

The Ascension of Jesus

Luke 24:50-53

If you've been with us anytime within the last year and a half, you probably would be able to guess what part of the Bible we are in this morning for our text. We have been going through the longest gospel in the New Testament, the gospel of Luke, however, this morning is our final sermon in our series through Luke.

Next week we will begin a brief series through the Old Testament book of Joshua, and we'll walk through a very different period of history long before Jesus comes in the flesh, however there are many ways in which the story of Joshua points to Jesus, just like the rest of the Old Testament does.

Today though, we are going to look at the final few verses of Luke, and even though they are the last few verses in a long book, they are verses that we cannot afford to miss or skip over.

Last week, we looked at the previous passage that told us about the resurrected Jesus' appearance and conversation with the disciples on the road to Emmaus as well as back in Jerusalem. Between verse 49, the last verse of our passage last week, and verse 50, the first verse of our passage this morning, we know that there is a 40 day period (Acts 1). These 40 days a time when Jesus is showing himself to many people and continuing to teach about the kingdom of God.

So, after 40 days since his resurrection we read in Luke 24:50...

Luke 24:50-53

50 And 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.

So, this final passage of Luke tells us about what is called the "Ascension" of Jesus, the moment when the resurrected Christ, leads the disciples out of town a bit, offers them a benediction, and then he ascends to heaven. And this moment is, of course, incredibly significant.

In fact, the ascension of Jesus, and what it signifies, has long been considered an essential part of orthodox belief in Jesus.

The earliest creeds in church history, those summaries of belief that defined orthodox Christian doctrine, mentioned the ascension of Jesus along with his birth, death, and resurrection.

For example, the historic Apostles' Creed says in the section about Jesus:

"I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit
and born of the virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to hell.
The third day he rose again from the dead.
He ascended to heaven
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty.
From there he will come to judge the living and the dead."

Again, the ascension is mentioned alongside his deity, incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and eventual return.

The Nicene Creed, another very important early church creed, includes the ascension as well in its statement of belief.

And so the ascension of Jesus has long been rightly recognized as an important part of our understanding of who Jesus is and what he does. And yet, we don't often talk about or even think about this essential doctrine of Jesus. I mean, I've been in church my whole life and I can't really recall much talk about the ascension of Jesus, especially its meaning.

1. The Ascension as Neglected Event/Doctrine

And I think there are a few reasons the Ascension is often neglected or ignored. First, it really isn't talked about much in Scripture. The *narrative* of the ascension is given here at the end of Luke, the beginning of Acts, and, though it's debated, is at the end of Mark, but that is it. So, it's easy to think, it must not be that important if it's spoken of in only a handful of verses in the entire Bible.

Second, the ascension is neglected, I think, because the implications are somewhat unclear. It's hard to understand why it's important that Jesus ascended to heaven after his resurrection. I mean, the resurrection was surely enough, right? That was pretty significant to say the least, so why an extra event after? Was it just for show, like an epic bat flip after hitting a home run?

A related third reason why the ascension is often neglected is because the resurrection of Jesus gets the attention and the ascension is kind of lumped in with it. It's easy to think that, conceptually, they are really the same thing. And, of course, we give a lot of attention to the resurrection, which is not wrong, it is just incomplete.

So, our text this morning gives us the opportunity to think about the ascension and look at why the ascension is so much more than just an accessory to the resurrection. It's important to understand that the ascension is not the cherry on top or exclamation point for the resurrection; it is a new event, a new stage in redemptive history and has unique implications for our lives here and now.

ILLUS - We have three daughters. And like many little girls, they have always loved princess stories. And anyone who has read a fairy tale, knows the way they typically begin and end: "Once upon a time." - "And they lived happily ever after." The fairy tale story ends there with no regard really of what happens later. We are just given a generic statement about a happy life. And if we are not careful we might think of Jesus the same way. He lived, died, rose again, and lived happily ever after, without giving any thought to what that resurrected life entails.

But notice the way that Luke begins his second book in our New Testament, the book of Acts...

Acts 1:1-2

1 In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus *began* to do and teach, **2** until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.

Notice again, Luke says everything he recorded for us in his gospel was what Jesus "*began* to do." It was only the beginning. The work of atoning for our sins is done, but there is certainly more for Jesus to do now that work has been completed.

We spoke about Jesus' continual interceding work in heaven a few weeks ago when we looked at the passage with Peter's denial...I'd encourage you to go back and listen to that.

But, this morning I want us to focus on a different truth that the Ascension points us to, and that is that **the ascension marks the installation of Jesus as King**. This morning we are going to look at the connection between the Kingly role of Jesus and his ascension, and then what that means for us today.

1) Jesus is the True King

Now, the idea of living under a king is a pretty foreign concept for us as Americans, and I think this really does impact the way we view Jesus as Lord and the way we live in a new reality described as the kingdom of God. Again, most of us, I'm assuming, have never lived under a monarch. In fact, as Americans, we typically scoff at the idea of a king or queen who would rule over us. In a little less than a month, we will hold our annual celebration of rebelling against a king to gain our independence by shooting off fireworks. So, again the idea of Jesus as King, and that being a good thing takes a little more work maybe for us in our context to grasp. But, it is a concept that is very important in the storyline of Scripture and is a reality in redemptive history.

