension Day is a profound resource for addressing deep pastoral needs—for those who struggle with depression, guilt, shame, burnout, shallowness, and conflict; for those who are persecuted; for victims of war and violence; for victims of abuse and tragedy” (Witvliet).
- Jesus is *also* **Waiting**, so we must **Wait** with patience!
  - “Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets” (Acts 3:21).
- Our **Desires** are not too **Strong**, but too **Weak**! (Lewis)
  - We must set our hopes firmly on what is promised! (Heb 10:23; 1 Pet 1:13)
  - We must **Groan**!
    - “The whole creation has been groaning. ... We ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, *the redemption of our bodies*” (Rom 8:22-23).
- Human minds are both too **Proud**, and too **Unimaginative**! (Rom 11:33-36).
  - He’s exalted, *therefore we can’t be proud*.
  - He’s exalted into heaven, *therefore we need to have greater imaginative powers to see and live within his exaltation*.
- We are ascended *in him*! (Col 3:3)
  - We are **Absent** in **Body** from *our* true home; but we are **Present** there in **Spirit** in Christ’s **Body**!
  - Because Jesus has ascended, we also “ascend through the Spirit to the Son, and through the Son to the Father” (Irenaeus, b. AD 130).
  - “It was not enough that Jesus rose again from the dead. By itself, this signals eternal life only for him. But because Jesus ascended into heaven, ... he can bring us with him. This is what the early church called the gospel” (Cannata).

## V. Discussion

- How does the biblical revelation of Jesus as “Ascended into heaven” surprise, confuse, encourage, correct, thrill, startle, or delight you, and challenge you to live differently?
- What (if any) intellectual or volitional roadblocks remain?