



ASCENSION

Course 4, *The Promised One*, Lesson 12

The Problem: In what form did Jesus Christ ascend to heaven after His resurrection? Was He still human as well as divine? What kind of body did He have? Some people have concluded that, since "*flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God*" (1 Corinthians 15:50), Jesus could not have gone to heaven in bodily form. They think that He was only a spirit being and that when He transports His people to heaven at the end of time they will be spirits without bodies.

On the other hand, we will discover that when Paul said that "*flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God*," he did not mean that Christ and His people no longer have bodies after they have gone to heaven, but that corruptible mortal bodies, which are characteristic of this world, cannot be taken to heaven. God transforms bodies into incorruptible, spiritual bodies (1 Corinthians 15:44), not in the sense that they cease to be bodies at all, but in the sense that they become perfect, immortal bodies without earthly weaknesses and disadvantages. Of course, there is a mysterious element here. None of us has yet been given such a body, so we cannot know what it will be like.

If Jesus went to heaven in some kind of bodily form, does He remain a human being? That is a very interesting question. It will be especially encouraging for us if the Lord, who is the supreme God of the universe (Colossians 2:9), remains a human being forever. We will feel that God has really identified Himself with us, and that will give us a greater sense of acceptance. Is it really so?

Where did Jesus go when He returned to Heaven? And what kind of work did He undertake there? Does it really matter to us what He is doing in heaven? Is it a matter that concerns our salvation in any way? These are very important questions because they are discussed in the Bible at some length, and in such a way as to enable us to understand their relevance to us.

When Jesus went back to heaven, what did He want His followers on this earth to do? Jesus' instruction between His resurrection and ascension is very important for us because it lets us know what He expects us to be doing until His second advent. And it informs us of the availability of power to do the work He has in mind for us.

The period from the resurrection to the ascension is vitally important for Christians, not just because of Jesus' appearance but because of the divine light that was given to the disciples in those interviews. We will turn to the Word and find the exciting answers to our questions.

Objectives:

- I. What was Jesus' parting instruction to His disciples? Of what special importance is it to us?
- II. In what form did Jesus ascend to heaven? Was he still human as well as divine? What kind of body did he have?
- III. Where did Jesus go in heaven? Was there a special place for Him to carry on a special kind of work?
- IV. What kind of ministry did Jesus begin in heaven? Does that ministry have anything to do with our salvation?
- V. What kind of ministry does Jesus conduct just before His Second Advent?

I. WHAT WAS THE PARTING INSTRUCTION OF JESUS?

For a period of 40 days after His resurrection Jesus made several appearances to His disciples and gave them vital instruction (Acts 1:3). As we study this counsel we come to understand the work that Jesus has in mind for us. And we receive promises that by faith we can lay hold of as we endeavor to carry out His divine commission.

The Word:

1. What special message did Jesus give to the two men with whom He walked to Emmaus? Luke 24:25-27
2. What instruction did Jesus give on the evening of resurrection Sunday? John 20:21-23; Luke 24:44-49.
3. What special message did Jesus teach Thomas a week after the resurrection? John 20:26-29.
4. What lesson of dependence did Jesus teach the disciples by the Sea of Galilee? John 21:1-14; compare Luke 5:4-10.
5. In the same interview by the Sea, what was Jesus' special instruction to Peter? John 21:15-23.
6. What great commission did Jesus deliver to His followers when meeting with them on a mountain in Galilee? Matthew 28:19, 20
7. Immediately before His ascension, what instruction did Jesus give the disciples? Luke 24:50-52; Acts 1:4-12.

Explanation: During the walk to Emmaus and again on the evening of the resurrection day, Jesus guided the disciples through the Scriptures, explaining how His life, death, and resurrection fulfilled Old Testament prophecies. In doing so, He laid the foundation for the message that would later resonate in the preaching of His followers. This revelation opened their eyes to the Christ-centered focus of their Hebrew Scriptures, bringing new clarity and significance to passages that had once seemed obscure.

The Greek text of John 20:23 states, 'If you forgive the sins of any, they have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained.' This does not imply that sins must be confessed to human beings for forgiveness. Scripture clearly teaches that we are to confess our sins directly to God, who is faithful to forgive (1 John 1:9).

Jesus' message in this verse was that the church, filled with the Holy Spirit, would be granted discernment to identify genuine disciples and distinguish them from those who are not. The intent was never for an individual or a small group to wield the authority to forgive or withhold forgiveness arbitrarily. Instead, God designed that His congregation, guided by the Holy Spirit, exercise wisdom in determining who should be welcomed as members of the church and who should be excluded due to apostasy (see 1 Corinthians 5).

The use of the perfect tense in John 20:23 suggests that the church's decisions, under the Spirit's guidance, reflect what has already been decreed in heaven. Human beings merely carry out what heaven has decided. Importantly, this process must not invite a judgmental spirit into the church (Matthew 7:1-2), nor should it involve authoritarian control, which Jesus Himself condemned (Mark 10:42-43).

The message to Thomas a week after the resurrection was that faith does not require physical sight. Those who believe in Jesus, even though they have never seen him, are greatly blessed of heaven.

The first message by the Sea of Galilee was a repetition of Jesus' earlier teaching: man's efforts to win souls will only succeed as long as there is total dependence on the power and methods of heaven. The instruction to Peter in the same interview has been a great source of inspiration down through the ages. All believers, like Peter, have been given the privilege of loving their brethren and sisters and of sharing the message of Jesus with them. This is why the Great Commission holds such profound importance. Each of us shares the responsibility of leading others to become disciples of Jesus' Kingdom by faithfully teaching them the Word of God and introducing them to the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). Through this mission, we participate in God's redemptive work, proclaiming the Gospel and inviting all to experience the grace and salvation offered through Christ.

At the time of the ascension, Jesus repeated His previous promise that the Holy Spirit would be poured out upon the believers in an unprecedented way shortly after His departure. When the disciples pressed for an answer to the question

that had troubled them for so long, as to whether Israel was to be restored to national greatness in the near future, Jesus assured them that there were some things that would be left unanswered. The important issue was that they were to be His witnesses first to the Jews, second to the Samaritans, and third to all nations of earth. Thus, the Christian believers were to fulfill the great evangelistic commission that had originally been given to the nation of Israel but which it had failed to accomplish.

Relevance: During the 40 days between His resurrection and ascension, Jesus delivered His followers their foundational Scriptural message. He revealed how the entire Bible testifies to Him—a truth He had shared before, though the disciples had not fully understood it. The insights Jesus provided during this time were later incorporated into the apostles' writings. The apostolic testimony to the work of Jesus Christ was deeply rooted in the Old Testament Scriptures, which they now recognized as Christ-centered.

Jesus also entrusted His church with the authority to make decisions, always under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. A key aspect of His teaching during this period was the promise of special power through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. This empowerment would enable the worldwide proclamation of the Gospel, making the great commission achievable. Jesus' followers were all called to be "fishers of men," embracing their mission to draw others into the Kingdom of God.

Hence Jesus gave His church (i) a message, (ii) authority, (iii) spiritual power, and (iv) a mission. These four blessings still reside in His church today. The early disciples experienced extraordinary results in their ministry because they were fully surrendered to God and empowered by the Holy Spirit, especially following Pentecost (Acts 1:8; Acts 2:1-4). Their lives were characterized by prayer, unity, faith, and boldness in proclaiming the Gospel.

When believers today similarly yield themselves to God, seek His guidance, and are empowered by the Holy Spirit, they can witness remarkable results. However, it's important to recognize that the outcomes may not always mirror those of the early disciples in form or scope, as God works uniquely in every generation and circumstance. The key is faithfulness and reliance on His power, trusting that He will accomplish His purposes through us in ways that align with His perfect will. The same Spirit that empowered the early disciples is available to believers today, making it possible to participate in the ongoing mission of spreading the Gospel with power and effectiveness. The Spirit of the apostolic church will be revived before the second coming of Jesus, and the whole world will be enlightened with His glory (Revelation 18:1).

II. IN WHAT FORM DID JESUS ASCEND TO HEAVEN?

This question is important because the Bible teaches that we will be made like Him. Moreover, it helps to know what relationship He has with humanity now that He is no longer on Earth. Is He still one of us?

The Word

8. Did Jesus still have a human body after His resurrection? Give some evidence. Matthew 28:9; John 20:20, 27-28; Luke 24:38-43.
9. In what form did Jesus ascend to heaven? Acts 1:9-11.
10. What kind of body has Jesus had since His resurrection? 1 Corinthians 15:35-44.
11. What will the bodies of the redeemed believers be like after Jesus' second advent? Philippians 3:20-21; Compare Romans 8:23.

Explanation: The form in which Jesus ascended to heaven was the form in which He rose from the dead. He took great pains to demonstrate to His disciples that He was still a human being with a body that could be touched and nourished by food. As Paul explains, there is a marked difference between an earthly and a heavenly body; yet Jesus' body is real and so will be the bodies of the redeemed saints at the end of time. Jesus' spiritual or heavenly body is still a body; He is not only a spirit being. Certainly, He retains all of the prerogatives of Deity. He is still the supreme God of the universe,

and we do not wish to reduce God to the state of a redeemed human being. Nevertheless, our Savior, who is supremely divine, retains His human nature forever. He will be one of us throughout the ceaseless ages of eternity.

Relevance: What a merciful condescension it is for the Lord Jesus Christ to regard Himself for eternity as a human being. He came to our sin-cursed earth and suffered for us even though in all justice He did not have to. His interests are now so bound up with ours that He wants to be our elder brother forever. When Jesus was incarnated, He took on a fully human nature in addition to His divine nature (Philippians 2:5-8). After His resurrection, He appeared to His disciples in a glorified but physical body, demonstrating that He was not merely a spirit (Luke 24:39). When He ascended into heaven, He did so in this glorified human body (Acts 1:9-11).

In His glorified state, Jesus remains both fully God and fully man—a union of divine and human natures. His continued humanity is significant because it affirms His role as the mediator between God and humanity (1 Timothy 2:5) and as our eternal High Priest, who sympathizes with our weaknesses (Hebrews 4:14-16). Through His glorified human body, He represents redeemed humanity before the throne of God, securing eternal access for believers to the Father. This truth underscores His ongoing relationship with those who trust in Him.

III. WHERE DID JESUS GO WHEN HE ASCENDED?

In the court of the earthly sanctuary after the sacrifice for sin was offered (Leviticus 4), the priest ministered in the Holy Place. In the case of some sin offerings, blood was sprinkled before the veil that separated the Holy from the Most Holy Place. And every morning and evening the officiating priest offered incense at the altar of incense in the Holy Place. The incense represented the prayers of God's people ascending to the Lord. The court was the place of sacrifice, the Holy Apartment the place of mediation and intercession. The Most Holy Place, which was entered only once a year (Leviticus 16), represented the court where God upon His throne would pass the final verdict upon every human soul. The earthly sanctuary and its services represented the three phases of the ministry of Jesus: sacrifice, mediation, and judgment. After His ministry of sacrifice, Jesus went to the place of mediation.

The Word:

12. Where does Jesus' heavenly mediation for our sins take place? Hebrews 4:14-16; 8:1-2; 9:11-12, 24.

13. What vision of the heavenly sanctuary or temple was given to John the Revelator? Revelation 4:2, 5; 11:19; 15:5.

Explanation: Both Hebrews and Revelation give evidence of the existence of the heavenly sanctuary. The writer of Hebrews is anxious for us to understand that Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension brought to an end the services of the earthly sanctuary or temple. After the death and ascension of Jesus there was no more need for animal sacrifices, sprinkling of blood, and offering of incense. He ascended to the heavenly sanctuary to begin a ministry of mediation for us.

Relevance: To understand the ministry of our ascended Lord in the sanctuary above we can study the structure and services of the earthly sanctuary that Moses was commanded to institute for the Israelites after they had been delivered from Egypt. Those services pointed forward to the ministry of Jesus, and as we study them we gain a much clearer insight into where and why He ascended after His resurrection.

IV. WHAT KIND OF MINISTRY DID JESUS BEGIN IN HEAVEN?

The earthly ministry in the Tabernacle itself was divided into two parts: every day of the year, priestly mediation or intercession was carried on in the Holy Place; on the Day of Atonement (10th day of the 7th month), the High Priest entered the Most Holy Place where, in the presence of God, the judgment took place.

The Word:

14. As our High Priest, what kind of ministry has Jesus been conducting ever since His ascension? Hebrews 9:13-15; 1 Timothy 2:5; 1 John 2:1.

15. What does Jesus' ministry in heaven have to do with our salvation? Hebrews 7:25; 10:19-22.

Explanation: The death of Jesus was absolutely essential to our salvation. He bore our punishment and made it possible for us to be forgiven for our sins. But we are not forgiven and delivered from the dominion of darkness until we come to Him as our living, heavenly High Priest and, claiming His sacrifice for us, and ask for forgiveness. Then we are washed clean from our sins and stand before the Lord as though we had never sinned. The mediatorial ministry of Jesus has been going on ever since His ascension, and it will continue until just before His second advent. John caught a vision of Jesus symbolically casting down the censer (Revelation 8:2-5), representing the point at which He will cease interceding for us. Then the great proclamation of Revelation 22:11 goes forth: "He that is unjust, let him be unjust still ... and he that is righteous, let him do righteousness still." (Literal translation).

Relevance: The ministry of Christ as a mediator began conceptually with the first sin in the Garden of Eden, as God's plan of redemption was established (Genesis 3:15). In this sense, Christ's role as mediator was anticipated even before His incarnation, foreshadowed through the sacrificial system, the promises of the Messiah, and the prophecies recorded throughout the Old Testament.

However, Hebrews and Revelation refer specifically to Christ's ministry of mediation in heaven, particularly in His role as High Priest. This aspect of His mediation began after His ascension, when He entered the heavenly sanctuary (Hebrews 4:14-16; Hebrews 9:24). At this point, Jesus interceded for humanity in the presence of God, presenting the merits of His sacrifice and ensuring ongoing access to God's grace for those who believe in Him (Revelation 5:8; Revelation 8:3-4).

Thus, while the concept of Christ's mediation was present from the time sin entered the world, His formal and heavenly ministry of mediation commenced following His ascension. These dimensions complement each other, pointing to the eternal scope of God's redemptive plan through Christ. All of the indications are that Jesus' mediatorial ministry will soon end. The prophecies regarding the end of human history are rapidly being fulfilled, and very soon Jesus will end it all. Are your sins forgiven, and are you preparing to meet your Lord?

V. WHAT KIND OF MINISTRY DOES JESUS CONDUCT JUST BEFORE HIS SECOND ADVENT?

Just as there was a Most Holy Place judgment on the Day of Atonement, so before His second advent Jesus is involved in a final investigative judgment conducted in the heavenly sanctuary.

The Word:

16. What vision did Daniel receive of the judgment ministry of Jesus a short time before His second advent? Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14.

17. What is the purpose of the heavenly pre-advent judgment? Daniel 7:22; Matthew 22:11-14; Revelation 3:5.

Explanation: Daniel saw a judgment in heaven with God as Judge upon the throne and Jesus as Advocate or Lawyer. In the prophecy of Daniel 7, this judgment takes place before the second coming of Jesus. The purpose is to vindicate for eternity those who have been serving Jesus and have received His forgiveness for sin. Daniel 7:22 says that the judgment in heaven is to provide "judgment," or "justice" (Aramaic: *dina*) for the people of God. Born-again Christians, whose names are written in the Book of Life (Luke 10:20; Philippians 4:3), live in daily dependence on Jesus, receiving His righteousness and gaining victory over sin through His transformative power. Scripture affirms that those who remain in a living, abiding relationship with Christ are clothed in white robes, symbolizing His righteousness, and their names are retained in the Book of Life (Revelation 3:5).

Before His Second Advent, Jesus, as our High Priest, is engaged in a special judgment ministry in the Most Holy Place of the heavenly sanctuary, as described in Hebrews 8:1-2 and Revelation 11:19. In this phase, Christ examines the lives of

those who profess faith in Him, determining who has remained faithful and who has fallen away. This judgment is not about earning salvation—salvation is a gift of grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9)—but it demonstrates the justice and mercy of God before the universe, affirming that those who are saved have accepted Christ's righteousness and allowed His transformative work in their lives.

During this process, the names of those who have severed their relationship with Christ are removed from the Book of Life, as their lives no longer reflect faith in Him (Revelation 20:15). Conversely, those who remain faithful, trusting in Jesus' merits and relying on His grace, are affirmed as His for eternity. This is not a judgment based on human effort but on Christ's intercession and the evidence of a genuine relationship with Him.

Daniel 12:1 speaks of those whose names are kept in the Book of Life as the ones who are sheltered during the great time of trouble after Jesus' heavenly mediation ceases.

Relevance: The ascension of Jesus marked the beginning of a heavenly ministry that is vital for our salvation. The cross, of course, is the very center and soul of the divine plan for our redemption. But Jesus' heavenly mediation and judgment ministries are the means by which He applies for us the merits of His sacrifice upon the cross. As He forgives our sins in heaven and intercedes on our behalf, His Spirit pleads with our hearts and draws us nearer and nearer to the ideal of likeness to Himself. The ministry in heaven is matched by His ministry in our hearts. Praise the Lord for such a wonderful Savior! He wants your love and allegiance. Christ offers something that material wealth, personal achievements, or human relationships cannot: eternal hope, lasting peace, and reconciliation with God. Won't you go to Jesus just now in prayer, surrendering your heart to Him and inviting Him to be your heavenly High Priest and indwelling Lord?

Review Questions

1. True or False
 - a. Jesus ascended to heaven in bodily form
 - b. The great commission to go into all the world with the Gospel message was intended only for the apostles.
 - c. Jesus' ministry in heaven is really not important for our salvation
 - d. One of the purposes of the judgment ministry is to vindicate for eternity those who are living habitually as born-again Christians
2. Discuss: Believers can approach Christ, their living and heavenly High Priest, directly for the forgiveness of sins. See Hebrews 4:14-16. However, is there a place in the Christian life for confessing our sins to each other, including to those we have wronged? How does the practice in James 5:16 foster accountability, reconciliation, and spiritual healing within the community of faith? Is it a substitute for seeking forgiveness from God Himself?

Further study:

- A. The judgment ministry, as described in the Bible, encompasses demonstrating the justice, mercy, and righteousness of God's plan of salvation. This includes Christ's ministry in the heavenly sanctuary and the Investigative Judgment (Daniel 8:14; Hebrews 8:1-2), which examines the lives of professed believers to confirm their faithfulness to Christ and their acceptance of His righteousness.

The judgment vindicates those who have maintained a living, daily relationship with Christ, reflecting His righteousness in their lives. This vindication is not based on human works but on the transformative grace of Christ working within them (Philippians 1:6; Revelation 3:5). Furthermore, it serves to reveal God's justice and fairness to the universe, affirming that His decisions regarding salvation are perfect (Revelation 15:3-4).

The ultimate purpose of the judgment is to uphold God's character, bring an end to sin, and ensure that those who inherit eternal life have done so through faith in Christ's sacrifice and His ongoing ministry on their behalf.

- B. Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 818-835