

Sermon: The Ascension of Christ to Rule the Universe Comforts His Suffering Church

Dr. P.J. (Flip) Buys*

** Dr. Buys is the International Director for World Reformed Fellowship. He is a minister in the Reformed Churches in South Africa, an experienced pastor, cross-cultural missionary, church planter and initiator of community development projects. He is also an adjunct professor of Missiology at North-West University in Potchefstroom. Dr. Buys was the founder of Mukhanyo Theological College and Christian Academy.*



Read: Revelation 5:1-14 and Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 19

.... *“Worthy are you to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation,
and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on the earth.”* (Rev. 5:9-10, ESV)

Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 19

50. Q. Why is it added, And sits at the right hand of God?

A. Christ ascended into heaven to manifest Himself there as Head of His Church, through whom the Father governs all things.

51. Q. How does the glory of Christ, our Head, benefit us?

A. First, by His Holy Spirit He pours out heavenly gifts upon us, His members. Second, by His power He defends and preserves us against all enemies.

52. Q. What comfort is it to you that Christ will come to judge the living and the dead?

A. In all my sorrow and persecution I lift up my head and eagerly await as judge from heaven the very same person who before has submitted Himself to the judgement of God for my sake, and has removed all the curse from me. He will cast all His and my enemies into everlasting condemnation, but He will take me and all His chosen ones to Himself into heavenly joy and glory.

Introduction

Did you know that the 20th century has seen more Christian martyrs than the previous nineteen centuries combined? Lions have been replaced by firing squads and concentration camps as record numbers of Jesus' worshipers are persecuted from Syria to North Korea to several countries in Africa.

The world is still recovering from the shock of bomb blasts in Brussels, Istanbul, Pakistan and Nigeria. There may be more than 160,000 martyrdoms per year in fifty countries around the world. Christian martyr deaths around the globe more than doubled since 2012. In North Korea alone, an estimated 50,000 to 70,000 followers of Jesus are suffering in prison camps for "crimes" such as owning a Bible, going to church, or sharing their faith.

Eritrea is listed as the twelfth worst country in the world for Christian persecution. In his 2013 book, *The Global War on Christians*, reporter John L. Allen Jr. writes that in Eritrea Christians are sent to the Me'eter military camp and prison, which he describes as a "concentration camp for Christians." It is believed to house thousands being punished for their religious beliefs.

Many weeping Christians are asking: "Where is Christ our Lord and King who proclaimed that He has all power in heaven and on earth and will be with us until the end of the world? How should we face the fearful questions and threats facing us now?"

The vision given to us in Revelation 5 and the doctrines Reformed Christians confess concerning the ascension of Jesus as his enthronization (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 19) gives us answers to these questions.

To understand this passage and the doctrine it proclaims, we need to see two amazing pictures:

Picture 1:

On the small rocky and barren island Patmos, we see an old grey-haired weeping father. What a startling sight! It was in the mid-90s A.D. – a time of terrible persecution for Christians. The blood of many martyrs drenched the earth. They had to die because of their faith in Christ.

This old father is John, the apostle whom Jesus loved. He was banished by Caesar Domitian to this island for just one reason: because of his faith in Jesus Christ as his Saviour and Lord. All the promises that Christ would return soon and that His reign would spread over the whole world now seemed to be very far off, while the blood and tears of thousands of Christians soaked into the earth.

Picture 2:

But in Revelation 5 Christ opens the heavens and reveals to John another vision. He was allowed to peep into the throne room of almighty God to see what happened there on the day of Jesus' ascension into heaven to sit at the right hand of God.

This astonishing vision also reveals to us the magnificent implications of the doctrine that CHRIST RULES THE UNIVERSE TO BENEFIT HIS CHURCH as it is confessed in Sunday 19 of the Heidelberg Catechism.

In an explanation of Sunday 19 from Revelation 5 three truths become crystal clear. With His ascension:

- 1) Christ is manifested as King over the church and the whole universe.
- 2) Christ, from His position in the throne room of God, is gathering, empowering and protecting His church.
- 3) Christ is heading towards the final judgement.

1.) Manifested as King over the church and the whole universe.

In Revelation 5 the curtain is drawn away to reveal to John and us what happened behind the clouds on the day Jesus ascended into heaven. It was the day when Jesus entered into the throne room of almighty God in heaven. He saw the great and awesome and holy God on His throne with a scroll in His right hand. This scroll and the seals around it contained God's global action plan as well as the names of all His elect: all those who are redeemed and will share in His eternal glory with Him in His coming new creation. The book and the seals reveal Christ as Sovereign King on His way to God's final judgement over the living and the dead that will take place when this scroll is opened.

