

“Jesus Ascended to Heaven”

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Luke 24:49–53 (NIV84)

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⁵⁰ When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. ⁵¹ While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. ⁵² Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.

⁵³ And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.¹

Last week was Easter or, as the theologically correct would have it, Resurrection Sunday. It’s an exciting time for the Christian. Churches are filled with more people. There’s a feeling of triumph as we talk about the risen Christ. And many of us enjoyed special time with family, perhaps a good meal. We can praise God for such good days.

But Easter has come and gone. And now what? I tried to imagine what it would be like to hear about the death and resurrection of Jesus for the first time. What if I was someone who came here last week and heard about Jesus’ resurrection. I think one of my first questions would be, Where is Jesus now? After all, almost all that I have talked about in this series of sermons on Jesus is ancient history. But what about now? Where did Jesus go? What is he doing?

Jesus died in a horrible way, enduring the great pain that comes through flogging and then crucifixion. But he rose from the grave. He triumphed. If you just heard about that and didn’t know the whole story, you might imagine that Jesus would become something of a celebrity. He would be on all the talk shows, embarking on a world tour, visiting the various heads of state the way the Pope does today. Well, they didn’t have talk shows two thousand years ago, but you get the idea. Yet we don’t see Jesus today. Where is he? What is he doing? Where is Jesus when bad things happen? Why doesn’t Jesus travel around the world, showing himself to everyone?

I don’t think those are bad questions. In fact, I think those are natural questions to ask. The answer to the question, “Where is Jesus now” is this: Jesus is in heaven, with God the Father. He is on the throne in heaven. He is interceding for Christians. He is advocating for us. He is preparing a place for us. He couldn’t do any of these things if he didn’t ascend into heaven first.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, the Scripture quoted herein is taken from the New International Version (1984).

What I want to do today is tell a bit of the story that follows Jesus' resurrection. I want to show that Jesus ascended into heaven. And I want to start to show why he ascended into heaven. I'll continue to explain the "why" of the ascension over the next two weeks. I think this is important because it's natural to wonder where Jesus is. I also think it's important because we don't often talk about the significance of the ascension.

In Matthew, Luke, and John, we see that Jesus appears to his disciples following his resurrection.² He appeared to them in Jerusalem and Galilee, and then in Jerusalem again. In the passage that was just read, Luke 24, we see that Jesus tells the disciples to stay in Jerusalem until they receive the Holy Spirit. Let's back up just a bit and go to Luke 24:44-48:

⁴⁴ He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶ He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things.

First, Jesus tells the disciples that all the Old Testament is about himself. The "Law of Moses" refers to the first five books of the Bible. The "Prophets" refers to historical books like Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings, and the prophetic books like Isaiah and Jeremiah. And the "Psalms" is the section of the Hebrew Bible that includes not only the Psalms, but also Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes and a few other books.³ Jesus opens up the minds of the disciples so they could understand how he fulfilled Scripture. Jesus had to suffer and die and rise from the grave. But even the Old Testament shows that repentance and forgiveness would be preached in the name of the Messiah, the special, anointed one of God, to all nations. I think Jesus has a number of passages in the Old Testament in mind. For example, God told Abraham that "all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen. 12:3). And Isaiah envisioned a time when Gentiles would come to the temple (Isa. 2:2; 56:3-8). But for that to happen, the nations needed to hear about the Messiah. People needed to be told to turn from their ways of sinning, or rejecting God and doing life on their own terms, and they needed to hear about the forgiveness of

² Mark 16:9-20 is probably not part of the original Gospel of Mark, and therefore I don't include it here.

³ The Hebrew Bible has the same content as our Old Testament, though the books were ordered differently.

sins available in Jesus. And Jesus says all this is found in the Old Testament. It was always God's plan.⁴

Jesus says something similar in Matthew 28:16-20. This passage is known as the Great Commission.

¹⁶Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Here, Jesus meets with the eleven disciples, the twelve minus Judas, who betrayed Jesus and then killed himself. He tells them they need to go and make disciples of all nations. He doesn't just say "make converts," or "get people to recite a creed or say a prayer." No, he wants disciples. To be a disciple is literally to be a student. Students learn. So Jesus tells his disciples to teach others to obey everything that he commands. This is important. And, of course, so is baptism. This is the rite that accompanies salvation. It is a picture of the gospel: just as the person is submerged into the water, the old self has died. As the person comes up out of the water, so he or she has been raised to new life in Christ (Rom. 6:3-4). Becoming a Christian means being transformed by God into a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17).