To understand the kingly role of Jesus, we find some help in our thinking from some Old Testament texts.

Very briefly, at creation Adam & Eve were created and placed in the garden of Eden. And the garden of Eden is given a unique description later in Ezekiel 28...

Ezekiel 28:13-14

13 You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone was your covering, sardius, topaz, and diamond, beryl, onyx, and jasper, sapphire, emerald, and carbuncle; and crafted in gold were your settings and your engravings. On the day that you were created they were prepared. **14** You were an anointed guardian cherub. I placed you; you were on the holy mountain of God; in the midst of the stones of fire you walked.

The garden of Eden is described as the "mountain of the Lord." And there on that mountain they were the royal family, as it were, made to rule over creation. However, they decided to rebel against their king and they were cast out of the garden.

Ezekiel 28:15-16

15 You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created, till unrighteousness was found in you. **16** In the abundance of your trade you were filled with violence in your midst, and you sinned; so I cast you as a profane thing from the mountain of God, and I destroyed you, O guardian cherub, from the midst of the stones of fire.

In other words, because of their sin, they were forced to *descend the mountain of God*.

The rest of the story of Scripture is man's attempt to ascend the mountain once again, to stand in the place of God. We see this most literally in Gen. 11 at Babel, when the people attempt to build a tower that reaches the heavens. The rest of humanity though has been trying to ascend on their own, either by their own efforts at being a good person, following strict religious rules, or by declaring themselves as the king of their own mountain. rejecting the mountain of the Lord.

But the Old Testament prepares us for the coming One who would actually ascend the mountain, restore all things, and even increase the fellowship humanity once had with God. So, because Adam descended, Jesus ascended.

And so there are a number of OT texts that describe this event, when the coming, true King would ascend the mountain of the Lord. I'll just point out a few...

Psalms 2 describes the Lordship of Christ over the nations who rebel against him...

Psalm 2:1-9

1 Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? **2** The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his Anointed, saying, **3** "Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us." **4** He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. **5** Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, **6** "As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill." **7** I will tell of the decree: The Lord said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you. **8** Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. **9** You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel."

Even though the nations rebel against the Lord, we get a glimpse of the conversation between the Father and the Son when Jesus ascended, when the Lord laughs and installs Jesus as king over all nations.

Later, in the psalms we find Psalm 110:1, the most quoted OT verse in the NT.

Psalm 110:1

The Lord says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool."

And, here we notice three important points when it comes to the ascension of Jesus. First notice the *action*: Jesus "sits." Of course, this doesn't mean that Jesus has his feet kicked up and is relaxing until he returns. It just designates completeness. Jesus accomplished all he was sent to earth to do.

Also, notice the *location*: he is seated at the right hand of the Father. This is the place of highest rank. We use the phrase "right hand man" or "right hand woman" today to describe that person who holds power by proximity, the one closest to us who therefore holds special rank above all others.

But, it also points to a *future*. Jesus' ascension and enthronement was a glorious day but it is not the final day. Jesus sits enthroned until all his enemies become his footstool. For now, Jesus reigns at the right hand of the Father, but there is a day coming when he will reign in fullness.

So, understand that when Jesus ascended into the clouds it was not to float around in space, he ascended to the throne. He went to the Father as the chosen King set on the holy hill of the Lord.

This reminds us that Jesus is more than just an influential moral teacher. He is more than just an elevated spiritual man. He is the resurrected Son of God who reigns as King over all.

And so the New Testament is filled with passages that were written to remind God's people of the Lordship of Christ and all that means for us.

2) Life Under the King (Implications)

If Jesus is king, the church is the royal family, his kingdom on earth. This should shape the way in which we live with one another and those outside of the kingdom. I want us to consider just four ways the ascension of Jesus, along with its significance, shapes the way we live in the kingdom.

First, it means that there should be...

A. Unity in the Kingdom

The reign of King Jesus, which was made a reality at his ascension, is the truth that Paul points to when he calls the church to unity. Notice what he says in Ephesians 4...

Ephesians 4:1-6

1 I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, **2** with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, **3** eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. **4** There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— **5 one Lord**, one faith, one baptism, **6** one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

What is Paul getting at? One theologian pointed out, "If one king sits on the throne, then he is all people's peace - no matter what gender, race, or socioeconomic status - for he has broken down the walls of hostility."¹

In other words, because there is one king, we are all united under the one king.

¹ Patrick Schreiner, *The Ascension of Christ* (Bellingham: Lexham, 2020), 96.

Unfortunately though, churches don't always seem to act like it. In fact, at times, church can feel more like a very dark period of Israel's history, before there were kings at all.

The book of Judges describes this dark period when the nation of Israel lived out a cycle of sin, judgment, repentance, a judge raised up for deliverance, peace, then sin again...a repeating cycle.

But listen to the last verse of the book of Judges...

