

Key Bible Doctrines

Part 3: The Person of Christ / The Atonement / The Resurrection and Ascension of Christ

The Person of Christ

Jesus Christ was fully God and fully man in one person, and will be so forever.

That Christ was both fully God and fully man is immediately evident from the unusual circumstances of his birth. In Luke 1:26-38, we are told that Jesus was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary. Hence, Jesus called himself both the *Son of Man* (e.g., John 3:13), since he was born of a human mother, and the *Son of the God* (e.g., John 10:36 cf. Luke 1:32, 35), since he was conceived by the Holy Spirit. But we are also told that Jesus was “without sin” (Hebrews 4:15). Therefore, his conception by the Holy Spirit must have prevented him from inheriting Mary’s sin, which is why he is called “the holy one” in Luke 1:35.

The virgin birth made possible the uniting of full deity and full humanity in the one person. If Jesus had come into the world independent of human parents it would be difficult for us to relate to him as a human being. On the other hand, if he had been born from two human parents, both a father and a mother, it would be hard for us to understand how he could be fully God. The reasons why Jesus needed to be both fully human and fully God are discussed in a later section. In the following sections the scriptural evidence for the above doctrine is presented.

The Humanity of Christ

The fact that Jesus was fully human is clear from the many ordinary human experiences in his life. He was born just like any other baby (Luke 2:7), and needed the care and protection of his parents (Matthew 2:13). He grew up and matured like any other child (Luke 2:40), and learned to be obedient to his parents (Luke 2:41-52). He became tired just as we do (John 4:6), experienced thirst and hunger (Matthew 4:2; John 19:28), and on one occasion became physically weak to the point that he required the ministrations of angels to revive him (Matthew 4:11). The Scriptures also reveal that Jesus “was a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering” (Isaiah 53:3). During his torture and execution Jesus’ body was torn, broken and bruised like that of any other man (Isaiah 52:14). Ultimately, he died like any other man (Luke 23:46) before being resurrected again to life by the power of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:14).

Jesus also experienced the full range of human emotions. He marvelled at the faith of the centurion (Matthew 8:10), he wept with sorrow at the death of Lazarus (John 11:35), and mourned for the lost children of Israel (Luke 13:34). When he found that the temple was being desecrated by traders, he became very angry and drove them out with a whip (John 2:13-17). At times Jesus experienced emotions of a purely human kind, unlike those which God can experience. Just before his crucifixion he was “troubled” by the ordeal that awaited him (John 12:27), and on the night before his arrest he was greatly distressed so that “his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground” (Luke 22:44). At his darkest hour, he reached the point of utter despair, crying out to his Father, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46, cf. Psalm 22).

The Deity of Christ

The scriptural evidence for the deity of Christ is very extensive in the New Testament. We will begin by considering direct statements of Scripture that Jesus is God or that he is divine, before looking at some of the physical evidence.

Bearing in mind that Scripture is the Word of God, it is appropriate to look first at the titles

given to Christ. There are several passages in the New Testament that explicitly refer to Jesus as *God* (Greek, *theos*). In each of these passages the word *theos* is used in the strong sense to refer to the one who is the Creator of heaven and earth, the ruler over all. These passages include John 1:1; 1:18; 20:28; Romans 9:5; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 1:8 (quoting Psalm 45:6); and 2 Peter 1:1. There is also one Old Testament example of the name God applied to Christ in a familiar messianic passage: “For to us a Child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6).

The title *Lord* (Greek, *kyrios*) was more commonly used for Christ. The word *kyrios* can be used simply as a polite address to a superior, roughly equivalent to our word *sir* (e.g., Matthew 13:27), and sometimes it can simply mean “master” of a servant or slave (e.g., Matthew 6:24). But the word can also be used to refer to “the Lord” or “Jehovah” in the Old Testament. There are many instances in the New Testament where the word *kyrios* is used of Christ in what can only be understood as this strong Old Testament sense of the Lord or God. An example is when the angel announced to the shepherds of Bethlehem, “Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11). Another example is in Matthew 3:3 where John the Baptist, quoting Isaiah 40:3, says of Jesus, “This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah ... ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’” There are also many examples in the Epistles where the word *kyrios* is used to refer to Christ. For example, Paul says, “there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live” (1 Corinthians 8:6; cf. 12:3 and elsewhere in the Epistles).