But there are two other things to notice, things that relate to the ascension. Jesus says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." Now, I have said many times over the course of these sermons that Jesus is God.⁵ Yet how can God be given authority? God has always possessed all authority in heaven and on earth. The only way that Jesus could be given authority is as a man.⁶ Jesus has existed eternally as the divine Son, but when he was conceived by the virgin Mary, he added a second nature: He also became man. He died as a man, he was raised from the dead as a man, and he was given all authority as a man. I'll talk more about that later.

The other thing we should notice in this passage in Matthew is Jesus' statement: "surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." But Jesus is about to ascend into heaven. How

⁴ Perhaps Jesus had verses like Isa. 42:6 and 49:6 in mind.

⁵ See the sermon, "Jesus Is God," March 29, 2015, <http://wbcommunity.org/jesus>.

⁶ I have also taught about the humanity of Jesus. See the sermon, "Jesus Was a Man," January 4, 2015, <http://wbcommunity.org/jesus>.

can he be with us always? I'll get back to that in a moment. But for now, I want the question to linger for a while.

Then, in both Luke and Acts, we see that Jesus ascended. Luke ends his Gospel with this account, in Luke 24:49-53:

⁴⁹ I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

⁵⁰ When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. ⁵¹ While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. ⁵² Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.

⁵³ And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

Jesus told his disciples to wait for what his Father promised. He's referring to the Holy Spirit. After Jesus ascended into heaven, he poured out the Holy Spirit on his disciples. We'll talk more about that in two weeks, but that's an important part of the ascension. In John 16:7, Jesus says, “But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.” Jesus promised that he wouldn't leave his disciples alone; he would give them the Holy Spirit.

Then Jesus blesses his disciples and he is taken up to heaven, apparently by the Father. Luke gives us a bit more detail at the beginning of the second volume of this work, Acts. We know that Luke and Acts form a two-volume work because of what we read at the beginning of Acts. Turn with me to Acts 1:1-5:

¹ In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach ² until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. ³ After his suffering, he showed himself to these men 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. ⁴ On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. ⁵ For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

Luke wrote both his Gospel and Acts to a man named Theophilus. Here, he says that in his previous book, he wrote about what Jesus *began* to do and teach until his ascension. That implies that Acts is about what Jesus *continued* to do through his disciples. Luke also tells us that Jesus showed himself to his disciples and “gave many convincing proofs” that he was indeed alive. He

appeared to them multiple times over a period of forty days, he talked about the kingdom of God, and he told them to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit.

Then we read about one last question the disciples ask of Jesus. Look at Acts 1:6-8:

⁶ So when they met together, they asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

⁷ He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

First, Jesus’ disciples ask an important question. During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, Jews expected that the Messiah would be a political figure. He would come and deliver Israel from political oppression. He would defeat the Roman Empire and return Israel to her glory, as in the days of King Solomon. That’s what many expected, anyway. And in some sense, it was reasonable of the disciples to think this way. They have seen their King rise from the grave. Even death couldn’t stop him. As we saw in verse 3, he talked to them about the kingdom of God. Jesus also told them that the Holy Spirit was coming. In the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit is promised to come at the end time, when Israel would be restored. So, their question certainly made sense to them.

But the disciples’ expectations were mistaken. They expected a national, political kingdom. And they expected it would come right away. Jesus, in his own way, answers their question, but he does it in a way that corrects their understanding of the kingdom of God. In verse 7, he says that the kingdom they’re thinking about isn’t coming now. It will come at the time the Father has set and it’s not for them to know when. But there’s an ambivalence to this answer. Jesus doesn’t quite say, “Oh, the kingdom will come, but that will be later, so don’t worry about it.” He answers in a different way.

I think he really answers their question in verse 8. He says that the Holy Spirit will come, and that they will be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. In the Old Testament, there are several passages that speak of the promised Holy Spirit coming. He would come to restore creation. In Isaiah 32:15, we read that Israel would be a wasteland

till the Spirit is poured upon us from on high,
and the desert becomes a fertile field,
and the fertile field seems like a forest.

The Spirit would come to restore paradise lost, Eden.

In another passage in Isaiah, chapter 43, God calls Israel “my witnesses” (vv. 10, 12). In the next chapter, Isaiah 44, we find all these themes coming together. In Isaiah 44:1-5, God says to Israel,

- ¹ “But now listen, O Jacob, my servant,
Israel, whom I have chosen.
- ² This is what the LORD says—
he who made you, who formed you in the womb,
and who will help you:
Do not be afraid, O Jacob, my servant,
Jeshurun, whom I have chosen.
- ³ For I will pour water on the thirsty land,
and streams on the dry ground;
I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring,
and my blessing on your descendants.
- ⁴ They will spring up like grass in a meadow,
like poplar trees by flowing streams.
- ⁵ One will say, ‘I belong to the LORD’;
another will call himself by the name of Jacob;
still another will write on his hand, ‘The LORD’s,’
and will take the name Israel.

