

The Ascension and Promised Return

[Acts 1:9-11](#)



In our study thus far in the book of Acts we have seen the resurrected Christ teaching His disciples about the Kingdom of God and opening their minds to understand these truths. After spending forty days teaching them, Jesus commissions them to proclaim the Gospel to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the remotest part of the earth, and then He leaves them and ascends to the Father:

And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight.
(Acts 1:9 NASB)

We learn from Luke's former narrative that it was while Jesus was in the act of blessing them with uplifted hands that He departed from them and went into heaven:



And He led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up His hands and blessed them. ⁵¹ And it came about that while He was blessing them, He parted from them. (Luke 24:50-51 NASB)

What doctrine are these texts referring to? This is the doctrine of the Ascension.

The ascension of Jesus is a central element in the Christian tradition. It is included in the two classic Christian creeds. Both the [Apostles' Creed](#) and the [Nicene Creed](#) affirm that Jesus "ascended into heaven."

By the word "ascension" we mean **the removal of Jesus Christ from this earth into a different place and sphere, which we call heaven.** A place seen by Isaiah ([chapter 6](#)) as high and exalted; a place of sovereign control and authority. The ascension means the Lord's physical removal from His people on earth and from this present state of affairs. It is a removal, a change of position and locale.

The ascension and the pouring out of the Spirit are connected:

"But now I am going to Him who sent Me; and none of you asks Me, 'Where are You going?' ⁶ "But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. ⁷ "But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper shall not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you. (John 16:5-7 NASB)

Only after Jesus ascended, could He send the promised Spirit.

Reflecting on the ascension, Paul said:

Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name,
(Philippians 2:9 NASB)

"**Therefore**" begins this section with a ringing contrast. Because of Christ's humility (verses 6-8), His exaltation now follows (verses 9-11). Here we see a Divine principle in operation—it applies to you, me, and every believer. He who humbles himself shall be exalted.

The words “**highly exalted**” are the Greek word [huperupsoo](#) [uḗperuyo/w] (hoop-er-oop-so'-o), it means: “*to elevate to a surpassing position, to exalt beyond all others, to exalt to the highest, maximum majesty.*” This particular exaltation is so grand that this particular Greek word is not used anywhere else in the whole Bible.

Our Lord changed residence in hypostatic union from earth to heaven forty days after the resurrection. He ascended to the right hand of God:

but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, SAT DOWN AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD,¹³ waiting from that time onward UNTIL HIS ENEMIES BE MADE A FOOTSTOOL FOR HIS FEET. (Hebrews 10:12-13 NASB)

Peter puts it this way:

who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him. (1 Peter 3:22 NASB)

The [right hand](#) of God is a metaphor for the place of supreme privilege and divine authority. We can determine what this statement means by referring to other Scriptures where the meaning appears to be clear.

In [Genesis 48:8-20](#) we find Jacob (Israel) being brought Joseph’s two sons, laying his hands upon them shortly before his death and blessing them both. In [verse 17](#), we see Joseph trying to remove his father’s hands from off his children and swapping them over so that his right hand rested on the firstborn son, Manasseh, for it was the firstborn who had special rights concerning inheritance.

But Jacob prophetically saw that Ephraim would be greater than his elder brother, Manasseh and so had deliberately laid his right hand upon the head of Ephraim:

But his father refused and said, "I know, my son, I know; he also shall become a people and he also shall be great. However, his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his descendants shall become a multitude of nations." (Genesis 48:19 NASB)

The right hand is, therefore, a position of superiority over and above others and of greater blessing than being positioned at the left hand. Notice that in [Genesis 48:19](#) Jacob says clearly that Ephraim “***shall be greater.***” The right hand is a place of honor above all else and all others:

Thou wilt make known to me the path of life; In Thy presence is fullness of joy; In Thy right hand there are pleasures forever. (Psalms 16:11 NASB)

This Psalm speaks of the great blessing and provision that there is at God’s right hand for all His saints:

(A Psalm of David.) The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at My right hand, Until I make Thine enemies a footstool for Thy feet." (Psalms 110:1 NASB)

When David speaks of the Messiah as being seated at the right hand of the Lord, he’s saying that the Christ is to be given a position of great power and authority, a place of unequalled honor and blessing.

These concepts are at the heart of the New Testament usage of the saying that Jesus has been exalted to the right hand of the Father in Heaven. He’s been elevated into a position that can be neither equaled nor bettered. He is the supreme Head over all things.