Jesus also made many strong claims to his own deity. On one occasion he said to the Jews, “I tell you the truth, before Abraham was born, I am!” (John 8:58). This is a direct reference to Exodus 3:14 where God said to Moses, “I Am Who I Am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I Am has sent me to you.” Jesus was here claiming for himself the title *I Am* which is the most sacred of all the names that God gave to himself.¹ The Jews were so outraged by this that “they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds” (John 8:59). The other “I am” sayings in John’s Gospel, where Jesus claims to be the bread of life (6:35), the light of the world (8:12), the gate for the sheep (10:7), the good Shepherd (10:11), the resurrection and the life (11:25), the way, the truth, and the life (14:6), and the true vine (15:1), also contribute to the claim of Jesus to be God incarnate (i.e., God in the flesh).

Another strong claim to deity is Jesus’ statement at the end of Revelation, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end” (Revelation 22:13), which corresponds to the statement of God the Father in Revelation 1:8, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty” (cf. Isaiah 41:4). Similar statements appear in verses 11 and 17 of Revelation 1 which we see from verse 18 are made by Jesus since he then proclaims, “I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever!” The identity of the speaker is also clear from verse 13 where we are told that he appeared “like a son of man”, a title that Jesus frequently used for himself (e.g., Luke 9:22).

The title *Son of Man* is derived from Daniel’s vision, recorded in Daniel 7, where he saw “one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed” (Daniel 7:13-14). This in turn corresponds to Jesus’ statement to the chief priests warning

¹ The title *I Am* in the original Hebrew is translated into English by the letters YHWH or YHVH or JHVH which in turn are often translated as “Yahweh” or “Jehovah” or, more commonly, “the Lord”. The title conveys the sense of God as the one and only God of all creation who exists by himself and for himself and who is independent of, and greater than, the creation itself.

them that “In the future you will see that Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Matthew 26:64). The response of the chief priests was to accuse him of blasphemy and to proclaim, “He is worthy of death” (v. 65-66).

There are also numerous references in the New Testament which reveal Jesus to be the literal son of God (e.g., John 1:1-18, 34, 49; 3:16; 20:31). Jesus himself clearly described this unique relationship on a number of occasions (e.g., Matthew 11:27; John 6:46; 10:22-39; 16:15), and when others referred to him as the Son of God he accepted this title (e.g., Matthew 14:33; 16:15-17; John 1:49-50). Again, when Jesus was on trial before the Sanhedrin, and at a later time before Pontius Pilate, he openly acknowledged that he was the Son of God (Mark 14:61-62; Luke 22:70), which is why they crucified him (Mark 14:63-64).

Jesus also made many remarkable claims about himself which clearly reveal his divine nature. These claims were backed up by the life that he lived and the miracles that he performed, and ultimately by his resurrection from the dead.² For example, he claimed:

- To have been with the Father “before the world began” (John 17:5).
- To have come from heaven (John 3:13; 8:23; 6:33, 35), and to have been sent into the world by the Father (Luke 10:16; John 4:34).
- To have authority to forgive people their sins (Matthew 9:1-8; Luke 7:48-49), and that he had come to establish a new covenant between God and man based on the remission of sins through his sacrificial death (Matthew 26:26-28; Luke 22:20; Mark 10:45).
- To be the judge of the world (John 5:27-30).
- To answer prayer (John 14:13-14; 15:7; 16:23).
- To grant eternal life (John 3:14-16; 11:25-26), and to be the *only* entrance into heaven (John 10:9) and the *only* way to the Father (John 14:6).
- To be without sin (John 8:46), and to always do the Father’s will (John 8:29; 14:30).
- To be the Truth (John 14:6; also cf. Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28; 24:35; John 5:24; 7:16; 8:40; 12:49-50 and the many places where Jesus prefaced this teaching with the words “I tell you the truth ...”).
- To be the fulfilment of prophecy (Matthew 5:17; 11:2-6; 26:54, 56; Luke 4:17-21; 24:25-27, 44), and that the Scriptures spoke about him (John 5:39-40, 46).
- To have “All authority in heaven and on earth” (Matthew 28:18).
- To be the same as the Father so that to know him was to know God (John 8:19; 14:7), to see him was to see God (John 12:45; 14:9), to believe in him was to believe in God (John 12:44), to receive him was to receive God (Mark 9:37), to hate him was to hate God (John 15:23), and to honour him was to honour God (John 5:23).

