

## He Ascended! Whereto? What for?

Hebrews 4:14-16; 7:23-28 & HC LD 18 (p.27f.)

Reformed Church of Wainuiomata, 9 May 2021, 10:30

(Sermon put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)

### Intro:

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

This coming Thursday, it will be forty days since Easter (since Resurrection Sunday, 4<sup>th</sup> April). And, of course, it was on the fortieth day after our Lord Jesus had risen from the dead that He ascended back into heaven where He came from.

Well, considering our Lord's ascension (now roughly 1988 years ago), here are the three points of this topical sermon:

- Ascended
- There, yet Here
- Blessings

### Part 1: Ascended (Ascended into Heaven)

Lord's Day 18 (Q&A46) gives a Biblical answer which comforts you & me with the knowledge of where the beloved Saviour of the world is *at this moment*; that He is in heaven for our good; that He will come again as judge of all who have died & all who are still alive.

Jesus Christ, our Lord, is in heaven!

Well, at times, people ask, "Where is heaven?"

To some degree, the answer is not easy.

You see, in a certain sense, people (also people of Bible times) have always used the word "heaven" to describe *that beautiful dome/firmament/vault* which one sees when you look up to the sky. On a cloudless *day*, this dome/vault is blue, and, on a cloudless *night*, the vault shows the breathtakingly beautiful starry sky.

Now, although *modern man* knows much more about space than the people of Bible times, we still only know a fraction of what there is to know.

So, as far as answering the question "What/Where is heaven – *the way God knows it* – *yes the heaven of glory*?" even modern man can only give a very modest answer.

You see, the universe – including what we call "the heavens" – is tremendously big!

Here are some figures that I got off the Internet.<sup>1</sup>

Now, we'll begin with our solar system!

And the only way we can fathom its size is by bringing it down to a scale our mind can grasp!

If we pretend the earth is about 1.3 cm in diameter (the size of a small grape), then the Sun would be 1.5 meters in diameter (about the height of a short man). Guess how far away from this "grape-sized earth" the sun would be? Well, 150 meters (about one small city block) from the Earth.

Uranus and Neptune (the size of lemons) would then be 20 and 30 blocks away.

A human being on this scale would be the size of an atom!

And the nearest star in our galaxy would be over 40,000 km away (i.e., the circumference of the earth at the equator) – if the earth was the size of a grape.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. <https://solarsystem.nasa.gov/planets/solarsystem/faq>

Well, these are just some of the shorter distances in our solar system and galaxy!  
The size of our galaxy is 100,000 light years in diameter<sup>2</sup> containing 100-400 billion stars!<sup>3</sup>  
This is just *our* galaxy!  
There seems to be more than 100 billion galaxies in the universe!<sup>4</sup>  
And the size of the universe?  
Well, the distance between the earth and the *observable* end of the universe is c. 46 billion light years!<sup>5</sup>

Well, that's a picture of man's limited view of this universe!  
But where is heaven?  
Does the *heaven of glory* (where God's throne is) include the universe or is it beyond the end of the universe?  
And could man's spacecraft reach the heaven of glory?

Well, here is a Biblical view of heaven, a view that shows why man, in own strength, will never be able to reach God's throne:

You see, the Bible uses the word "heaven" referring to at least 3 different levels:

**The first heaven: *Clouds* (in close relation with God's judgement)!**

You see...

- The Heavens were angry and destroyed the unbelievers in the days of Noah.
- And the Heavens remained shut & no rain fell (in the days of Elijah).
- Thus, the first heavens hold not just the blessing of rain, but also judgement!
- And, reminds a commentator, "One day the clouds will again serve as vehicle of God's judgement when they bring our Lord on the Last Day."<sup>6</sup>
- Indeed: the first heaven is where the clouds are!

**The second heaven: *Stars***

Now, I can imagine that, by God's allowance, man's spacecraft could come up (into) a part – I must say, a very, very *tiny* part though – of this heaven (past the clouds, through the stratosphere and into outer space, among the planets & stars), because – you see – in size, the vast domain of the stars is way beyond the reach of even modern man, as it consists of an estimated billion galaxies – each one made up of a billion stars!

