

September 18, 2011
 Matthew 28:16-20 / Acts 1:1-11 / Luke 24:49-53
 The Critical Importance of the Ascension

Today is kind of a sad day for me, because today is my last message from the Gospel of Luke -- a series of messages that I started on Dec. 5, 2007 and I will finish today on Sept. 18, 2011! You can do the math! Just over 3 1/2 years (though I did break away for a few miniseries in between)!

That makes Luke my longest running series of sermons I've ever preached (even longer than Isaiah, and more than double the length of Job)!

It was a series I originally entitled: "Portraits of Jesus." 137 sermons about Jesus / covering His pre-existence, birth, life, death, and resurrection / and ending today with His often overlooked exaltation and ascension into glory.

And I say "often overlooked" even in regard to myself, because I once had a conversation with a seminary trained man who asked me: "*Why do you always leave out the ascension when you summarize Jesus life?*" / I shook my head and said: "*I don't know.*"

But He was right. I do, or I have. I will often summarize the ministry of Christ by pointing to, "His birth, life, death and resurrection," as if that somehow covers it all! Which is, of course, far from the truth, since the greatest part of Christ's ministry didn't even start until He ascended to the Father's right hand in glory!

So what I'd like to do today is correct that oversight / and rectify my sad lack of emphasis on the "ascension" / by showing you how critically important it is that we lay great stress on Jesus' ascension into heaven -- both in our own thinking / and in our conversations with others.

WHY? Because apart from the ascension, non-believers will continue to see Jesus as a person from the past / or an antiquated figure from history / instead of the eternally reigning ruler in the heavenly realms / who is endowed with sovereign power / and all authority in heaven and on earth.

You see, when Jesus ascended into heaven (as Luke tells us in verse 52) the disciples were NOT sad or depressed. / They didn't weep at His leaving or plead with Him to stay. / But rather, ***"they returned to Jerusalem with great (or exceeding) joy."***

WHY? The answer is simple: Because they KNEW all the blessings (the much richer blessings) that would be theirs as a result of Him being taken up into glory!

So what I'd like to share with you today (if you don't already know them) are the many things the Bible declares about Jesus as a result of His ascension into heaven -- and the blessings that comes to us as a result. Blessings that would NOT be ours if Jesus had not ascended!

And as we consider them, the **FIRST** thing that becomes clear is this: Jesus' ascension is *NOT* the END of His ministry, but the END of His more limited, restricted, earthly ministry, and the BEGINNING of His more widely encompassing, eternal, heightened, far more powerful and more far-reaching ministry as He is seated at the Father's right hand in heaven.

You see, sometimes we can be led to believe -- and it is a grave mistake to do so -- but we can be led to believe that after the resurrection and ascension, all Jesus does is sit at the Father's right hand and pray and wait for the time of His return.

We can tend to see Jesus as passive. That His primary ministry somehow ended at His ascension and at that point the Holy Spirit took over and is now doing all the ministry in His absence.

Many people have that conceptualization in their mind. Yet nothing could be further from the truth! In fact, nothing could be further from the plain and ordinary teaching of the Bible!

Because what we find in Luke and Acts and the rest of the New Testament is that the ascension does not END Jesus ministry, as if it's somehow, "Job well done. Your work is finished. Now sit back and wait for the time when You will return." But RATHER, it throws Jesus ministry into hyper-drive!

More people are converted in one day through Jesus new ministry from heaven, than were converted in three long years through His earthly ministry!

On Pentecost Peter preached and three thousand people are converted, whereas during the three years of His earthly ministry there were at most only 500 converted. And it wasn't simply because the Holy Spirit was at work. That's where many misunderstand the message of the Bible!