In addition to the above affirmations of Jesus’ deity, many of the attributes of God can be seen in his life. For example:

- He demonstrated his *omnipotence* by the many miracles he performed such as calming a storm at sea (Matthew 8:23-27; cf. Psalm 65:7; 89:9; 107:29), walking on water (John 6:16-21), and changing water into wine (John 2:1-11).
- He demonstrated his *omniscience* by his knowledge of people’s thoughts (Mark 2:8) and knowing “from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him” (John 6:64; cf. John 2:25; 16:30).
- His *eternal nature* was demonstrated after his resurrection when he appeared to his

² For a more detailed discussion refer to the article *Was Jesus Christ God?* in the series *Ultimate Questions*.

disciples at various times over a period of forty days before ascending to heaven (Acts 1:1-11).

- His *omnipresence* is seen in his promise to the disciples that “where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” (Matthew 18:20). He also said to them, “I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20; cf. John 17:26).
- His *divine authority* is demonstrated by the miracles that he performed (John 5:36; 10:37-38; 14:11), and by the fact that he successfully completed his earthly mission (John 17:1-5).
- His *divine status* is seen by the fact that he was counted worthy to be worshipped, something that is true only of God. In Philippians 2:9-11 we are told that “God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

The New Testament affirms again and again the full deity of Jesus Christ as shown in the above, albeit brief, overview. Thus, the apostle Paul said of Jesus that “God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (Colossians 1:19-20).

The Resurrected Christ

After the resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples on a number of occasions. He appeared to them not as a ghost or spirit, but in the same form he had before he died. On one occasion he said to the startled disciples, “Look at my hands and feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have” (Luke 24:39). To reassure them further he then asked for something to eat and “They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence” (Luke 24: 41-43). However, it is clear from Scripture that his resurrected body was quite different from his earthly one. While he still carried some of the wounds that he had received at his crucifixion, yet they did not trouble him (John 20:24-28), and he was also able to appear and disappear suddenly, even within a locked room (Luke 24:31; John 20:19).

These appearances demonstrate the continuity of Jesus’ physical form with his heavenly one, but without its previous limitations and weaknesses. From this we can conclude that Jesus will forever continue to be the Christ who “died for our sins according to the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3). Thus, Paul says of the resurrected Christ that “in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority” (Colossians 2:9-10).

Why Christ Needed to be Both Fully Human and Fully God

As previously noted, the fact that Christ was fully human means that we can relate to him better than we can to the Almighty Father or the Holy Spirit, and we can be confident that he understands our daily struggles. The writer of Hebrews encourages us to “hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Hebrews 4:14-16).

But there are also two important “legal” reasons why Christ had to be fully human:

- *For representative obedience.* In the same way that Adam served as our representative in sin, Jesus became our representative in righteousness. Therefore, Paul teaches that “just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through

the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous” (Romans 5:18-19).

- *To be a substitute sacrifice.* If Jesus had not been a man, he could not have died in our place and paid the penalty that was due to us. The author of Hebrews tells us that “it is not angels he helps, but Abraham’s descendants. For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of his people” (Hebrews 2:16-17).³

However, Christ also needed to be fully God because:

- No human being is without sin, and therefore only God himself is worthy to cleanse us from our sins (Isaiah 1:18; cf. Psalm 51; John 1:29; Revelation 5:9).
- Salvation comes only from the Lord, and not from any man (Psalm 3:8; Jonah 2:9; cf. Isaiah 46:21-25; Acts 4:12).
- In order to carry out the perfect will of God, Jesus had to be God. As Jesus said, “No-one knows the Son except the Father, and no-one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him” (Matthew 11:27).