The ascension of Christ was taught in the First Testament:

Behold, My servant will prosper, He will be high and lifted up, and greatly exalted. (Isaiah 52:13)

NASB)

I have set the LORD continually before me; because He is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. 9 Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoices; My flesh also will dwell securely. ¹⁰ For Thou wilt not abandon my soul to Sheol; neither wilt Thou allow Thy Holy One to undergo decay. ¹¹ Thou wilt make known to me the path of life; In Thy presence is fullness of joy; In Thy right hand there are pleasures forever. (Psalms 16:8-11 NASB)

This prophecy traces Christ from the cross through resurrection back into His glory at God's right hand through the ascension.

The Lord is at Thy right hand; He will shatter kings in the day of His wrath. (Psalms 110:5 NASB)

Please notice this: The exalted Christ will shatter kings in the day of His wrath.

At the ascension, when Jesus disappeared from their sight, He sat down at the right hand of God:

And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. (Acts 1:9 NASB)

Physically, what is happening here? Is it that as they are talking to Jesus He begins to float upward and ascends into a cloud and disappears? That is what it sounds like. Do you remember in the first message of this series ("[Understanding the Bible](#)"), I said, "*Apart from understanding the First Testament, you will never completely understand the Second Testament. The writers of the Second Testament all suppose that their readers understood the First Testament. If we do not understand the language of the first three quarters of the Bible, we will never understand the last quarter—the New Testament*"?

Acts 1:9 is a good illustration of this principle. If we don't understand the First Testament idea of "clouds," we will be lost here. The idea is not that Jesus disappeared in a white puffy cloud. When Luke writes, "*A cloud received Him out of their sight,*" they would recognize in this that He had gone to God, Who, when He revealed Himself, regularly did so in a cloud:

And it came about as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the sons of Israel, that they looked toward the wilderness, and behold, the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud. (Exodus 16:10 NASB)

The cloud indicated God's presence:

And the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I shall come to you in a thick cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe in you forever." Then Moses told the words of the people to the LORD. (Exodus 19:9 NASB)

And the LORD descended in the cloud and stood there with him as he called upon the name of the LORD. (Exodus 34:5 NASB)

And the LORD said to Moses, "Tell your brother Aaron that he shall not enter at any time into the holy place inside the veil, before the mercy seat which is on the ark, lest he die; for I will appear in the cloud over the mercy seat. (Leviticus 16:2 NASB)

Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to him; and He took of the Spirit who was upon him and placed Him upon the seventy elders. And it came about that when the Spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do it again. (Numbers 11:25 NASB)

So the idea of a cloud would speak to them of the presence of God. And they would further remember that when the Son of Man received His kingdom, He would do so in the clouds of heaven:

"I kept looking in the night visions, And behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, And He came up to the Ancient of Days And was presented before Him. ¹⁴ "And to Him was given dominion, Glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and men of every language Might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13-14 NASB)

Notice that the Son of Man "***came UP to the Ancient of Days***" and was "***presented before Him.***" At that glorious event, Jesus receives His kingdom and sits at the right hand of God awaiting the conquest of His enemies. The idea of Jesus going and coming "on the clouds," is familiar [apocalyptic language](#) of the prophets to identify Himself as God. Only God came on clouds; that was a claim to deity. Thus they may well have seen His entering the cloud as indicating His departing to His heavenly throne.

This was the [Shekinah](#) Cloud. It was the cloud which hid the [presence of God](#). It was the same cloud of smoke that Isaiah saw in [Isaiah 6:4](#). It was the same cloud that led the Israelites through the wilderness. It indicated the presence of God:

And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. (Acts 1:9 NASB)

"Looking on" is the present active participle of the Greek word [blepo](#). Which, according to *BAGD*, is used abstractly, i.e., there was no object at which the disciples were looking; thus it may well mean simply "*in their sight,*" as in [1 Clem. 25:4](#).

Jesus is then said to have been "***lifted up,***" which is the Greek word [epairo](#) [εἰπάιρω], (ep-i'-ro), which, in its passive form, *figuratively connotes the lifting up of someone in stature or dignity*. The only other use of this word cited in *BAGD*, [1 Clem 45:8](#), does not denote a literal and physical elevation of the person, but instead describes the exaltation of someone.

W. Neil writes, "*It would be a grave misunderstanding of Luke's mind and purpose to regard his account of the ascension of Christ as other than symbolic and poetic. He is not describing an act of levitation.*" (W. Neil, *The Acts of the Apostles* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1973) 66.)

So a correct understanding of "***He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight,***" may not have anything to do with Jesus floating up in the air into a cloud, but may, in fact, speak of His exaltation into the presence of God. Either way, the main idea here is that Jesus is exalted to the right hand of God, a position of superiority over and above others.

As God, He was incapable of elevation, but as God-man, He could be lifted from humility to the highest glory. The God-man is exalted:

which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead, and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come. ²² And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, (Ephesians 1:20-22 NASB)

Christ has been given absolute authority, absolute power—Christ is exalted in His ascension.

With the ascension, Jesus wanted His followers to know that He was gone for good, as opposed to the way He appeared and reappeared during the [forty days](#) after the resurrection. It is very important at this point to understand

this is not just another coming and going. This is the promised ascension when Jesus said He would go to His Father and He would send back His Spirit to empower them to accomplish the mission.

And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was departing, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them; (Acts 1:10 NASB)

The disciples stand in awe, “***gazing intently into the sky***” for an extended period as the cloud departed. Luke will use the verb “***to look intently***” often in Acts in connection with the miraculous ([Acts 3:4](#), [12](#); [6:15](#); [10:4](#); [11:6](#); [13:9](#); [14:9](#)).

The two men, who by their description as being “***in white clothing,***” are depicted as messengers (angels) from God (this was the recognized way of describing angels—[Matthew 28.3](#); [Mark 16.5](#); [John 20.12](#)).

Two men also appeared in front of the women in [Luke 24:4](#). These men in Acts were like them. Luke wants us to consider them as witnesses. There had to be two witnesses that saw an event ([Deuteronomy 19:15](#)).

There may also be some imagery here in line with Elisha’s experience. As with Elisha, the seeing of their Master being taken was evidence that they would partake of His Spirit ([2 Kings 2.9](#)).

and they also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven." (Acts 1:11 NASB)

What do the angels tell the apostles here? Jesus will return. He will come again! He will come back! It is agreed by all that Acts 1:11, “***This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven***” refers to the [Parousia](#), the [Second Coming of Christ](#).

Was this something new to the apostles? Not at all. What is interesting in this verse is that it is rare for the Scripture to speak of the Second Coming *without a time reference*. Normally, when the Parousia is spoken of, a time reference is attached. Jesus had taught His disciples over and over that He would return, but what most Christians miss is that He also tells them when:

"But whenever they persecute you in this city, flee to the next; for truly I say to you, you shall not finish going through the cities of Israel, until the Son of Man comes. (Matthew 10:23 NASB)

To understand this verse, the first thing that we have to know is who is Jesus talking to? Who is the “you”? To find out, let’s back up to:

And having summoned His twelve disciples, He gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every kind of disease and every kind of sickness. (Matthew 10:1 NASB)

Now if you read verse 2 thru verse 22, you will notice the personal pronoun “you,” referring to **the twelve**, used over and over. Throughout this discourse, Jesus is speaking to the twelve. Jesus uses the second person plural throughout the discourse to make this point more than clear. There is nothing in the passage that gives any indication that Jesus has any other audience in view other than His immediate audience.

“You” means “the twelve” in the first century. “You” does not mean “US” in OUR century. Understand the hermeneutical principle of [audience relevance](#), we know that “You” means the twelve that Jesus was speaking to in the first century.

In Matthew 10:23 Jesus is saying to His twelve disciples that they will not have fled through all the cities of Israel until the Son of Man comes. They will keep running through the cities, [fleeing](#) from their persecutors. When He says

that they will not have time to have fled through all the cities, it indicates that they will not have fled to all the cities until the Son of Man comes, a promised deliverance for them—the twelve!

That really sounds like Jesus is saying He will return in their lifetime. Is that possible? Let's look at another text:

"For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels; and WILL THEN RECOMPENSE EVERY MAN ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS. (Matthew 16:27 NASB)

Verse 27 clearly speaks of the Second Coming, He **comes** with the **angels** to **reward** every man. Compare this with:

"Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done. (Revelation 22:12 NASB)

So Christ is speaking to His disciples of His Second Coming, now look at the next verse:

"Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who shall not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom." (Matthew 16:28 NASB)

Who are the "YOU" of this verse? Verse 24 tells us that Jesus is speaking to His **disciples**. So Jesus is saying to His disciples who were standing there that some of them would still be alive when He returned in the Second Coming.

Now some say He is talking about the transfiguration of [Matthew 17:2](#), but that is only six days later and none of them had died in that six day period. Did He come in the glory of His Father with His angels and reward each according to his works at the transfiguration? Of course not! How about Pentecost? No, that was only two months later, and they were all still alive except Judas.

What are the possible explanations to this verse? I see only three. If you have others, I would like to hear them.

1. There are still some of the disciples alive today.
2. Jesus was confused or lying. (I hope I could not convince any of you of that one)
3. Jesus actually did what He said and came in the lifetime of His disciples. (I would like to convince you all of this one. This seems like the simple and clear answer that holds to the inspiration of Scripture. Jesus did what He said He would do. I am very comfortable with that, how about you?)

If you are going to believe what Jesus is saying here, if you are going to hold to the TIME of His Second Coming, you are going to have to have a paradigm shift in your view of the NATURE of the Second Coming.

I submit to you that either Scripture is wrong about the **TIME** of the Second Coming and thus not inerrant or our paradigms are wrong about the **NATURE** of the Second Coming. Which one of those are you more comfortable with, an incorrect paradigm or an uninspired Scripture?

"Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. (Matthew 24:34 NASB)

If you look at the way Jesus used the word "[generation](#)," I think it will be abundantly clear that it **always** refers to His contemporaries, the Jewish people of His own period. Jesus here, very plainly and very clearly, tells **HIS DISCIPLES** that **ALL** of the things He had mentioned would come to pass in **THEIR GENERATION**. This includes [the Gospel being preached in all the world](#), [the abomination of desolation](#), [the great tribulation](#), and [the coming of the Son of man](#). This is so clear that it greatly troubles those who hold to a Futuristic eschatology.

Jesus uses the near demonstrative "[this](#)" generation. Every time "this" is used in the New Testament it always refers to something that is near in terms of time or distance. If I said, "[This building' is going to be remodeled.](#)" What

building am I talking about? You know that I'm referring to the one close to me—the one we are sitting in. But if I said, "That building," I'm referring to one further away, not the one we are in. Jesus could have said, "That generation." But He didn't! Jesus is saying that everything that He has spoken about will happen before the generation that He was speaking to would pass away.

When the Bible speaks about the "coming" of Christ, it does so in the same manner as the First Testament spoke of the "coming" of God. I'll say it again; it is because we do not have a working knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures that we get so confused in the New Testament. Christ's coming was not to be viewed physically:

The oracle concerning Egypt. Behold, the LORD is riding on a swift cloud, and is about to come to Egypt; The idols of Egypt will tremble at His presence, And the heart of the Egyptians will melt within them. (Isaiah 19:1 NASB)

We know from chapter 20 that God used the Assyrians as instruments of His wrath on Egypt, yet it says, "***The LORD is riding on a swift cloud..., Egypt will tremble at His presence.***" God came to Egypt. Did He physically come to Egypt? No, God is a Spirit. How did He "come" to Egypt? He came in judgment. His presence was made known in judgment. But it was the Assyrians who were literally present.

We must understand this if we are going to understand the Second Coming of Christ. Christ Coming was not physical; His Coming was the same as His Fathers. He came in judgment. The nature of the Second Coming was not physical, bodily as a man; Christ came in judgment against Old Covenant Israel when [He destroyed Jerusalem in A. D. 70 using the Roman army.](#)

All Christians believe in the Second Coming of Christ. To deny the **fact** of the Second Coming is to deny the inspiration of Scripture. Do you agree? Well, I believe that the time of the Second Coming is just as clear as the **fact** of the Second Coming. I believe that to deny the **time statements** that the Bible gives of the Second Coming is also to deny inspiration. Do you still agree?

If you attempt to share this view of eschatology (the Preterist view that says that Christ has already returned) with others, then I think you'll understand what I mean when I say that Acts 1:11 is a very important text. It is probably the text that is brought up against Preterists more than any other.

