

## Ascension Sunday: Where Did Jesus Go? – *Acts 1:9-11, Col 3:1-3*

**Introduction** – Ascension Day was Thursday, forty days after Resurrection Day (Easter). Jesus presented Himself alive several times to the disciples during those forty days. He ate with them and instructed them (Luke 24:36-42, John 21). Then, on that fortieth day, He gave them their final instructions and was taken up out of their sight. Two men in white apparel appeared then and told them they had just observed Jesus taken up into heaven. We know that He then sat down at the right hand of God where He was crowned “*King of kings and Lord of lords*” and His reign over heaven and earth began (Mark 16:19, Rev 19:16, Psalm 110:1-2). But what is this place called heaven? And do you daydream about one day going there?

**Ascended** – Christians believe some pretty incredible things as summarized in the Apostles’ Creed. Jesus “*ascended into Heaven*,” we claim. The disciples were able to watch this physical ascension up into the clouds (indicating a significant height). We often forget that Jesus was then, and is now, a thoroughly embodied Man. We often think of Heaven as a nonmaterial reality which would make Jesus living and reigning there a strange category mistake. God created all things visible and invisible (Col 1:16) but this is not to say that all things invisible are nonmaterial. Jesus did not drift off into outer space and, like a Voyager spacecraft, is now somewhere between Jupiter and Saturn. Scripture requires “*from us a robust commitment to the supernatural, to the miraculous, and to a view of the cosmos that will earn us the scorn of materialistic atheism*” (Wilson). It is interesting that they laugh at our belief in the creation of everything out of nothing, while they believe in the creation of everything out of almost nothing. They scorn our faith in a literal Heaven and Hell while posing theories of worm holes, super strings, and alternate dimensions. The fact is, and something we all must accept, we live in a weird and mysterious place.

**What is Heaven?** – It is the place where God dwells. “*Heaven is my throne*” (Isaiah 66:1). We are taught to pray, “*Our Father in heaven*” (Matt 6:9). Jesus “*has gone into heaven, and is at the right hand of God*” (1 Pet 3:22). Heaven, therefore, is a location, a place where the resurrected Jesus has gone. If we could make a 3-D map of all of creation, there would be coordinates for heaven. God is uncreated; heaven is a created place (Gen 1:1). Heaven is not simply a state of mind. When Stephen was being murdered, he saw the heavens opened (Acts 7:55-56), something which is normally invisible to us was made visible to him.

It’s important to note that the Scripture uses the term heaven in different ways. Heaven is what we call the sky, where birds dwell (Gen 6:7, Matt 6:26). Heaven is also used to refer to what we might call outer space, where the sun, moon, and stars reside (Deut 4:19). Then there is the highest heaven (Deut 10:14), or the heavens of heavens (Psalm 148:4). God cannot be contained there (1 Kings 8:27), yet His presence and glory are somehow localized in this heaven (Heb 8:1).

**Heaven as Substance, Earth as Shadow** – Is it possible that Jesus is dwelling in a place that is more material, not less material, than the place where we now dwell? Hebrews 9:24 says that Jesus is not in the temple on earth, “*which are the figures of the true, but into heaven itself*.” Earthly priests serve at the copy and shadow of the heavenly things (Heb 8:5). Heaven and earth are not opposites, but rather locations which share certain commonalities. Some have suggested that we should see Earth as the *derivative* realm and Heaven as the *source* realm (Alcorn). In that case, what exists in one realm can exist in the other realm at least in some form. If Earth is physical, it may not be that Heaven is less physical, but rather more; “*...the hills and valleys of Heaven will be to those you now experience not as a copy is to an original, nor as a substitute is to the genuine article, but as the flower to the root, or the diamond to the coal*” (Lewis).

**Paradise: A Physical Place** – The resurrected Jesus said, “*To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God*” (Rev 2:7). That same physical Tree of Life that was in Eden, a physical place, will one day be in the final consummation of the New Jerusalem on the New Earth (Rev 22:2). It appears that Eden was not destroyed; what was destroyed was mankind’s ability to live in Eden. Eden, Paradise, the Tree of Life, reside in the present Heaven for now.

**Our Intermediate State** – So what happens when you die? To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Cor 5:8). If we are in Christ (saved), then our souls go to be with Jesus, in heaven, while our bodies rest in the ground in the earth. But humans, by nature, are spiritual and physical (Gen 2:7). It is possible that, before the resurrection, Jesus has prepared an intermediate place for our souls to be embodied (John 14:1-3).

**So Heavenly Minded** (Col 3:1-3) – Covenantally, we have already been raised with Christ. To set our hearts on Heaven is not to shed our desires for physicality or physical things. It is to long for Christ and to set our hearts and minds on Heaven. When Paul thought he might die, his thoughts and yearnings turned to Heaven, and not to fear (Phil 1:19-26). Here's the deal. If you are in Christ, you are going to Heaven one day. In that place where things are more material, more real, your longings and desires (fully purged of all perversions, selfishness, and lawlessness) will find even greater fulfillment and ultimately it will all be tied to being in the presence of the One who saved you (Psalm 16:11). Life in Heaven, though not our final destination (for the resurrection will still be to come), will be better by far than living here on Earth under the curse and away from the direct presence of God (Phil 1:23). But notice, such heavenly mindedness made Paul all the more earthly good. *"It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in': aim at earth and you will get neither"* (Lewis).

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