There is one more very important reason why Christ had to be both fully man and fully God. It is so that he could be a mediator between God and man: “For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men” (1 Timothy 2:5-6).⁴

The Unity of Christ’s Human and Divine Natures

While the Bible clearly shows that Christ was both fully human and fully divine, it does not explain how these two natures were combined into the one person. For example, how could Jesus experience human weaknesses and yet be omnipotent? Or how could he be tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin, if God cannot be tempted with evil (Hebrews 4:15; James 1:13)? And how could he die if his Spirit is eternal?

The orthodox teaching of the church in regard to the nature of Christ is stated in the Chalcedonian Definition of AD 451. This speaks of two distinct natures in Christ that each retain their own properties, yet remain eternally and inseparably united together in the one person. This teaching is essentially the same as that of the Trinity in which God is seen to exist as three distinct persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, but each person is fully God and there is only one God.

If we accept that the human and divine natures of Christ are distinct, then it is necessary to distinguish between things done by his human nature but not his divine nature, or by his divine nature but not his human nature. For example, when we talk about Jesus’ human nature, we can say that he ascended to heaven and is no longer in the world, but with respect to his divine nature we can say that he is everywhere present. Similarly, with respect to his human nature we can say that Jesus was about 30 years old when he commenced his ministry (Luke 3:23), but with respect to his divine nature he was with the Father “before the world began” (John 17:5).

We can also say that Jesus’ human nature was subject to ordinary human weaknesses, but that his divine nature was omnipotent. A striking example of this is when Jesus calmed a storm on the Sea of Galilee as recorded in Matthew 8:23-27. When the storm hit, Jesus was asleep in the boat, presumably because he was tired. But when the disciples woke him up saying,

³ Abraham’s descendants are all those who have “the faith of Abraham” (Romans 4:16; also cf. Galatians 3:22).

⁴ This scripture shows that there can be no mediator between God and man other than Jesus – no priest, no prophet, no pontiff, no worker of miracles, no angel, no saint, no church, nobody!

“Lord, save us! We’re going to drown!”, Jesus stood up and “rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm.” Here we see that Jesus’ weak human nature completely hid his omnipotence until he needed to exercise it.

Similarly, we can understand that Jesus’ human nature was tempted in every way that we are, but that his divine nature could not be tempted. This is illustrated by the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness as recorded in Matthew 4:1-11. On three occasions Jesus was tempted by Satan to satisfy his human nature, firstly with bread to satisfy his hunger after forty days of fasting, secondly to put God to the test, and finally with earthly wealth and power. But on each occasion Jesus, using the Scriptures to rebuke Satan, chose to subordinate his human nature to the will of his Father. For these tests to be relevant, Jesus must have been able to fail them. Therefore, every temptation which he faced needed to be resisted by his human nature, rather than his divine nature, for them to be valid tests. In overcoming every temptation to sin, not by his divine power, but on the strength of his human nature, Jesus reversed the failure of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.⁵

While it is often helpful to distinguish the human and divine natures of Christ in order to interpret certain events in his life, it is also important to understand that Christ was one person, and not two. For example, while we can say that it was his human nature that died and was raised again to life, we must also acknowledge that his divine nature shared in the event. This is common to all human experience. For example, when we hurt one part of our body, the whole of our being shares in that pain. In the same way, the whole person of Christ experienced everything that one nature or the other experienced.

Having now obtained at least a basic understanding of the nature of Christ and the extraordinary miracle of his incarnation, we will next consider the work that he did on our behalf so that we might be saved.

The Atonement

The atonement is the work that Christ did in his life and death to earn our salvation.

This definition includes both the work that Christ did in living a life of perfect obedience to God in order to earn righteousness for us (sometimes called his *active obedience*), and his death on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins (sometimes called his *passive obedience*). But before discussing these two aspects of the atonement in more detail, it is appropriate to first consider why the atonement was necessary at all.

The necessity of the atonement is symbolised in the many laws and rituals of the Old Testament which illustrate the need for God’s people to be cleansed from their sins so that they may be made right with him (e.g., Leviticus). But the New Testament reveals that these rituals were a mere foreshadowing of the perfect and final atonement achieved for us through the work of Jesus:

Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God’s presence. Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. Then Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will

⁵ It could be argued that if Jesus had been tested beyond the ability of his human nature to overcome, then he could have drawn upon his divine nature to prevent him from sinning. If this had happened, then Jesus would have failed to demonstrate the justice of God in expecting mankind not to sin. However, this did not happen, and so the argument does not warrant further consideration.

appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him (Hebrews 9:24-28).