Listen to what some have written about Acts 1:11:

- *"Jesus will return just as He left: physically, visibly, and to the Mount of Olives."* (Dave Guzik).
- *"The same Christ who ascended into heaven in Acts 1:9 will return the same way. He won't be different. He will return in the same glorified body that the disciples saw when Christ joined them for breakfast by the Sea of Galilee in John 21:4-14. He will be in the same body Thomas saw when he said, "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28)."* (John MacArthur)
- Ray Steadman writes, *"Now the angels tell us that though He was to go away, His return is certain. 'This same Jesus,' they say, 'will come back again.' When He comes, He will come in exactly the same way as they saw Him go. Just as He stepped into invisibility then, He will step back again into visibility. Suddenly He will be back.*

Men are today looking for a solution to the ecological crisis, the environmental crisis that confronts us today. How shall we solve these problems? Well, we shall not. They are going to get much worse. The crisis will get so bad that human life will actually be unable to exist any longer on the earth. Jesus said so."

Wow! Isn't that an encouraging view of our future? This is a good example of how bad theology affects us on a daily basis. We're all doomed!

- [Keith Mathison](#), who is a very vocal opponent to Preterism, declaring Preterists as heretics, says that *“Traditionally Acts 1:11 has been understood to be a clear and unambiguous promise of the personal, visible, and bodily Second Coming of Jesus Christ to earth”* (“Acts 1:9-11 and the Hyper-Preterism Debate”, p. 2).

The argument runs simply like this: If Jesus ascended visibly and in a physical body, and He is to come in the same way as He left, then He is to return visibly and in a physical body. And since this clearly has not happened yet, for we have no record of Him coming to the earth, nor is He here with us now; there is therefore a future coming of Christ.

The majority opinion of the **nature** of the Second Coming is that it will be a future to us, physical, visible, bodily return of the Lord Jesus Christ to earth that every eye will see. Does our text in Acts 1:11 teach a physical bodily Second Coming?

and they also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven." (Acts 1:11 NASB)

They say that His ascension was physical and visible, so won't His return be also? It says He will come in *“just the same way.”* The words *“just the same way”* are the Greek phrase *“[hon tropon](#).”* By examining the usage of *“hon tropon”* in the New Testament, it is clear that this phrase does not mean: “exactly the same in every detail,” but has the idea of: “similar in some fashion.” For example, look at how this phrase is used in:

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, just as a ([hon tropon](#)) hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not have it! (Luke 13:34 NASB)

Did Jesus want to gather Jerusalem in exactly the same manner as ([hon tropon](#) [*Acts 7:38*]) a hen gathers her chicks? I don't think so. So in *“just the same way”* doesn't mean: “in exactly the same manner.” That His coming was not to be “exactly” as He left (Acts 1:11) is made clear by comparing Scripture with Scripture. Notice what Matthew says about His coming:

"For just as the lightning comes from the east, and flashes even to the west, so shall the coming of the Son of Man be. (Matthew 24:27 NASB)

This is obviously different than what Acts 1:11 describes. So which way is it, visibly in a cloud or like lightning? But Paul describes Christ's coming this way:

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. (1 Thessalonians 4:16 NASB)

This is not *“just the same way”* as Luke describes in Acts. And what about:

and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, 8 dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. (2 Thessalonians 1:7-8 NASB)

This is also different than Acts 1:11. Here we have angels and flaming fire dealing out retribution. We don't see this in Acts. Notice what John says in:

And I saw heaven opened; and behold, a white horse, and He who sat upon it is called Faithful and

True; and in righteousness He judges and wages war. (Revelation 19:11 NASB)

John has Jesus coming on a horse, not a cloud. So how can anyone say that Jesus is going to come **exactly** how He left when they read Acts 1:11? When you compare Scripture with Scripture, it just doesn't add up.

The emphasis of Acts 1:11 is that Christ's coming would be a **cloud coming**, just as He left in a cloud, so He would come in the clouds. This is an apocalyptic symbol for coming in judgment. When Luke says that Jesus was taken up, and "***a cloud received Him out of their sight,***" He was not telling us what the weather was like that day, but rather the part that the Father played in the ascension of Jesus.

There is no Scripture that explicitly teaches that Jesus would return in a physical, bodily fashion. An understanding of the language of Scripture will help us see that His coming was not to be physical, but a coming in judgment on Old Covenant Israel.

Alright, so Jesus has ascended to the Father and the apostles are to go to Jerusalem and wait for Him to send forth the promised Spirit. We'll pick it up here next time.

This message was preached by [David B. Curtis](#) on April 6, 2008. Media #410.



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