Well, according to the concept which the ancient Semitic peoples had about the universe, the Second Heaven is where the stars are!

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. [https://imagine.gsfc.nasa.gov/features/cosmic/milkyway\\_info.html](https://imagine.gsfc.nasa.gov/features/cosmic/milkyway_info.html)

<sup>3</sup> Cf. [https://www.google.co.nz/search?q=how+many+stars+in+our+galaxy&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&client=firefox-b-ab&gfe\\_rd=cr&ei=ec8fWZnmCeHc8wfl8IPQCw](https://www.google.co.nz/search?q=how+many+stars+in+our+galaxy&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&client=firefox-b-ab&gfe_rd=cr&ei=ec8fWZnmCeHc8wfl8IPQCw)

<sup>4</sup> Cf. [https://www.google.co.nz/search?q=how+many+galaxies+in+the+universe%3F&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&client=firefox-b-ab&gfe\\_rd=cr&ei=AtAfWYq9EuHc8wfl8IPQCw](https://www.google.co.nz/search?q=how+many+galaxies+in+the+universe%3F&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&client=firefox-b-ab&gfe_rd=cr&ei=AtAfWYq9EuHc8wfl8IPQCw)

<sup>5</sup> Cf. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universe>

<sup>6</sup> cf. Knap, J.J. 1915. De Heidelbergsche Catechismus toepasselijk verklaard voor de gemeente des Heeren. Groningen : J.B. Wolters' U.M. p.178).

**The next heaven is the third heaven (the last one, and the highest one) – the heaven of glory.**

It's this heaven about which the apostle Paul said he was once taken up to. ***I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows.*** (2 Cor 12:2).

This third heaven is also called the *Highest Heaven*.<sup>7</sup>

- It's above and beyond the firmament
- It was about *this* heaven that the angels sang to the shepherds near Bethlehem: ***Glory to God in the highest ...***<sup>8</sup>
- Indeed: this *highest* is the home of the angels, and the home of God's glory. This is why Dt 10:14 says, ***To the Lord your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it.***
  
- My brother & sister, it's *through* the first two heavens<sup>9</sup> to this third (& highest) heaven that your & my Lord ascended with His glorified body. That's why Eph 4:10 says, ***He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.***<sup>10</sup>
- Could His body make it through space up to the highest heaven?
- My brother & sister,
- Already in the 40 days after our Lord's resurrection, He proved that His glorified body was not bound by earthly limitations of space, time and gravity. Thus, we can safely assume that His new body would be able to deal with all the challenges of outer space.
  
- Well, as the disciples watched Him ascend, they could only see the glorified Christ go past the first heaven, i.e., the clouds.<sup>11</sup>
- Thus, He ascended away from the human eye, from any human-made telescope and away from the reach of the craftiest spacecraft.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. also Ps 148:4 ***Praise him, you highest heavens and you waters above the skies.***

<sup>8</sup> ***“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.”*** (Lk 2:14) .

<sup>9</sup> ***Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through (διεληλυθότα – pf ptc act m s acc of διέρχομαι = go through ) the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess*** (Hb 4:14)

<sup>10</sup>Why did our Lord ascend? Here's my translation from Calvin's french: "Well, He had to leave earth, for He had finished the task set for Him by His Father – our salvation. There was thus no more reason for Him to stay on earth any longer" (*Il avait accompli la tâche fixée par le Père: toute son œuvre de salut pour nous. Il n'avait donc plus aucune raison de demeurer plus longtemps ici-bas* (Calvin, Jean. 1991. Catéchisme de Genève. Pretoria : GKEF. p.38 Q&A 76))

<sup>11</sup> Acts 1:9 ***And a cloud hid Him from their sight ...***

- And, based upon the Bible,<sup>12</sup> the Heidelberg Catechism's Answer 46 says, He is in this heaven for our good – preparing a place for all who believe in Him!
- He will be in this highest of heavens until He comes again to judge the living & the dead (A 46)

An old Dutch commentator<sup>13</sup> reminds us that it is no wonder that we, when we long for God/Christ, automatically incline our search upwards. This upward desire is inborn and it is in sync with the Bible: that our God is to be searched upwards.

Yes, remember: God has put eternity in the heart of man (Eccl 3:11); yes, as John Calvin says, God has given man an *inborn sense of God inscribed in the hearts of all*.<sup>14</sup>

And when man cries out to God for help, he naturally lifts his eyes upwards – as Ps 121:1 says, ***“I lift up my eyes to the hills. Where does my help come from?”***

My brother & sister, the Biblical view of heaven is the three-tier one of: 1) the clouds, 2) the starry heavens, 3) the highest heavens – the first of which man can clearly see; the second of which even modern man has only a limited glimpse; the third of which no man in/of himself can see, for this heaven is the heaven of God's glory!

Now, someone might ask, “But should we really think of the heaven of glory as physically situated higher than (or past) the end of the universe?” “Is such thinking not thinking *in an earthly way about heavenly things?*”

Well, such questions may be valid!

So, let's say it this way: *“Wherever... we conceive the heaven of glory to be – whether we think of it as above and beyond the firmament (universe), or whether we conceive of it as interpenetrating our world – yes, surrounding us on all sides though we cannot see it – we may never think of it as far away in the earthly sense of the word, so as if there's no contact between heaven and earth, and as if it would actually have to take a long time to reach it.”*<sup>15</sup>

You see, for spiritual beings – the angels – and also for our glorified Lord, travelling between the heaven of glory (the highest heaven) and earth is quick – is nothing!

And yet, even though, spiritually speaking, heaven is not at all far from earth, there is still a big gap between earth & glorious heaven (from earth's end)!

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<sup>12</sup> cf. among other Jn 14:1ff.

<sup>13</sup> Knap, J.J. 1915. De Heidelbergse Catechismus toepasselijk verklaard voor de gemeente des Heeren. Groningen : J.B. Wolters' U.M. p. 180.

<sup>14</sup> Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion (cf. among other <http://www.hollowayquarterly.com/2013/02/calvins-sensus-divinitatis.html> )

<sup>15</sup> Cf. HOEKSEMA, H. 1947. The Triple Knowledge: the Lord of Glory (*In*: Hoeksema, H. ed. The Heidelberg Catechism – an exposition. Vol. IV. Grand Rapids, MI : Eerdmans. p.68-69). Italics and bracket mine.

And there's only one Man who bridged this vast gap: the sinless, glorified man, our Lord Jesus. Thanks to Him, heaven is, already now, *not* closed (it's no heaven of bronze)<sup>16</sup> when the believer prays, but open – open to our Christ-enhanced prayers!<sup>17</sup> And thanks to Him, the spirits of all our loved ones who have died in the Lord are now with Him in heaven.

### **There, yet Here**

My brother & sister,

It was partly to counteract a Roman Catholic false teaching, that Zacharias Ursinus & Caspar Olevianus included Q 47 & 48 in LD 18.

You see, the Roman Catholic church follow the doctrine of transubstantiation – i.e., that the bread & wine of the LS, when we eat & drink it, literally become the flesh & blood of Christ.

But that can't be, says Q & A 47-48, because the Bible tells us Christ's glorified body is in heaven and not on earth!

The other reason why we have Q&A 47-48 is simply because a critic might say, "But if Christ ascended to heaven, how can He then still be on earth as He promised in Mt 28 & Jn 14 '*surely, I am with you to the very end of the age*'<sup>18</sup> and '*I will not leave you as orphans*'?"<sup>19</sup>

Well, boys & girls, what such a critic does not understand is that Christ has two natures – a glorified human nature and a divine nature. Although His human nature remains in heaven until His return, His divine nature, without fully leaving His body, is simultaneously there in heaven as well as here on earth.

It's like a lightbulb that shines out light!

The lightbulb itself can be touched, just like Christ's glorified body can be touched.