We also learn from the New Testament that the motivation for the atonement is both the love of God and his righteousness. The love of God is expressed beautifully in what is probably the most familiar passage in the Bible: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). But the righteousness of God also required that the penalty due to us for our sins be paid. If he had chosen to ignore our sins, then he would not be just, and we would be left wondering if, in fact, he was righteous at all:

But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished – he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus (Romans 3:21-26).

As noted above, the atonement includes both Christ’s life of perfect obedience to God (his *active obedience*) and his sacrifice on the cross (his *passive obedience*). By living a life of perfect obedience to the Father, Christ fulfilled the requirements of the law of Moses and in so doing reversed the effect of Adam and Eve’s disobedience in the Garden of Eden. This original sin was fundamentally an act of unbelief, since both Adam and Eve failed to believe the Word of God thereby revealing their lack of trust in him. Jesus, on the other hand, demonstrated a complete trust in his Father even to the extent of dying on a cross in order to do his will (cf. Matthew 26:39; Philippians 2:8).⁶ Because of Christ’s obedience we are now able to exchange our sinfulness, which we inherited from Adam and Eve, with his righteousness which we receive from Jesus when we put our trust in him: “For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous” (Romans 5:19). This is why Paul said that his desire was to “gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith” (Philippians 3:8-9).

The passive obedience of Christ includes not only his dying on the cross on our behalf, but also his enduring the ordinary hardships common to life in a fallen world. One example of this was the sorrow he felt for the lost children of Israel: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!” (Luke 13:34). Other examples include being rejected by his own townsfolk (Luke 4:14-30); his own brothers not believing in him (John 7:1-5); his disciples abandoning him in his time of greatest need (Mark 14:50); one of them, Judas, betraying him (Matthew 26:47-50); and another, Peter, denying him (Matthew 26:69-75). The prophet Isaiah said of Jesus, “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not” (Isaiah 53:3). In the same vein, the writer of Hebrews said, “Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him” (Hebrews 5:8-9). In all of his trials Jesus remained firm and did not waver, as predicted by the prophet Isaiah: “In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth” (Isaiah 42:3-4).

While the life of Christ was filled with many trials, the most terrible of these was his

⁶ Note, however, that Jesus was not forced to do this; it was entirely his own choice (John 10:14-18).

crucifixion. On the night before his arrest Jesus confided to his disciples, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death” (Mark 14:34). After his arrest, the soldiers guarding him mocked him and beat him (Matthew 27:27-31), and the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, had him flogged (John 19:1). He was then forced to carry his own cross to the place of his execution where he was stripped naked and nailed through his hands and feet to the cross (John 19:16-24). Jesus suffered terrible physical pain and public humiliation on the cross for six hours before he died (Matthew 27:45-50). But in addition to this, he also had to carry the guilt of our sins. Paul declared that God had made Christ “who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). And Peter said of Christ, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds [we are] healed” (1 Peter 2:24).

According to the apostle John, Christ “is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). The phrase “atoning sacrifice” in this verse (and similarly in Romans 3:25, Hebrews 2:17 and 1 John 4:10) refers to Christ as “one who turns aside God’s wrath”. This shows that Christ not only bore in his body on the cross the sins of the whole world, but also the full wrath of God against sin and evil:

God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! (Romans 5:8-10; see also Colossians 1:21-23).

The fundamental effect of the atonement was to bring believers back into a right relationship with God: “For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (Colossians 1:19-20). As we have seen, the motivation for this great act of heroism and compassion was God’s love for us: “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:10). Paul summed up the position of the believers when he said, “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God” (Romans 5:1-2).