Because what does PETER say of that particular occasion? Speaking of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on that day / and the miracle of the disciples speaking in tongues or languages they'd never learned / he says in Acts 2:33: *"Exalted to the right hand of God, HE (that is Jesus) has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear."*

Who then, is the One who is at work on Pentecost? Is it just the Spirit? NO! It is Jesus pouring out the Holy Spirit and its gifts upon the disciples! It was Jesus who was also at work on the day of Pentecost! The Father, Peter says, gave authority over the Spirit to the exalted and enthroned Son / and the Son took that Spirit and sent it (or poured it out) upon the disciples -- along with the gift of tongues which He also gave to them.

That's what Peter says! *"HE (that is, Jesus in His exalted state) has poured out what you now see and hear."*

Thus we see, Jesus isn't seated in heaven resting from His work, but is Himself doing the work of filling the disciples with the Spirit / and equipping them with the gift of tongues / so they can do what He commissioned them to do / and be witnesses for Him -- declaring to all that were present that He is alive / and reigning in heaven / and is at that very moment / pouring out the Spirit and its gifts!

But that's not all. For if the Spirit (which the Father placed under the authority of the Son) / moves only at the command of Jesus / and that Spirit is the author of salvation who brings people into the experience of the new birth / then that

means it was also Jesus who graciously brought those 3000 people to faith after Peter made his evangelistic appeal that day.

You see, JESUS had told us that if He was "lifted up," He would "draw all men unto Himself." It's a statement that includes His being "lifted up on the cross." But as most commentators note, it goes beyond the cross to include His "being lifted up on high" in the ascension -- where He does indeed, through the Spirit, draw all men unto Himself.

In that sense, JESUS becomes the One we look to for nearly everything in this present age! As the one who has "received" the Holy Spirit from the Father / and has been given "all authority" in regard to who will receive it from Him / and even the gifts they will receive through the Spirit / He becomes the One we must go to for all that we need in this present age, including the gift of salvation.

As Alexander MaClaren correctly notes: ***"It is the ascended Christ who sends the Spirit upon men; it is the ascended Christ who opens men's hearts to hear; it is the ascended Christ who sends forth His messengers equipped to go to the Gentiles; it is the ascended Christ who, today, is the energy of all the Church's powers, the whiteness of all the Church's purity, and the vitality of all the Church's life!... The risen Lord [is] the power by which alone any of us can do either great or small work in His Church."***

It's true! If you have been "born of the Spirit" / or "possess the Holy Spirit" (and thus salvation) / it is because JESUS sent the Spirit upon you / or poured it out upon you! / And if you possess spiritual gifts (regardless of which gifts they are) it is JESUS who gave them to you (even selectively and sovereignly determining the particular gifts you would have)!

That's what Paul says in Eph. 4:7: "But to each one grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says: ***"When He ascended on high*** (an Old Testament reference from Psalms 68 which Paul applies to the ascension!) ***He led captives in His train, and gave gifts to men."***

And likewise, only four verses later he says: ***"It was HE (that is, the Lord Jesus) who gave some to be apostles, and some to be prophets, and some to be evangelists, and some to be pastor's and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up."***

Which means what? If you want any of those things -- any at all -- you must go to Jesus to get them! In fact, given what Peter says in Acts 2:33, it has to be JESUS who is referred to in the quote from Joel 2:28-29 which Peter uses in Acts 2:16-18.

There Peter tells all the people who are asking about the disciples joy and euphoria and ability to speak in other tongues (a crowd numbering in the thousands): "This is what was spoken of by the prophet Joel: ***"In the last days, says God, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy; your young men will see visions, and your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days."***

Who is speaking and pouring out the Spirit in that verse? GOD is, according to Joel! Yet Peter, after quoting this verse, will go on to tell us it is the EXALTED JESUS who poured out the Spirit / and the gifts they were hearing and seeing exercised! It was Jesus who baptized the disciples with the Holy Spirit!

Which means that PETER (as early as the Day of Pentecost / and long before any Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D.!) understood Jesus to be God! ***What Joel says "God" was going to do, Peter says "Jesus" did!***

And it's not just Peter that sees or understands Jesus to be God. Because in our passage from Luke, verse 24:52 (days before Pentecost) we find that after Jesus was taken into heaven, ALL the disciples, ***"worshipped Him."***

It's something NO ORTHODOX JEW ever would have done, unless they believed that Jesus was God. For to worship anyone other than God would have been a clear violation of both the first and second commandments!