It is very clear: the opening of this scroll will bring an end to all the hatred and persecution against God's children. When this book is opened, the final judgement and destruction of Satan and all God's enemies will finally come. In heaven and on earth there is a real longing that this book be opened. That is why the longing cry of an angel rings with a loud sound through the universe: "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?"

It is as if the angels in heaven are keeping their breaths in awaiting tension. Will someone now step forward and take this scroll and open it so that God's triumphant kingdom can finally come?

But then John sees that this scroll is still sealed with seven seals around it. The seals – as we see later in the book of Revelation – signify the various aspects of God's plan in history that must still take place before the end can come.

At first, the shocking thing is that the scroll is still completely sealed with seven seals, indicating that it is totally locked – the number seven in the Bible is always a symbol of totality and completeness. Nobody stepped forward to take the scroll and break the seals.

After the loud cry of the angel echoing through eternity, there is just silence... It is such a tense silence that this old, grey-haired apostle bursts out in tears and weeps. If no one steps forward to take the scroll and break the seals and opens the scroll, it seems as if there will never come an end to the terrible hatred against God's children and that the bloody sufferings of the Christians will just go on and on and on forever.

But then one of the elders around the throne rushes to John to comfort him: You don't have to weep any more, old father. Look there: Someone is stepping forward to take the scroll and break the seals. He is the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David. He has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.

Any person who knows his Old Testament knows whom the Lion of the tribe of Judah and the Root of David is. It is the Messiah, Jesus Christ, the One promised for so many ages that He would come to conquer the enemies of God's people.

As John looks eagerly to see this Lion, he observes another amazing thing: the Lion looks like a slaughtered lamb. When Jesus stepped forward in heaven to the throne of God to take over the rule of the universe, the scars on His body resulting from His death on the cross, the holes made by the nails that were driven through His hands, were clearly visible. The fact that He is like a slaughtered Lamb reminds John of the heart of the message of the gospel: to conquer Satan and to liberate all those whose names are written in the scroll, a price first had to be paid.

The Devil had the right to own them. God's children come with stains of sin into the world when they are born. They also make their sins more and more every day. Therefore Satan has the right to rule over them and the whole world. The price they have to pay is death. God said that those who sin must die. We are all guilty of capital punishment. The sentence of death was hanging over us.

The one who would step forward to take the scroll and reveal the names as God's children, liberated from the rule of Satan, redeemed from the sentence of death hanging over them, this Redeemer had to pay the price of death for their liberation. That is why nobody at first dared to step forward and take the scroll out of the hand of God. But now – after His death on the cross - after He has been slaughtered like a lamb – Jesus had the right to step forward. Christ is the great Conqueror. His tremendous victory is that won on the cross.

God reveals to us in Revelation 5 that His ascension to heaven was really a step towards the right hand of God to go and take that scroll and bring the final redemption of all God's elect and the coming of a whole new creation to completion. When He takes the scroll and starts to break open the seals, it means that He is now taking hold of the whole history of the world in His bloodstained hands. What a stunning thing to know. The same Christ who loved us so much that He was willing to suffer the death penalty on our behalf on the cross went to heaven to take the reins of the rule of the whole world in the same hands through which the nails of the cross were driven.

The future of the world does not lie in the hands of the United Nations Organization. It does not lie in the hands of any earthly government or the White House in America or the European Union or a Muslim Al Qaeda terrorist group. No! The ascension of Christ tells us that the reins of world his-

tory are firmly in the bloodstained hands of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

That is the wonderful background of the words of the Heidelberg Catechism in answer 50, where Reformed Christians around the world confess that the fact that Christ ascended to the right hand of God means that *God the Father governs all things through Christ*. He ascended into heaven to manifest Himself there as Head of His Church and Ruler of the World.

This sentence is so much more than just a piece of dry doctrine.

- It is something that should give us hope and comfort.
- It should actually drive us to burst out with songs of joy.
- Our Lord reigns!

And exactly that happened in heaven. Look! We read that all the hosts of heaven, thousands and thousands of angels – that means millions – and the elders around the throne burst out with a new song, singing: “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.” And this choir is then echoed by another choir of all creatures in heaven and on earth singing: “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power, for ever and ever!”

It is so sad that it has become a fashion with some people to think that the old doctrines of the church are irrelevant. In Revelation 5 we see the angels in heaven finding this doctrine of the meaning of the ascension of Christ so wonderful that they cannot stop singing songs of worship and praise to God about it.

This doctrine has more implications: through His ascension Christ did not only manifest Himself as King over the church and the whole universe, but He also starts now already to use His church to be His instruments and co-workers in the final coming of His Kingdom.

2.) Christ empowers and protects His church.

When Christ liberated us from sin, He not only redeemed us from the reign of the Devil. He also came to live in our hearts through His Spirit to strengthen and empower us to become His co-workers. That is why some of His last words to His disciples just before He went to heaven were: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). That is also why the Holy Spirit was poured out on the church on the day of Pentecost so soon after the ascension of Christ.

God the Holy Spirit now lives in the heart of each of God’s children to keep them close to Jesus and empower them with His gifts to serve Him in serving others. Every Christian has these gifts of the Spirit. In the Heidelberg Catechism we confess that He pours out heavenly gifts upon us, as His members.

Do you really realise that you possess heavenly gifts? This is not merely

some Pentecostal or Charismatic doctrine, as some people think. No, this is part of the Reformed doctrine in one of the oldest Reformed confessions. Every true Christian has heavenly gifts of the Holy Spirit. Not only pastors, not only members of a church council or session, but every Christian has gifts and now needs to use those gifts to serve God through serving one another and others.

That is why the new song in heaven which the angels started to sing when Christ took the scroll states that Christ has made us a kingdom and priests to serve our God. In the times of the Old Testament, only certain specific people were chosen to be priests. But now, after the resurrection of Christ, the whole church are called priests. Therefore, every member is a minister or a priest. When you hear your neighbor is ill or suffering or crying with some spiritual need or busy backsliding, please don't sit and wait for the pastors to come and do something. If you are a Christian, Christ says He has also given you heavenly gifts for service. You can go and give a prayer and a song and a word of comfort and encouragement or even rebuke where needed. The words "one another" are used more than sixty times in the New Testament to describe the life style expected of Christians.

We do not have to be afraid for anybody or anything. Christ rules in heaven. He has taken the scroll and is breaking the seals. He protects me. He who rules the universe loves us so much that He was willing to die for us. With the same self-sacrificing love with which He died for us, He now cares for us. He has millions of angels to protect us against all dangers. Would you have any fear to live in the country if the president of the country was your brother who loves you very much? No, definitely not! Now if you then know that Jesus Christ, who is the King of kings, was not ashamed to call us His brothers and sisters, how can we have any fear? That is why we confess in the Heidelberg Catechism that we believe that by His power He defends and preserves us against all enemies.

3.) Christ is heading towards the final judgement.

Although the old, grey-haired father, the apostle John, lived in a terrible time of bloodshed and persecution, this vision of Revelation 5 reminded him – now that Jesus Christ has taken hold of the scroll and started to break and unfold the seals, the end is coming in sight. Soon all the seals will be broken. Then final judgement will come on all God's enemies.

It is not possible to deal with the meaning of each of the seals here, but we read in the next chapter that when the sixth seal is broken, the terrible judgement of God is revealed that will be so terrible that the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man will try to hide in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They will call to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?" (Rev. 6:16)

That is why we can confess in the Heidelberg Catechism that “the very same person who before has submitted Himself to the judgement of God for my sake, and has removed all the curse from me, He will cast all His and my enemies into everlasting condemnation”. Jesus is not like a friendly old grandfather who just keeps on smiling to the rebelliousness of sinners. The day will come that He will bring judgement. Jesus Himself warned that on the last day many people who have preached and even performed miracles and great powers will cry out to him: “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?” Then He, the Lamb, will tell them plainly, “I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!” (Matt. 7:22-23)

I was once deeply shocked when another preacher reminded us that on the last day many people will turn around before the doors of heaven and be thrown into the pit of hell with the name of Jesus on their lips. Why? Because His name was on their lips, but He Himself was not really in their hearts, and they have never really embraced Him with humble confession of sin.

If you are really in Christ and He in you (John 16), you will have nothing to fear on that day when He is going to break the last seal. This same old, grey-haired apostle John wrote in 1 John 2:28: “And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming.”

For the real, humble Christian, the final judgement is not something to fear; it is something to long for. That is why we confess in answer 52 of the Heidelberg Catechism that now, “In all my sorrow and persecution I lift up my head and eagerly await as judge from heaven the very same person who before has submitted Himself to the judgement of God for my sake, and has removed all the curse from me.”

Conclusion

What a wonderful, powerful confession we have in this section of the Heidelberg Catechism! We know for sure – our Saviour is in charge of the universe. He has the scroll in His hands. He is breaking and unfolding the seals of history now, at this very moment.

Let us use the heavenly gifts He has given us to be channels of His love in this broken world. But most of all, let us be ready for His return and final judgement by committing ourselves to Him daily. Then we can even be eager to see that great day of His return and make the final prayer of the Bible in Revelation the earnest prayer of our own hearts: “Come, Lord Jesus, yes please do come soon!”

