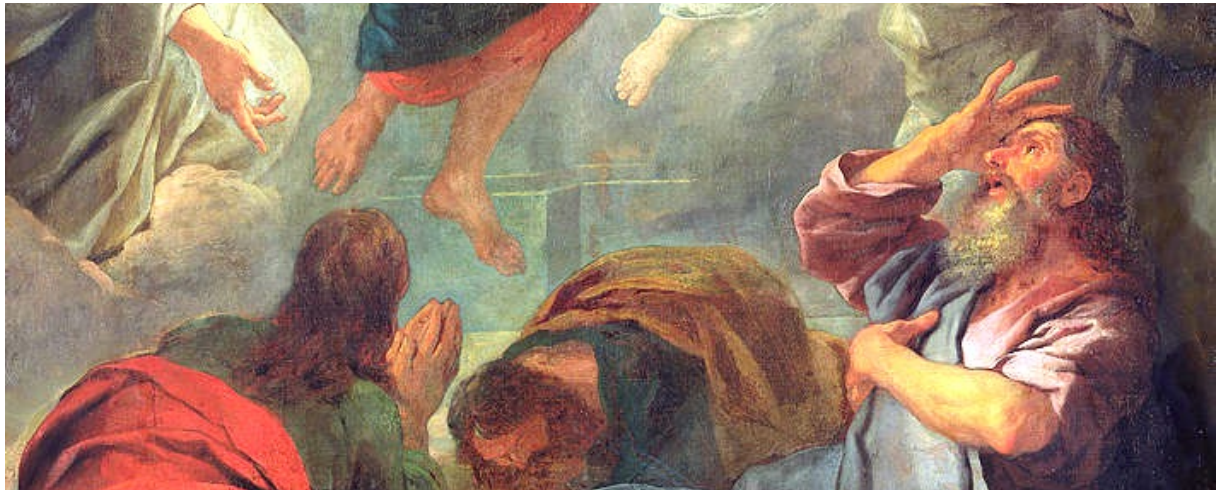


# SUNDAY ARTICLE

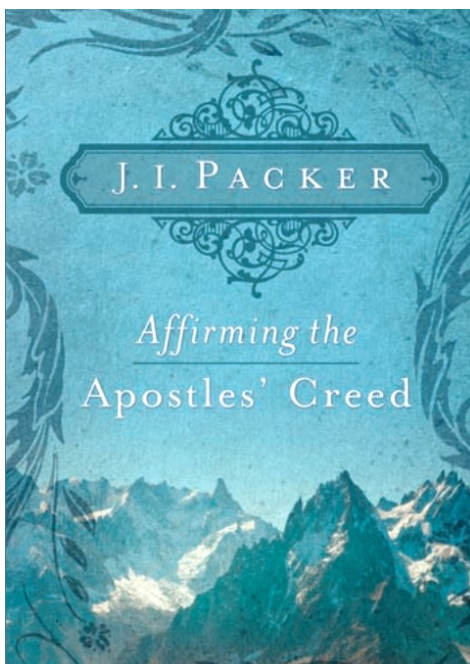
ST DAVID'S PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH ♦ 28 MAY 2017



## I Believe... He Ascended into Heaven

*J I Packer*

This is chapter 12 of the short book:



(Crossway, 2008)  
Available from [Koorong.com](http://Koorong.com)

**“He ascended”** echoes Jesus’ “I am ascending” (John 20:17; compare 6:62).

**“Into heaven”** echoes “taken up from you into heaven,” the angels’ words in the Ascension story (Acts 1:11).

But what is “heaven”? Is it the sky or outer space? Does the Creed mean that Jesus was the first astronaut? No; both it and the Bible are making a different point.

### WHAT HEAVEN MEANS

“Heaven” in the Bible means three things:

#### 1. The endless, self-sustaining life of God.

In this sense, God always dwelled in heaven, even when there was no earth.

#### 2. The state of angels or men as they share the life of God, whether in foretaste now or in fullness hereafter.

In this sense, the Christian’s reward, treasure, and inheritance are all in heaven, and heaven is shorthand for the Christian’s final hope.

#### 3. The sky, which, being above us and more like infinity than anything else we know, is an emblem in space and time of God’s eternal life, just as the rainbow is an emblem of his everlasting covenant (see Genesis 9:8–17).

The Bible and the Creed proclaim that in the Ascension, forty days after his rising, Jesus entered heaven in sense 2 in a new and momentous way: thenceforth he “sitteth on the right hand of God the Father almighty,” ruling all things in his Father’s name and with his Father’s almightiness for the long-term good of his people. “On the right hand of God” signifies not a palatial location but a regal function: see Acts 2:33ff.; Romans 8:34; Ephesians 1:20ff.; Hebrews 1:3, 13; 10:12ff.; 12:2. He “ascended far above all the heavens” (that is, re-entered his pre-incarnate life, a life unrestricted by anything created) “that he might fill all things”

(that is, make his kingly power effective everywhere; see Ephesians 4:10). "Ascended" is, of course, a picture-word implying exaltation ("going up!") to a condition of supreme dignity and power.

### THE ASCENSION

What happened at the Ascension, then, was not that Jesus became a spaceman, but that his disciples were shown a sign, just as at the Transfiguration. As C. S. Lewis put it, "they saw first a short vertical movement and then a vague luminosity (that is what 'cloud' presumably means...) and then nothing." In other words, Jesus' final withdrawal from human sight, to rule until he returns in judgment, was presented to the disciples' outward eyes as a going up into heaven in sense 3. This should not puzzle us. Withdrawal had to take place somehow, and going up, down, or sideways, failing to appear or suddenly vanishing were the only possible ways. Which would signify most clearly that Jesus would henceforth be reigning in glory? That answers itself.

So the message of the Ascension story is: "Jesus the Saviour reigns!"

In a weary world in which grave philosophers were counselling suicide as man's best option, the unshakable, rollicking optimism of the first Christians, who went on feeling on top of the world however much the world seemed to be on top of them, made a vast impression. (It still does, when Christians are Christian enough to show it!) Three certainties were, and are, its secret.

**The first** concerns God's world. It is that Christ really rules it, that he has won a decisive victory over the dark powers that had mastered it, and that the manifesting of this fact is only a matter of time. God's war with Satan is now like a chess game in which the result is sure but the losing player has not yet given up, or like the last phase of human hostilities in which the defeated enemy's counterattacks, though fierce and frequent, cannot succeed and are embraced in the victor's strategy as mere mopping-up operations. One wishes that our reckoning of dates "A.D." (anno Domini, in the year of our Lord), which starts in intention (though probably a few years too late) with Jesus' birth, had been calculated from the year of the cross, resurrection, and ascension, for that was when Jesus' Lordship became the cosmic fact that it is today.

**The second** certainty concerns God's Christ. It is that our reigning Lord is "interceding" for us (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25), in the sense that he appears "in the presence of God" as our "advocate" (Hebrews 9:24; 1 John 2:1) to ensure that we receive "grace to help" in our need (Hebrews 4:16)

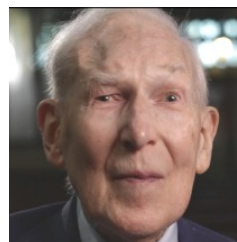
and so are kept to the end in the love of God (cf. the Good Shepherd's pledge, John 10:27-29). "Interceding" denotes not a suppliant making an appeal to charity, but the intervening of one who has sovereign right and power to make requests and take action in another's interest. It is truly said that our Lord's presence and life in heaven as the enthroned priest-king, our propitiation, so to speak, in person, is itself his intercession: just for him to be there guarantees all grace to us, and glory too.

An eighteenth-century jingle puts this certainty into words that make the heart leap:

*Love moved thee to die;  
And on this I rely,  
My Saviour hath loved me,  
I cannot tell why:  
But this I can find,  
We two are so joined  
He'll not be in glory and leave me behind.*

**The third** certainty concerns God's people. It is a matter of God-given experience as well as of God-taught understanding. It is that Christians enjoy here and now a hidden life of fellowship with the Father and the Son that nothing, not even death itself, can touch – for it is the life of the world to come begun already, the life of heaven tasted here on earth. The explanation of this experience, which all God's people know in some measure, is that believers have actually passed through death (not as a physical but as a personal and psychic event) into the eternal life that lies beyond. "You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:3; cf. 2:12; Romans 6:3-4). "God...when we were dead...made us alive together with Christ...and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:4ff.).

The prayer used on Ascension Day in the Anglican Prayer Book asks God to "grant...that...as we do believe thy only-begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ to have ascended into heavens; so we may also in heart and mind thither ascend, and with him continually dwell." May we be enabled, in the power of these three certainties, to do just that.



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