Which means that our understanding of the Deity of Christ, doesn't simply come from verses that explicitly state: "Jesus is God." Because His deity is both assumed and confirmed and taken as a given throughout the New Testament! And to find it, all people need to do is connect the dots!

Which brings us to our **SECOND** point: The great joy the disciples have when Jesus is taken from them (v. 52b). Many have questioned how the disciples could be so happy that Jesus has gone away! / You would think they would be grieving and weeping and sad and depressed. But they weren't! Not in the least! And now you know why! Now you know why it is that when He was taken away from them, "they returned to the city with great joy!" Because they KNEW Jesus would return to them very shortly (in less than two weeks) in a better, more powerful, more constant, unwavering, indwelling way!

So many people have said to me: ***"If only I could have been alive when Jesus was alive and walked with Him, and talked with Him, and seen Him and touched Him."***

But that's not the viewpoint of the disciples nor Jesus Himself: In fact, in John 16:7 He tells the disciples: ***"It is good for you that I go away*** (the sense being "it is **BETTER** for you that I go away") ***because unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you. But if I go, I will send Him to you."***

There it is again! / Jesus is the One who will send the Holy Spirit! And why is it better that He go? Why are they so happy He's going? Because they knew that within days He would return to them in a better, more powerful, more constant, unwavering, intimate and indwelling way!

He would no longer walk beside them, external to them, but He would come to live within them by the indwelling Spirit (the Spirit who is, according to John 14:23, the presence of the Father and the presence of the Son mediated to the life of the believer).

In their day Jesus dwelt among them. In our day, He dwells within our hearts. THEN He was limited by virtue of the incarnation / NOW He is present everywhere, by His Spirit. And THAT, says Jesus, is better.

That's how CHRIST can be " ***dwell in our hearts*** " and " ***be with us always*** " even to the end of the age? By the presence of the HOLY SPIRIT, which is HIS Spirit! In Scripture the Holy Spirit is called " ***the Spirit of Jesus*** " (Acts 16:7) / " ***the Spirit of Christ.*** " (Rom. 8:9) / and " ***the Spirit of the Lord*** " (that is, the Spirit of the Lord Jesus -- II Cor. 3:17).

In fact, the indivisible oneness between Jesus and the Holy Spirit is so closely linked, that Paul can say in II Cor. 3:17: " ***Now the Lord IS the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is*** (that is, the Spirit of the Lord Jesus) ***there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces, all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into His likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who IS the Spirit.*** " It's Paul's way of telling us that the Holy Spirit IS the Spirit of Christ!

Which means when the Holy Spirit comes to live within you the Spirit of Christ Himself comes to live within you! Jesus comes to "dwell in your hearts by faith." He no longer walks with you and talks with you, He resides inside you / and empowers you / and transforms you from the inside out / to reflect His glory / and conform you to His image and likeness!

It's no wonder they, "go back to the city rejoicing with great joy!" It meant nothing but blessing, upon blessing, upon blessing. It was BETTER that He go away because He could then be intimate with more people, and dwell equally within all believers -- guiding and empowering and encouraging them -- whether they be in Israel, Africa, China, Europe or the U.S. Some-thing He couldn't do when He walked this earth in the flesh.

Which brings us to the LAST thing we need to see in regard to the ascension. / It was the day of Jesus exaltation when He was given a name that is above all names!

It was His coronation, in which He was given all authority in heaven and on earth / and whereby He was enthroned in the heavens as " ***King of kings, and Lord of lords,*** " or " ***Lord of heaven and earth!*** "

That's what people often miss. In the ascension Christ was taken up into "glory" or taken up to be glorified! He didn't simply rise into the sky (as some have thought) to gradually get so high up in the air that an ordinary, big, white, fluffy cumulus cloud, **"hid him from their sight."**

That's NOT the picture Luke paints! **"The cloud,"** as Maclaren points out, **"was the symbol of the Divine Presence."** It was the **"cloud"** that covered Mount Sinai / and left its afterglow radiating forth from the face of Moses! / The **"cloud"** in which we are told, "the glory of the Lord" was present.