But from this lightbulb beams out untouchable light just like the Spirit of Christ reaches far out of His glorified body – even from heaven to earth!

Indeed: just as a lightbulb's light shines brightly inside the bulb itself yet also beams far outside the bulb, so is Christ's Spirit inside & outside His glorified human body!<sup>20</sup>

Thus, you & I may take great comfort that, even though on earthly terms, heaven is far from us, yet spiritually, our Lord is near to us, because for God neither time nor space is a hindrance.

Indeed, Heaven is His throne and the earth is His footstool!<sup>21</sup>

### **The Blessings of His Ascension (HC Question 49)**

The New Testament uses the word *Intercessor* for two persons: for our Lord Jesus<sup>22</sup> and for the Holy Spirit.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> cf. e.g., Dt 28:23 as curse for disobedience: *The sky over your head will be bronze, the ground beneath you iron.* וְהָיָה שָׁמַיָא אֲשֶׁר עַל-רֹאשְׁךָ נְחָשֶׁת וְהָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר-תַּחְתֶּיךָ בְּרֹזֶל:

<sup>17</sup> 1 Jn 2:1

<sup>18</sup> Mt 28:20b

<sup>19</sup> Jn 14:18

<sup>20</sup> For the longer description of this illustration, cf. LAMMERS, W.H. 2005. The price of possession: The Heidelberg Catechism Part 1. Chino, CA : First United Reformed Church. p.177.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Is 66:1, "*Thus says the Lord: 'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest?'*"

<sup>22</sup> 1 Jn 2:1b. καὶ ἐάν τις ἀμάρτην, παράκλητον ἔχομεν πρὸς τὸν πατέρα Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν δίκαιον.

<sup>23</sup> Jn 14:16b. κἀγὼ ἐρωτήσω τὸν πατέρα καὶ ἄλλον παράκλητον δώσει ὑμῖν,

You see, whereas the Holy Spirit is our Intercessor (Spokesperson) on earth *right beside us*,<sup>24</sup> our Lord Jesus is our Spokesperson in heaven *right beside God the Father*.

Yes, as *Intercessor*, our Lord Jesus is the fulfilment of the High Priest of the Old Testament – the high priest who used to intercede on behalf of God’s people.

Now, remember: The High Priest first brought the sacrifice in the *outer court* of the temple before he went into the *most holy part of the temple* to intercede for the people on the basis of the sprinkled blood.<sup>25</sup>

Likewise, just on a larger scale, our Lord Jesus first brought His sacrifice in the *outer court* (i.e., *here on earth*), before He went into the *Most Holy* (the *highest heaven*) to intercede for us on the basis of His shed blood!

What’s more: when, in Old-Testament times, the High Priest went into the Most Holy, he wore the ephod (shoulder cape; mantle) around his shoulders. Upon this ephod were fastened two onyx stones on which the names of all Israel’s tribes were engraved as a memorial before God!<sup>26</sup> Thus, on the High Priest’s shoulder cape were the names: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Zebulun, Issachar, Dan, Gad, Asher, Naphtali, Benjamin and Ephraim & Manasseh – i.e., all God’s people!

Likewise, our Lord Jesus, when He entered the Highest Heaven, He took with Him the names of all God’s loved-ones on His shoulders, where He is now interceding for them.<sup>27</sup>

And indeed, our Lord Jesus intercedes for us in all circumstances – yes, *when you have a difficult day, when you fumble and make mistakes, when you have pain, and even when you sin, Christ is still interceding for you*.<sup>28</sup>

Thus: the first blessing that we have because of our Lord’s ascension is: *He intercedes for us!*

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<sup>24</sup> Also cf. Rm 8:26-27