Verse 3 is important. God says he will pour out the Holy Spirit, which will be part of the recreation of the land as well as the recreation of his people. Then, in verse 8, he says,

You are my witnesses. Is there any God besides me?
No, there is no other Rock; I know not one.”

The point is that Jesus was showing his disciples that the kingdom of God would be established through the Holy Spirit and through the witnessing of his people. And this message would go from Jerusalem to the known world, even to the ends of the earth. This kingdom would not be a political one. It would not come by force. It would be by the power of the Spirit and through proclamation of the good news that God had come in the flesh to rescue his people from sin.

And then Jesus ascends into heaven. We see this in Acts 1:9-11.

⁹ After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

¹⁰ They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ¹¹ “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 ascension must be important because Luke ends his first book and begins his second one with it.⁷ Though Luke doesn't give us a lot of information about Jesus' ascension, I think the ascension is part of Jesus' answer regarding the kingdom of God. When Jesus ascended to heaven, he went to sit on the throne of God. We know that because Jesus ascended on a cloud. That may not seem like an important detail, but it surely is meant to recall Daniel 7:13-14.

¹³“In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. ¹⁴He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

The one that Daniel sees is “like a son of man.” That's Jesus. In this vision, he's coming with clouds to the Ancient of Days, God the Father, to receive all power and authority. He comes to receive a kingdom.

There are many verses in the New Testament that speak about how Jesus is now at the right hand of God. The right hand is the position of power and authority. Perhaps the clearest passage is in the next chapter in Acts when Peter is preaching at the day of Pentecost. This is Acts 2:32-36:

³² God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. ³³ Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. ³⁴ For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said,

“ ‘The Lord said to my Lord:
“Sit at my right hand
³⁵ until I make your enemies
a footstool for your feet.” ’

³⁶“Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”

⁷ Robert A. Peterson, *Salvation Accomplished by the Son: The Work of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 161: “The placement of the ascension at the beginning of Acts shows that it is foundational to all that follows in the book.”

When Jesus ascended into heaven, he was exalted to the right hand of the Father. Peter also quotes a Psalm of David, Psalm 110:1, which is the Old Testament verse most quoted in the New Testament. The Psalm is about the Messiah. David says that “the Lord,” God the Father, said to his “Lord,” the Messiah, Jesus, “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.” In other words, Jesus will reign until all his enemies are under his feet.⁸ N. T. Wright, a British theologian, puts it this way: “Easter tells us that Jesus is himself the first part of [the] new creation; his ascension tells us that he is now running it.”⁹

I’ll return back to this idea of Jesus reigning from the throne in just a moment. But first I want us to think a bit about heaven. Though Jesus ascends to heaven, we shouldn’t think that heaven is a place that is above us in the sense that we could travel there. Heaven is not another place in this universe. It’s the realm of God. It’s beyond where we can go. According to Tim Keller, “When a Russian cosmonaut returned from space and reported that he had not found God, C. S. Lewis responded that this was like Hamlet going into the attic of his castle looking for Shakespeare.”¹⁰ In other words, it’s something of a category mistake to think that heaven is another place in this universe.

In the Bible, heaven is the realm of God, and earth is the realm of humans. In the beginning, God made heaven and earth to be together (Gen. 1:1). But because of sin’s entrance into the world, heaven and earth are not joined together, at least not fully. When Jesus returns, they will be one (Rev. 21:1). This explains why we can’t see God, and why we don’t always feel his presence. But even now, heaven and earth connect. In the Old Testament, God would appear in various forms, such as when he descended upon Mount Sinai after the Israelites left Egypt. His presence also filled the tabernacle (Exod. 40:34-35) and the temple (1 Kgs. 8:10-11).

When Jesus was on earth, he was the connection between God and man. One of his names was Immanuel, which means “God with us” (Matt. 1:23). He said that his body was the temple, which is the meeting place between God and man (John 2:19-21).

Now, Jesus, a man, has gone into heaven. This is important for two reasons. One reason is very interesting. N. T. Wright says that even though heaven and earth are separate realms, different kinds of places, even now “[h]eaven permeates earth. If Jesus is now in ‘heaven,’ he is

⁸ Other verses that speak of Jesus’ position at the right hand of the Father include Acts 5:31; Rom. 8:23; Eph. 1:20-21; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3; 1 Pet. 3:22.

⁹ N. T. Wright, *Simply Jesus: A New Vision of Who He Was, What He Did, and Why He Matters* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 195.