It was the luminous, glowing, **"pillar of cloud"** that had led them through the wilderness by day / and came down and covered the Tent of Meeting when Moses entered into it / and hung over the tabernacle.

It was the radiant **"cloud of God's glory"** that lifted from the Temple in Ezekiel's day / and did not return again until it blazed above the Shepherds / and enveloped the angels at Jesus birth / and shone with near blinding brightness on the Mount of Transfiguration / and blinded Paul on the road to Damascus.

It was **THAT CLOUD** -- the symbol of the Divine presence and glory and pleasure and holiness -- that now received the ascending Lord Jesus and hid Him from their sight as He was taken to be enthroned as King over His kingdom!

He wasn't just hidden by a regular "cloud" like we see when we look out the window today (as many famous paintings unfortunately suggest). He was enveloped by the "cloud" of God's unspeakable glory!

God's glory received Him / and transported Him / and took up to reign / and receive all authority in heaven and earth / and be given the Name "at which every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that He is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Phil. 2:1-11 / Mt. 28:16-20 / I Cor. 15:25).

So what is Jesus doing right now? (Besides continuing to pour out His Spirit on all flesh / and gifting people with spiritual gifts / and giving people new birth

/ and residing in them to empower them / and produce the fruit of His character in their lives)?

Paul tells us in I Corinthians 15:24-25. Speaking of the end of time, and the day of resurrection, after Christ has returned the second time, he says: ***"Then the end will come when He (that is Jesus) hands over the kingdom to God the Father after He has destroyed all dominion, authority, and power."***

And He doesn't simply mean at His return. He WILL complete that at His return, but Paul makes it clear He is doing that even now. For he writes in the next verse: "He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet."

So, in addition to all those other things I mentioned, what is Jesus doing right now? He's reigning in heaven above as the King over God's kingdom! To be ***"exalted to God's right hand"*** is to be exalted to the place of divine omnipotence! It means to be granted the right to exercise that omnipotence!

Gradually -- day by day and year by year -- Jesus is exercising the divine power and authority He was given by the Father at His ascension into heaven -- a power by which He is destroying ***"all dominion, authority, and power"*** that opposes the purposes of God!

It's a function He will continue to carry out until He finishes it completely at the time of His second coming.

In that sense, His ascension is the pledge of His return. The pledge that the world has not seen the last of Jesus! Yet it's only when people are told that He was taken up into heaven alive / and was enveloped in the divine glory / and enthroned as the King who reigns in heaven at God's right hand, right now / that they can be assured of the possibility of His return.

It was in seeing him go, that the angels assured them, ***"This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way that you saw Him go."***

THAT, my friends, is what Jesus ascension has to tell us! And I didn't even get to His present ministry of **"interceding for us at God's right hand"** (Rom. 8:34) / and answering the prayers that we pray **TO** Him, and **IN HIS NAME** (John 14:13-14).

I didn't even mention His work of going to prepare a place for us (John 14:2) / and His being our **"High Priest"** who sympathizes with our weaknesses (Heb. 4:15) / and the One who makes it possible for us to **"approach the throne of grace with confidence and find grace to help in time of need"** (Heb. 4:16)

I didn't even get to His being our advocate (Job 16:19) / and the only mediator between God and man (I Tim. 2:5) / and the One in whose Name the demons must flee / and healing can become ours / and all fear of death can disappear.

That's the Jesus I call you to look to, and feed upon, and trust, and serve, and worship today! Because He ascended and is thus alive! But more than just alive, He is exalted / and thus reigns / and is and has and gives you everything you need!

The Lord who has all power and is ever working on your behalf, and will someday return to take you to be where He is!