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Lv 16:1-1-22

<sup>26</sup> **“Take two onyx stones and engrave on them the names of the sons of Israel <sup>10</sup> in the order of their birth—six names on one stone and the remaining six on the other. <sup>11</sup> Engrave the names of the sons of Israel on the two stones the way a gem cutter engraves a seal. Then mount the stones in gold filigree settings <sup>12</sup> and fasten them on the shoulder pieces of the ephod as memorial stones for the sons of Israel. Aaron is to bear the names on his shoulders as a memorial before the LORD. <sup>13</sup> Make gold filigree settings <sup>14</sup> and two braided chains of pure gold, like a rope, and attach the chains to the settings (Ex 28:9-14).**

**The Shoulder Stones (Exodus 28:9-12) On each shoulder-piece of the Ephod was a precious stone. Six names were written on each of the stones, altogether naming the twelve tribes of Israel. Every time the high priest went before God at the Golden Incense Altar, the names of all the people of God were upon His shoulders.**

**WEBSITE <http://www.domini.org/tabern/highprst.htm>**

<sup>27</sup> cf. Heb 4:14-16 **Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. <sup>15</sup> For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. <sup>16</sup> Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.**

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Lammers (ibid:179)

Then blessings no. 2 & 3 is really the fact that 1) with our Lord's ascension and 2) the accompanying outpouring of the Holy Spirit, an *exchange/swap* took place!

It's almost like wedding rings bought long before the wedding day!

You see, about eight months before Annette and I got married, I bought her an engagement ring as well as a wedding ring. She wore the engagement ring on her finger, but, as for the wedding ring – I kept it with me for eight months until our wedding day. Similarly, she bought me a wedding ring (the same one I'm wearing now) but kept it with her for eight months until our wedding day.

Thus, I had *her* ring with *me*, and she had *my* ring with *her* – and it felt real great: although we did not yet have *one another*, I nevertheless had something of her and she something of me!

It's like a guarantee & a counter-guarantee.

Well, the same is true of our Lord Jesus and us!

You see, when our Lord ascended to Heaven, it was like *One of us is there* – human flesh is in heaven!

And shortly afterwards when He sent His Holy Spirit to us on earth, it is like *God is here* – God's Spirit is on earth!

So, what are the promises contained in this blessing?

My brother & sister,

The fact that human nature (body & soul) in glorified form (in a form that had beaten death) went to the highest of heavens, is a sure guarantee that *more humans will follow!* He, as head, will also surely take us, his body, there where He is.

*His* ascension is a guarantee of *our* ascension!

He did as He promised He would: went to prepare a place for us.

And, as someone<sup>29</sup> has so poignantly said, "If we are united with Him, our Head, then our death-bed becomes a Mt of Olives from which we are taken up in glory ..."

My brother & sister, for all believers – but especially for those who are in pain, it is a tremendous reassurance to have this guarantee. It's Rm 5:1-5 all over again, "...*Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope...*"<sup>30</sup>

Our Forerunner is already in heaven! One of us is there!

But at the same time: God is here.

Here is how a commentator<sup>31</sup> has beautifully summed up this guarantee and counter-guarantee:

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<sup>29</sup> Knap (ibid:186)

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Rm 5:1-5, "***Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>2</sup>... And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. <sup>3</sup>Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; <sup>4</sup>perseverance, character; and character, hope. <sup>5</sup>And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.***"

<sup>31</sup> Kuyvenhoven (1988:120)



## Jesus

### Functions in heaven

- Intercedes in heaven (Rom 8:34 “Christ Jesus, who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.” Cf. also 1 John 2:1)
- Pleads the believers’ case with the Father
- Claims us as His own before the Father (“They are Mine” = cf. above, Heb 2:13)
- Jesus is our **human body** in heaven
- pledge



## Holy Spirit

### Functions on earth

- Intercedes on earth (Rom 8:27, Rev 22:17)
- Pleads the Father’s case with the believers
- **Assures us** that we are children of God (right here & now – “**You are His**”)
- HS is **God’s Spirit** on earth
- counterpledge (Eph 1:13-14)

My brother & sister, it is my prayer that God will give certainty in your heart regarding where Christ is now (in His glorified body and Spirit), and regarding all the blessings and assurances we have that we will one day be with Him.

**AMEN** (2,702 words excluding footnotes)