¹⁰ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 126.

present to every place on earth. Had he remained on earth, he wouldn't have been present anywhere except the one place where he was. The ascension enables him to be present everywhere."¹¹ If you stop and think about this idea, it makes sense. In the Bible, we are told God is in heaven. For example, Psalm 11:4 says,

4 The LORD is in his holy temple;
the LORD is on his heavenly throne.
He observes the sons of men;
his eyes examine them.¹²

But God is also omnipresent. Jeremiah 23:24 says,

24 Can anyone hide in secret places
so that I cannot see him?"
declares the LORD.
"Do not I fill heaven and earth?"
declares the LORD.

Apparently God is omnipresent through his dwelling in heaven. So Jesus, who is still a man, can be omnipresent by being in heaven. If he were still on earth, he would only be in one place. I'm not 100 percent sure that's true, but it does make sense. What we can say is that Jesus needs to be in heaven to reign, because that's where the throne of God is. He also needs to be in heaven to intercede for us, which is something I'll talk more about next week.

Here's another important aspect of Jesus' ascension: Jesus, a man, has gone ahead of us into heaven. Hebrews 12:1-3 says,

¹ Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. ² Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

This passage is meant to motivate us. Jesus endured suffering on earth, but after his death, he rose from the grave and was exalted into heaven. He has blazed a trail for all who follow him.

¹¹ Wright, *Simply Jesus*, 196.

¹² See also 2 Chron. 20:6; Ps. 115:3; Eccl. 5:2; Lam. 3:41; Dan. 2:28.

This should encourage us to continue to fight against sin, to persevere. Jesus endured suffering and shame, and he is now in the presence of God. We can do the same.¹³

In the New Testament, we are told several times that after Jesus died and rose, he was exalted. That is the pattern for our own lives. In another place in Hebrews—Hebrews 2:5-9—we read:

⁵ It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come, about which we are speaking. ⁶ But there is a place where someone has testified:

“What is man that you are mindful of him,
the son of man that you care for him?
⁷ You made him a little lower than the angels;
you crowned him with glory and honor
⁸ and put everything under his feet.”

In putting everything under him, God left nothing that is not subject to him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him. ⁹ But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

Think about that: everything is now subject to a man. He is above all rule, all authorities, because he suffered death. Robert Peterson, a theologian, says, “This means that right now, there is a man, a full flesh-and-body man still marked with wounds of his crucifixion, sitting at the right hand of the Father as Lord and King over all the earth.”¹⁴

So, what does this mean for us? It means a lot of things. Jesus’ ascension completes his work as Priest. He presents his sacrifice to the Father. He intercedes for us. He is our advocate. I’ll talk more about it this week.

Jesus’ ascension shows that he is King. He reigns right now as a man, even when we can’t see the results of his reign. Nothing is beyond his control. Nothing is more powerful than him. What’s amazing is that the Bible says that even now Christians share in Jesus’ heavenly rule. Ephesians 2:6 says, “God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.” Right now, we have access to Jesus’ throne. If you are “in Christ,”

¹³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 619: “Jesus was a man like us in every way yet without sin, and he has gone before us so that eventually we might follow him there and live with him forever.” Other verses that speak of Jesus as exalted are Phil. 2:9 and 1 Tim. 3:16.

¹⁴ Peterson, *Salvation Accomplished by the Son*, 163.

united to him by a relationship of faith, you are already seated with him in the heavenly places. And, one day, you will reign with him. Paul writes this in 2 Timothy 2:11-13:

¹¹ Here is a trustworthy saying:
If we died with him,
we will also live with him;
¹² if we endure,
we will also reign with him.
If we disown him,
he will also disown us;
¹³ if we are faithless,
he will remain faithful,
for he cannot disown himself.

If we endure, if we persevere in faith through this life, we will reign with Jesus. That's a significant theme in the book of Revelation, which we're studying at 9:15 each Sunday morning.¹⁵

The risen and ascended Lord Jesus is also a Prophet. But God's plan is interesting. Jesus doesn't speak directly from heaven to people. Jesus speaks through us, his witnesses, his ambassadors, who have been empowered by the Spirit. We are supposed to proclaim the gospel and make disciples, baptizing them and teaching them all about Jesus.

Right now, Jesus is preparing a place for us in heaven. He told his disciples that one of the reasons he would go to be with the Father is to prepare a place for us (John 14:2-3). If you belong to Jesus, there is a place for you in heaven. If you belong to Jesus, you will live with God forever. One day, Jesus will return and bring heaven down with him. He will make a new creation, a new heaven and earth, where God will dwell with his people.¹⁶

So, where is Jesus now? He's in heaven, on the throne of God.

What is he doing? He's reigning over all creation. He's interceding for us. And he's preparing a place for us.

He's also working through us. We are his witnesses. We are his ambassadors. We must tell others about who Jesus is, what he's done, what he's doing, and how they can know him.

¹⁵ See Rev.2:26; 3:21; 20:4.

¹⁶ Acts 3:21 says that Jesus "must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything."