

To Seek and to Save the Lost

The Ascension of Jesus

Luke 24:50-53

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Scripture

The Gospel of Luke opens with these words in Luke 1:1-4:

¹ Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, ² just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, ³ it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

For twenty-four chapters Luke has compiled a narrative about the life and ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. It is a most remarkable account of the most remarkable person who has ever walked the face of this earth. For twenty-four chapters we have been riveted to Jesus' preaching and healing ministry. We have learned that Jesus came to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God, and how he demonstrated his authority over disease, demons, death, nature, and sin itself. We have learned how God the Father sent his son, Jesus Christ, to seek and to save the lost.

Today, we come to the final, remarkable conclusion in *The Gospel of Luke*. It ends, as commentator David Gooding said, with an "in-describably august event, the ascension of the King."¹

Let's read about the ascension of Jesus in Luke 24:50-53:

⁵⁰ Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. ⁵¹ While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. ⁵² And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, ⁵³ and were continually in the temple blessing God. (Luke 24:50-53)

¹ David Gooding, *According to Luke: A New Exposition of the Third Gospel* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1987), 356.

Introduction

Theologian Robert Webber wrote the following in his magisterial work titled, *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*:

The most common term for the yearly celebration of time in worship is the Christian year. The Christian year, developed in antiquity, was a vital part of worship until the Reformation, when Protestants abandoned much of it because of the abuses attached to it in the late medieval period. . . . The current return to the Christian year among Protestants advocates a very simple and unadorned year that accents the major events of Christ, a Christian year similar to that of the early church.²

Webber lists the following days or seasons in the simple Christian year: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, and Pentecost. We are familiar with these celebrations. However, one of the most significant events in the account of Jesus is almost always completely overlooked by the Christian Church. I am of course referring to the Ascension of Jesus.

Hardly any attention is given to the ascension of Jesus. Hopefully, our study today will change that perspective.

Lesson

The ascension of Jesus in Luke 24:50-53 shows us the remarkable manner in which Jesus left his disciples.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Benediction at Jesus' Ascension (24:50-51)
2. The Reaction to Jesus' Ascension (24:52-53)
3. The Implications of Jesus' Ascension

² Robert Webber, *The Services of the Christian Year*, vol. 5, *The Complete Library of Christian Worship* (Nashville, TN: Star Song Pub. Group, 1994), 78–79.

I. The Benediction at Jesus' Ascension (24:50-51)

First, let's look at the benediction at Jesus' ascension.

Chapter 24 of *The Gospel of Luke* begins with the resurrection of Jesus on Sunday. The women went to the tomb of Jesus to anoint his body with spices. However, when they got there they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were perplexed about this, two angels said to them, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen" (Luke 24:5-6). They went back and told these things to the apostles, but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter rose and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; and he went home marveling at what had happened (Luke 24:11-12).

Luke noted that later on Sunday Jesus appeared to two disciples who were traveling from Jerusalem to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). The two disciples immediately rushed back to Jerusalem, a journey of about seven miles, and told the apostles and other disciples that Jesus was alive! Suddenly, Jesus appeared in the midst of the disciples in Jerusalem (Luke 24:36-49), and showed himself alive to them also!

Luke began his second volume, *The Acts of the Apostles*, with the note that Jesus "presented himself alive to [the apostles] after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3). What a glorious forty days that must have been for the apostles! That was undoubtedly the most intensive, exhilarating, eye-opening, faith-enriching, and heart-warming forty-day crash course in theology that ever took place! Finally, all their lack of understanding about the person and work of Jesus was cleared up.

But all of that had to come to an end. Jesus' work on earth was coming to a close. So, on what we now call Ascension Thursday, which was forty days after Resurrection Sunday, Jesus **led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven** (24:50-51).

Luke began his Gospel with the “coming” of Jesus when he was born in Bethlehem. Now, he described the “going” of Jesus when he parted from his apostles and was carried into heaven. Here is how David Gooding describes what Luke was doing in writing *The Gospel of Luke*:

Luke’s inspired presentation of Christ is arranged in two great movements: first the “Coming” of the Lord from heaven to earth; and then his “Going” from earth to heaven. . . . Appropriately, the climax of the “Going” shows the man, Jesus, rejected and crucified on earth, but now risen and ascending, being received up into glory. The “Coming” and the “Going”: between them they sum up Luke’s message of salvation. The pre-existent and eternal Son of God came to our world and became a man like us so that he might secure for us here in this world forgiveness, wholeness, peace with God and the certainty that God’s will shall eventually be done on earth even as it is done in heaven. But there is more. By his “Going” he has taken humanity to the pinnacle of the universe. . . . All who trust him will one day be brought to share his glory in that exalted realm, and to reign with him at his return.³

Jesus’ “going” was sealed with a benediction. A benediction is a practice that went back for centuries. After Aaron was ordained to serve as the first high priest of Israel, he concluded the ordination service with a benediction. Leviticus 9:22–23 says, “Then Aaron lifted up his hands toward the people and blessed them. . . and the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people.” This pronouncement of a benediction became the tradition for all of Israel’s priests. The well-known Old Testament benediction is found in Numbers 6:24–26, “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.”

The best-known New Testament benediction is found in 2 Corinthians 13:14, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

³ David Gooding, *According to Luke: A New Exposition of the Third Gospel*, 9.

Jesus' benediction upon his disciples as he parted from them and was carried up into heaven was intended to remind them of all that he came to do when he came to seek and to save the lost. Bishop J. C. Ryle put it this way:

He came on earth to bless and not to curse, and in blessing he departed. He came in love and not in anger, and in love he went away. He came not as a condemning judge, but as a compassionate Friend, and as a Friend he returned to His Father. He had been a Savior full of blessings to his little flock while he had been with them. He would be a Savior full of blessings to them, he would have them know, even after he was taken away. . . .

Gracious was our Lord Jesus while he lived among his weak disciples, gracious in the very season of his agony on the cross, gracious when he rose again and gathered his scattered sheep around him, gracious in the manner of his departure from this world. It was a departure in the very act of blessing! Gracious, we may be assured he is at the right hand of God. He is the same yesterday, to-day, and forever, a Savior ever ready to bless, abounding in blessings.⁴

That is why the pastor always closes every worship with a benediction. Robert Rayburn writes, "No worshipers should ever be sent forth to serve in their own strength. They must ever be dismissed in the name of the Lord with the assurance of the power and presence of the Triune God to accompany them always."⁵

So, what does that mean for us? Philip Ryken explains the purpose of the benediction at the end of a worship service:

Whenever a minister pronounces the benediction, God's blessing is repeated. It is as if Jesus himself is lifting his hands over us – nail-prints and all – to bless us with his grace. He is giving us strength for ministry, comfort in suffering, and hope for the future. He is calling us to serve as a blessing to the nations. Jesus blesses us and blesses us

⁴ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, vol. 2 (New York, NY: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1879), 525–526.

⁵ Robert Rayburn, *O Come, Let Us Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1980), 217.

again, placing all our lives and all our service under his holy benediction.⁶

II. The Reaction to Jesus' Ascension (24:52-53)

Second, let's observe the reaction to Jesus' ascension.

In his second volume, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Luke said that when Jesus had said these things, and as the disciples were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men (who were angels) stood by them in white robes, and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" (Acts 1:9–11).

The reaction of the disciples to Jesus' ascension was worship with great joy. Luke said in verses 52-53, "**And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God.**" What accounts for the great joy of the disciples? How did this company of weak disciples, now left for the first time like orphans in the midst of a hostile world, not give in to despair but instead react with great joy? Bishop J. C. Ryle answers:

The answer to these questions is short and simple. The disciples rejoiced, because now for the first time they saw all things clearly about their Master. The veil was removed from their eyes. The darkness had at length passed away. The meaning of Christ's humiliation and low estate, the meaning of his mysterious agony, and cross, and passion, the meaning of his being Messiah and yet a sufferer, the meaning of his being crucified, and yet being Son of God, all, all was at length unraveled and made plain. They saw it all. They understood it all. Their doubts were removed. Their stumbling-blocks were taken away. Now at last they possessed clear knowledge, and possessing clear knowledge felt unmingled joy.⁷

⁶ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, vol. 2, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 699.

⁷ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, vol. 2, 527.

Do you sometimes feel a lack of joy in your life? Do you read this account of the ascension of Jesus and ask yourself, “Why do I not have great joy in my life?”

The reason the disciples were so full of great joy is that they now clearly understood the person and work of Jesus. Whenever Christians struggle with a lack of joy, it is because we have taken our eyes off Jesus. We are overwhelmed by our circumstances, or we give in to temptation, or we believe Satan’s lies. The remedy is to look to Jesus and remind ourselves of who he is and what he has done to rescue us from the world, the flesh, and the devil.

Helen Lemmel was born into a Methodist pastor’s family in Wardle, England, on November 14, 1864. When she was twelve, she and her family emigrated to America where she eventually became a popular soloist, traveling widely and giving concerts. Later she taught voice at Moody Bible Institute in Chicago and Biola University in Los Angeles. During her ninety-eight years, she wrote more than five hundred hymns and a successful book for children. Helen’s most popular hymn was written in 1918 after she read a tract that was captured in the chorus of “Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus”:

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in his wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of his glory and grace.⁸

So, if you find yourself struggling with a lack of joy, turn your eyes upon Jesus.

III. The Implications of Jesus’ Ascension

And finally, let’s notice the implications of Jesus’ ascension.

⁸ Paul Eckert, *Steve Green’s MIDI Hymnal: A Complete Toolkit for Personal Devotions and Corporate Worship.*, Electronic ed. (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 1998).

John MacArthur mentions a number of implications that flow from the ascension of Jesus.⁹ Let me mention a few of them.

A. *The Ascension of Jesus Marked the Completion of the Work of Salvation*

First, the ascension of Jesus marked the completion of the work of salvation.

Jesus had come to earth as a baby, lived until he was about thirty-three years old, died on a cross at Golgotha, was buried in a tomb, and was resurrected back to life again. Jesus' words on the cross signified that he had completed the work of salvation when he said, "It is finished!" (John 19:30). There is nothing to be added to what Jesus has done to save sinners. And his ascension is proof of that.

B. *The Ascension of Jesus Marked the End of His Limitations*

Second, the ascension of Jesus marked the end of his limitations.

During his incarnation, Jesus "emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:7-8). After Jesus completed his work of salvation on earth, he ascended to heaven to be with his Father again, and to return to the glory he had before he left heaven.

Nevertheless, as John Blanchard said, "When Jesus came to earth he did not cease to be God; when he returned to heaven he did not cease to be man."¹⁰ He returned to heaven as the God-Man, whom he will remain forever.

⁹ MacArthur, John F (2014-10-01). Luke 18-24 MacArthur New Testament Commentary (MacArthur New Testament Commentary Series) (pp. 454-455). Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition.

¹⁰ John Blanchard, *The Complete Gathered Gold: A Treasury of Quotations for Christians* (Webster, NY: Evangelical Press, 2006), 341.

C. The Ascension of Jesus Marked His Exaltation and Coronation

Third, the ascension of Jesus marked his exaltation and coronation.

Jesus' ascension to heaven was the beginning of his post-incarnation reign. In fact, John Calvin put it this way, "Christ's ascension into heaven was the real commencement of his reign."¹¹

D. The Ascension of Jesus Signaled the Sending of the Holy Spirit

Fourth, the ascension of Jesus signaled the sending of the Holy Spirit.

Earlier in his ministry, Jesus taught his disciples that "the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified" (John 7:39). On the night before his death, Jesus told his disciples, "Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you" (John 16:7). Of course, the Holy Spirit was sent ten days after the ascension of Jesus, on the Day of Pentecost.

E. The Ascension of Jesus Marked the Start of His Preparing Believers' Heavenly Home

Fifth, the ascension of Jesus marked the start of his preparing believers' heavenly home.

On the night on which Jesus was betrayed, Jesus had the last divinely-sanctioned Passover meal with his disciples and also instituted the first divinely-sanctioned Lord's supper with his disciples. After the meal, Jesus had an extensive time of teaching with his disciples. Among the many things he said to his disciples, he said, "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you

¹¹ John Blanchard, *The Complete Gathered Gold: A Treasury of Quotations for Christians*, 341.

that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also” (John 14:1–3).

F. The Ascension of Jesus Marked the Passing of the Work of Evangelism to His Followers

And sixth, the ascension of Jesus marked the passing of the work of evangelism to his followers.

Jesus’ work is both finished and unfinished. It is finished in the sense that he has done everything necessary for our salvation, and nothing can be added to his finished work (cf. John 17:4; 19:30). But the work of evangelism is unfinished. Luke’s second volume, *The Acts of the Apostles*, describes Jesus’ work that was continued through his apostles, and the rest of the New Testament describes how Jesus’ Church is to continue the work of evangelism until he returns.

There are many other implications that flow from Jesus’ ascension, but these will suffice for now.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the ascension of Jesus in Luke 24:50-53, we should worship God for sending Jesus to seek and to save the lost.

The old Baptist preacher Vance Havner (1901-1986) once said about the ascension of Jesus, “Astronauts sink into insignificance beside this ascension!”¹² How gloriously true that is!

The ascension of Jesus into heaven is a vital part of God’s work of redemption. Let us not forget the significance of Jesus’ ascension. Let us worship God for sending Jesus to seek and to save the lost. And let us worship God for Jesus’ ascension into heaven where he reigns on high, for ever and ever. Amen.

¹² John Blanchard, *The Complete Gathered Gold: A Treasury of Quotations for Christians*, 341.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAYER:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

Thank you for the coming of Jesus from heaven to earth. We thank for his birth, life, ministry, preaching, miracles, death, burial, and resurrection back to life again.

Thank you also for the going of Jesus from earth to heaven. We thank you for the completion of Jesus' work of salvation, for the end of his human limitations, for his exaltation and coronation, for his sending of the Holy Spirit, for his preparation of believers' heavenly home, and for the passing of the work of evangelism to his followers.

O Father, if there are any here today who do not have joy in their lives, will you take away the stumbling blocks to faith? Will you remove the doubts about the person and work of Jesus? Enable each one of us to turn our eyes upon Jesus to look full in his wonderful face, so that the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!