

## **CROSSROADS (EASTER2020): CHRIST ASCENDED** **(Luke 24:50-53; Acts 1:9-11)**

### **INTRODUCTION**

We have had a chance to take close looks at some incredible events over the last couple of weeks:

- 1) The amazing love that led a completely surrendered, obedient Savior to the horrors of the cross and the unspeakable agony, because of His taking onto Himself all the sins of the world, of a break in the relationship He had always enjoyed with His Father - a break with so much spiritual and emotional pain on the cross that, according to Matthew: ***About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ... "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" - Matthew 27:46.***
- 2) The amazing miracle of Jesus' resurrection, an event that declared in unmistakable terms that Jesus was, in fact, the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One - in other words, Jesus of Nazareth was Himself God.

Following those truly astounding moments, we also looked at the additional 40 days of time that the disciples were blessed with spending with Jesus. During those days He:

- 1) Restored all the disciples, specifically including Peter, back into relationship with Him,
- 2) Prepared them for ministry, and doing that ministry without His physical presence, and finally ...
- 3) Confirmed what loving Him really meant- for them then and for us now.

That brings us to another absolutely overwhelming, amazing event, and the final event of Jesus' time on earth: His return to heaven, which we know as the "Ascension." Jesus' earthly ministry- including the intimacy of His time with His beloved disciples - had finally come to an end. Among His last words to them had been one more command, passed along while they shared a meal together: ***"Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift My Father promised, which you have heard Me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days, you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit" - Jesus Christ, Acts 1:4b-5.*** And now, just before He left them, as they were walking together as in other times, the disciples asked Him one more question as they clustered around Him: ***"Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" -Acts 1:6b.***

His answer moves them from thinking about a future that is not necessary for them to know but rather to the mission they have right in front of them and, in so doing, also gives them a hint of the scale of the mission - not just for them but for all those who follow: ***"It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by His own authority. 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" - Jesus Christ, Acts 1:7-8.***

And now to the Scriptures: I'm going to put the two texts that tell this story - from Luke 24 and Act 1 -together so that they read as one harmonized text.

### **TEXT (combining Luke 24:50-53 with Acts 1:9-11)**

*When [Jesus] had led [the disciples] out to the vicinity of Bethany, He lifted up His hands and blessed them. [After He said this, He was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid Him from their sight.] While He was blessing them, He left them and was taken up into heaven. [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.']. Then they worshiped Him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.*

### **ANALYSIS**

As Jesus leads His disciples (just the 11 original disciples judging by the phrase from the angels, "Men of Galilee"), the text says that He led them out to the vicinity of Bethany. This is likely referring to the "Mount of Olives," a high ridge that comes between Bethany and Jerusalem. The ridge rises to a height of over 2,600, which provides a panoramic overlook of Jerusalem's temple. This is significant because the Mount of Olives is prophesied in Zechariah 14 to be the point where Christ's feet first touch down upon His return to earth to establish His millennial kingdom on earth. So essentially, He will be coming right back to this same place. Luke says Jesus *lifted up His hands and blessed them - Luke 24:50b*. What Luke is saying is that Jesus was encouraging them by giving them the favor of God that they might be a praise to God - the highest hope of joy they could know.

This time of blessing may have carried over a bit of time (versus our simply saying the phrase, "God bless"). Anyway, for however long it lasted, it came to a miraculous end, as Jesus began to literally and physically be lifted up from the ground, in front of their astonished eyes. Higher and higher He went until He gradually disappeared from view, hidden, as Luke writes, by the clouds. The Greek in Luke 24:51 tells us that Christ was being "borne or carried away," that is, literally, to be "leading persons up to a higher place," while in Acts 1:9 it's saying that Jesus was literally "lifted up." How cool a picture is that: The Father is literally calling out to Jesus: "My Son, it's time to come home." This is as much an ID of who Jesus was as was seen at Christ's baptism, His transfiguration or with the Greeks in Jerusalem during Holy Week. Now for all the things they had witnessed during their time with Christ, the disciples had never seen anything like this, so Luke tells us they kept staring up at the sky. What was Jesus up to (no pun intended)? But as they continued to stare up into the heavens, their concentration is interrupted by two men dressed all in white who share with them that, while Jesus has gone, He is coming back! This is not the end of their relationship with Him. It has just moved into a new phase.

So, what was His ascension saying to us? What was that awesome moment saying

about Jesus Christ? Some ideas:

- 1) His ascension clearly speaks to the fact that everything that Jesus came to earth to do was now completed. During His time with the Samaritan woman in John 4, His disciples returned from a nearby town and encouraged Him to eat something; how could He not be hungry after a long day? But Jesus said to them: ***"My food . . . is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to finish His work" - Jesus Christ, John 4:34.*** And as Jesus had declared so triumphantly even within the shadow of His sufferings on the cross, ***"It is finished" - Jesus Christ, John 19:30a.*** The job of securing the offer of salvation for all who ***had fallen short of the glory of God - Paul, Romans 3:23b*** was fully accomplished, to the satisfaction of the Father who had sent Him; as the author of Hebrews writes: ***After He had provided purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven - Hebrews 1:3b.***
- 2) His ascension clearly speaks to the reality of His being exactly who He said He was - the one and only Son of the Father. He was deity, now clearly understood by the disciples as, according to Luke, ***they worshiped Him- Luke 24:52a,*** granting Him the adoration and exultation He deserved.
- 3) His ascension clearly speaks of His "passing the torch" to His disciples, by His power and authority, to take the church He founded and care for it and teach it and grow it. They will now be the empowered hands and feet and minds and mouths that will engage in that ministry.
- 4) His ascension clearly speaks to the truth of Jesus' promise of sending the gift of the Holy Spirit. As He had said just before Gethsemane: ***"I will ask the Father, and He will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever - the Spirit of truth. . . . I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. . . . But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you" - Jesus Christ, John 14:16a, 18; 16:7.***
- 5) His ascension clearly speaks to the beginning of Jesus' cosmic reign in the halls of heaven; as the apostle Paul wrote: ***[God] raised Christ 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 name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under His feet and appointed Him to be head over everything for the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills everything in every way - Paul, Ephesians 1:20-23.*** It is in the context of that rule far above all earthly authority that Jesus will one day return to earth- not as a baby but as the all-powerful, all-conquering Messiah.
- 6) His ascension clearly speaks to the witness of His life that now will become the focus of the disciples' preaching and teaching ministries. As He had said to them in the Upper Room: ***[Y]ou also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning" - Jesus Christ, John 15:27.*** His ascension provided an invaluable piece of witnessed evidence that Jesus was who He said He was. Witnessing to the truth

of Jesus Christ - who He was, what He came for, all He accomplished - was to be their foundation going forward. Did you know that the word "witness," either as a noun or a verb, is used 29 times in the book of Acts? This does not mean being any kind of expert, and it doesn't even mean being an evangelist in the "spiritual gift" sense of the term. While we are not all called to be evangelists, we are all called to witness - to tell what we have seen and heard of Jesus Christ. That's why, for the disciples, His physical ascension wound up being another piece of their witness. As the apostle John summarized for all the disciples in his first letter: ***That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched - this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ-I John 1:1-3a.*** God became tangible, able to be received by our human senses as a result of His becoming human. The physical, visual nature of His ascension was another experience to be added to their witness.

- 7) His ascension clearly speaks to heaven being a real place. Jesus did not just instantly vanish but His tangible, spatial body was taken up before their eyes to go someplace. While we cannot know where specifically heaven is located (certainly now existing in the spiritual realm), we can know, as the movie title suggested, that "heaven is for real," and that it exists in the space-time universe that we also inhabit.

## APPLICATION

But for us, in the here and now of today, what does Jesus' ascension mean?

- 1) In heaven today, Jesus is our interceding High Priest - an interceding priest who understands us and empathizes with us because He has been us. So, what does it mean to "intercede?" The Greek tells us that to intercede, specifically FOR the benefit of another (it can also mean to intercede AGAINST someone), is, first of all, "to meet with in order to converse," and then to literally "plead with a person" - in this case, Jesus interceding for us by pleading to His Father. He intercedes with the ongoing redeeming of His blood to cover all our sins - and Jesus is the perfect one for that role.
  - a) Paul explained it like this to Timothy: ***[T]here is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus - Paul, 1 Timothy 2:5.*** Here Paul is describing Christ as a "go-between," as one who mediates between two parties with a view to producing peace. In this case, the two parties were us and God; the peace was achieved by the sacrifice of Christ on the cross and the washing away of our sins by His blood.
  - b) The author of Hebrews tells us that Jesus ***shared in [our] humanity . . . made like [us], fully human 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 the people. Because He Himself suffered when He was tempted, He is able to help those who are being tempted - Hebrews 2:14b, 17-18.* And he goes on to write that, because Jesus was once us, we have a high priest interceding for us who is actually able to empathize with our weaknesses, ... *one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are - yet He did not sin* and, on that basis, we can approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need - *Hebrews 4:15-16.*

c) But unlike human priests, whose death ended their office, *Jesus lives forever so He has a permanent priesthood. Therefore He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them - Hebrews 7:25.* And the best part? As the author of Hebrews concludes: *Unlike the other high priests, [Jesus] does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for His own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when He offered Himself - Hebrews 7:27.*

d) That's why Paul rejoices to the Romans: *Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died - more than that, who was raised to life - is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us - Paul, Romans 8:34.*

2) In heaven today, Jesus is our Advocate before the Father. As the apostle John wrote: *[I]f anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father - Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice ("propitiation" - satisfaction) for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world - I John 2:1b-2.* So, what is an "advocate?" The Greek word tells us something really cool: It tells us that an advocate is somebody who quite literally is "called to one's side," of one with the capability or adaptability for giving aid. It pictures a legal setting where someone is pleading the cause of another. What does that mean? It means that Jesus Christ, our Savior and Redeemer, comes alongside us to plead our case before the Father when, as Christians, we still stumble in our sins. And, when Satan (the accuser) points his finger of guilt and failure at us (as he did with Job), Jesus advocates for us by representing the satisfaction of our failures by His sacrifice before His Father.

3) In heaven today, Jesus is the preparer of our heavenly home; as He promised the disciples (and I love how the NKJV translates it): *"In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also" - Jesus Christ, John 14:2-3 (NKJV).* The idea of "prepare" in the Greek is "to make ready." Just like when we are preparing our homes for company, we want everything "just so." That's the idea of what Jesus is doing in making preparations for us in heaven. We can be sure that everything is going to be perfect. In fact, Jesus' ascension to heaven is a wonderful precursor of what we as Christians have to look forward to: our own ascension; Paul told the

Thessalonians about it: ***[T]he Lord Himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever - Paul, 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17.*** Christ's desire is for us to be with Him where He is -and heaven is the place where that most ultimately will take place.

## CONCLUSION

Wow! His ascension says so much to us today, in fact, one thing far above all else: If we are His children, saved by His blood, surrendered at a moment in conscious time, what a future we have to look forward to. As John foresaw: ***See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know Him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is - 1 John 3:1-2.***

The ascension, in lockstep with the resurrection, shows us what, in Christ, we have to look forward to: not metaphors, but realities; not hopes, but promises. We know that death cannot hold us because it did not hold Him. In the same way, while everything connected with this world will one day pass away, the ascension tells us that heaven is our future home; in fact, it's already our "home in waiting" as Paul told the Philippian church: ***[O]ur citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables Him to bring everything under His control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body - Paul, Philippians 3:20-21.***

Our time here on earth is so temporary - but our time with our ascended Savior will be so forever. Are you ready? Have you surrendered to God through Jesus Christ? Simply put, has He conquered you? To be found in Christ Jesus is literally everything for us: how we can live with joy, how we can live with power, how we can live with confidence, how we can live with expectation - all because Jesus rose, and ascended ... and is coming back! If you do not yet know beyond a shadow of a doubt that the promise of His future is your future as well, I beg you in the name of Jesus Christ to make that right, to confess your sins, to surrender your life and everything you are to God the Father through the work of God the Son. It is not yet too late to do that. If you have any questions, call me, or call one of our elders. This is the most important decision you will ever have to consider in your life. Don't let another moment go by. Jesus Christ is alive. Go to Him - and begin the eternal journey of living with Him. Let's pray!