The Resurrection and Ascension of Christ

The whole of the New Testament bears witness to the fact of the resurrection and ascension of Christ.⁷ In addition to the detailed accounts of the resurrection in the four Gospels (see Matthew 28:1-20; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-53; John 20:1-21:25), the book of Acts⁸ records the apostles’ proclamation of the resurrection of Christ, and of their continued prayer to him and trust in him as the one who is alive and reigning in heaven. Similarly, the letters in the New Testament written to the various churches by Paul and the other apostles (called the Epistles), depends entirely on the assumption that Jesus is a living, reigning Saviour who is now the exalted head of the church, who is to be trusted, worshipped, and adored, and who will some day return in power and great glory to reign as King over the earth. Finally, the book of Revelation repeatedly reveals Christ as the risen Lord: “I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever!” (Revelation 1:17-18).

Christ’s resurrection was not simply a coming back from the dead, as had been experienced

⁷ There is also substantial historical evidence for the resurrection of Christ. For a more detailed discussion refer to the paper *Did Jesus Christ Rise from the Dead?* in the series *Ultimate Questions*.

⁸ The book of Acts was written by the apostle Luke who was a physician and historian.

by others before such as Lazarus (John 11:1-44), for then Jesus would have been subject to weakness and aging, and eventually would have died again just as all other human beings die. Rather, when he rose from the dead, Jesus was the “firstfruits” (1 Corinthians 15:20, 23) of a new kind of life, a life in which his physical body was made perfect and no longer subject to weakness, aging, or death. Some texts show that God the Father specifically raised Christ from the dead (Acts 2:24; Romans 6:4; 1 Corinthians 6:14; Galatians 1:1; Ephesians 1:20), but others indicate that Jesus had authority to bring himself back to life (John 2:19-21; 10:17-18). Indeed, Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25).

After his resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples “and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3). As well as the apostles, Jesus appeared to over five hundred of his disciples at the same time, and then to James, the brother of Jesus, and lastly to Paul (1 Corinthians 15:3-7). At the end of the forty days (but before he appeared to Paul), Jesus led his disciples to a place near Bethany where “he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven” (Luke 24:50-51). This event is also described in Acts 1:9-11 where we are told that Jesus “was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ‘Men of Galilee,’ they said, ‘why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.’”

The writer of Hebrews tells us that after his ascension Jesus “sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven” (Hebrews 1:3). Similarly, Paul taught that God “raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come” (Ephesians 1:20-21). Quoting from Psalm 110:1, Paul explained that Christ “must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet” (1 Corinthians 15:25). This refers to the current age in which Christ rules over his church, but for now has allowed Satan to continue to rule over the world (cf. John 12:31; Galatians 1:4; 1 John 5:19). When Christ returns at the end of the age he will at that time destroy Satan’s kingdom, and “The kingdom of the world [will] become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever” (Revelation 11:15).

The most important implications of the resurrection and ascension of Christ may be summarised as follows:

- They provide proof of the claims that Jesus made about himself and confirm the reliability of his teachings (Matthew 12:38-40; John 4:48).
- They provide assurance to believers of their own resurrection and ascension (Romans 4:25; 1 Corinthians 6:14; 15:12-58; 2 Corinthians 4:14; 1 Thessalonians 4:17).
- Believers can share in the power of the resurrection of Christ in their personal lives and in their service to the Lord (Romans 6:1-14; 1 Corinthians 15:58; Ephesians 1:18-21; 2:4-10; Colossians 3:1-4; Hebrews 12:1-3; 1 Peter 1:3-6).
- Believers will share in the glory of Christ in heaven (Ephesians 2:6-7; Hebrews 2:5-8; Revelation 2:26-27; 3:21).

Jesus said that everyone who has died will be raised to life again, “those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned” (John 5:29). This is bad news for those who do not know Christ, but good news for those who have put their trust in him. The faithful in Christ can join with the apostle Peter in proclaiming:

Praise be to God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has

⁹ The “firstfruits” or first taste of a ripening crop show what the rest of the harvest will be like. This imagery illustrates how believers will be like Christ when they also are resurrected to life.

given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time (1 Peter 1:3-5).

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Acknowledgments

Bible quotations are from the New International Version, 1984 unless otherwise indicated. Other versions referred to from time to time are:

Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible, New American Standard Bible, 1977 (NASB).

The Spirit Filled Life Bible, New King James Version, 1991 (NKJV).