

He ascended into heaven' he is seated at the right hand of the Father.

“After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.” (Acts 1: 9). What can we make of this story today? How can we expect modern people who have witnesses moon landings and seen pictures of Mars, to believe that heaven is above the clouds? What are we to make of stories of Jesus flying through the air? Actually, this problem is more apparent than real. The account of the ascension is not entirely out of step with accounts of Jesus' resurrection appearances. The risen Jesus appears to be solid (i.e. No ghost), but materialises behind closed doors, and dematerialises at will. He appears to have a real body, but somehow it is different. We will discuss this under “the resurrection of the body”. Floating upwards in the air is only a small advance on this. But in fact, all we need to suppose is that the disciples *saw* Jesus being taken up into the air. People in those times believed heaven was above the earth, and Jews were familiar with the image of “clouds” as a sign of God's presence. This vision (and it may be no more than that) conveyed the needed message that their risen Lord had regained his place in glory with the Father, and passed on his mission to his followers. What is it then that Jesus was doing in His ascension? He was leaving his followers and going to the Father. But why?

1. To reign with the Father

This is the final triumphant end to Jesus' story. This is the great finale, the coronation. He has been obedient to the Father's will, he has revealed the Father to us, he has willingly given up his life for those who will believe in him, he has risen from the dead. Now he is going back to the Father to reign with Him in glory. And because He reigns, we will reign with him

2. To represent His followers

The second reason Jesus went back to the Father was so he could be our representative at the heavenly court. The traditional way of putting this is to say he is “pleading our cause”. The image of a God who is either so intent on harming humans, or so totally indifferent, that he is only prevented from destroying the world by His Son's frantic pleading quite naturally revolts modern minds. And it does not, in fact, accord with what we know of God from the biblical record. If He loved the world so much he gave his own Son (John 3: 16), how could he be indifferent or intent on harm? But Jesus has lived on earth, he does know what it is like to be a human, and he does intercede on our behalf with God (Romans 8: 34). When he ascended to the father, he took our human nature with Him. There is “one of us” in the highest of places in heaven.

3. To release the Spirit

The third reason Jesus went back to the Father was so He could hand over His work to His followers. Luke, in the foreword to the second volume of his work (Acts), describes his first volume as the record of “all that Jesus *began* to do and teach”

(italics mine). Evidently, what follows is the *continuation* of Jesus' actions and words. But Jesus takes his leave in verse 9! The clear implication is that Jesus is now at work through his followers. And in order to carry on that work, He sends upon us the gift of the Holy Spirit, who gives us the guidance and power we need.

In the light of the ascension, we need to acknowledge Jesus as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, as the one who represents us in heaven because he is one of us, and we must continue the work he has given us to do, in the power of the Spirit he has given.