Judges 21:25

In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

The hard truth is, we often do the same, whatever is right in our own eyes, and this is shown in our lack of grace, unforgiveness, division, and love of controversy. It's as if we've forgotten that we live in the same kingdom under the one king and so we set up our own kingdoms, setting ourselves as king.

But understand, we are not competing kings and queens of our own rival kingdoms. We are fellow citizens of one kingdom who live under one King. And that King is not a pastor, outspoken church member, or influential voice in our culture. That King is Jesus.

Therefore, be eager, Paul says, to maintain unity, Why? Because we have one King.

The Ascension of Jesus should also give us...

B. Confidence in Mission

Before his ascension, Jesus gave his disciples, and us, what is called the Great Commission.

Matthew 28:18-20

18 And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. **19** Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **20** teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Again, we are called to the nations to make disciples. We are called to go and tell them the good news of the gospel, call them to repentance and belief, to baptize them, and see that they grow in their new relationship with Christ.

And that is a huge task. Overwhelming even. But notice that Jesus did not simply say, I did my part now you do your part. Go to the nations, if you need me I will be in heaven. I died and rose again, now you go. No, Jesus said, this is a big task, but you won't do it alone. I, the one who reigns with all authority in heaven and on earth, by my Spirit will go with you. You will not face the task alone.

This ought to give us incredible confidence as we go out from here into a hostile world to point people to Jesus. This ought to give you confidence as you try to share Jesus with your coworker who knows about your faith but continues to reject it and you are frustrated because you just don't know what else to do or say. This ought to give you confidence as you try to share Jesus with unbelieving family or friends who know of your life before you met Jesus and you feel like that undermines your credibility and authority. This ought to give you confidence as you wrestle with the idea of God calling you overseas to serve Him, but you feel terribly unqualified and inadequate for the mission.

Jesus, the ascended, reigning King over all, goes with us as we go for Him.

The Ascension of Jesus should promote unity in the kingdom, confidence in mission, and it should also produce...

C. Patience in Suffering

The pattern of Christ's life and ministry is one of descending before ascending. He went to the cross before he ascended to glory. And as followers of Christ, we follow the same descent-ascent pattern for life.

We lay down our life so that we might find it. In baptism we go underwater so that we can be raised up. We go down with Christ so that we might rise with Christ. Like Jesus, we suffer before we are glorified.

Patrick Schreiner notes, "Christ's rule does not mean the church is called to go out and rule the world. Christ's kingship does not cancel out the harsh and wretched condition of life for Christ's legion. Christ's kingship is in heaven, and therefore the church's royalty is hidden with him."²

And so we are called time and again in Scripture to remember the reign of Christ and our union with him there.

The largest example is the entire book of Revelation. The book of Revelation is a book that either fascinates you or repels you, due to the vivid imagery within the text. As difficult as the book of Revelation can be to interpret, the big idea of the book is that it

² Ibid., 97.

was written to give the Church a glimpse of the reign of Christ throughout history all the way through his return and full reign in the New Jerusalem. It is meant to give hope to believers of every age that regardless of the difficulties they face for their faith, Jesus is on the throne and will reign for all eternity, and we should lean into that truth as we suffer. It is a call for perseverance as God's people endure the difficulties of this age until the coming age when Christ returns.

Notice one portion of the book, the letter to the church in Smyrna, offers su one example of the call to patient suffering...

Rev. 2:9-10

9 “I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. **10** Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Notice, he did not say, I know that you are about to face suffering, so fight back. Lawyer up. Reclaim culture. He said, “Don’t be afraid. Be faithful.” Why? We follow Jesus in his descent, before we follow him in his ascent.

But, the ascension and reign of Christ reminds us that glory is guaranteed. But that time is not yet. We wait patiently for the return of the King, but we do so with confidence knowing that because of his glory we too will be glorified with him.

The Ascension of Jesus should also produce...

D. Joyful Worship in Waiting

In John 16 we read that the disciples were sorrowful when Jesus said he was leaving. And yet at the end of Luke, we read that after they saw him ascend to heaven, they were joyfully praising him. This should be the natural response to the reign of our King and Savior Jesus.

This is what they did through the book of Acts. This is what the church has done throughout history. This is what we do today.

We ought to do the same, for all that we have read and thought through over the last year and a half in Luke:³

-Jesus’ birth was celebrated by angels

-even though Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness, he was perfectly obedient to the Father, victorious where Adam failed

³ Based on Ryken, *Luke*, vol. 2, 703.

- Jesus miraculously cured the sick, healed the disabled, fed the hungry, and raised the dead
- Jesus displayed unmatched wisdom in his teaching, often stopping the mouths of the religious leaders with his parables and probing questions
- Jesus showed his love in seeking the lost and lonely people we met in Luke's account, all sinful people like you and me

Most of all, we worship Jesus for his work in salvation:

- his courageous sufferings
- his sacrificial and atoning death
- his triumphant resurrection
- and his glorious ascension

As we await the return of our King, we ought to be waiting with joyful worship. We are not without hope. We are not without a leader. We are not without guaranteed victory. We find it all in Jesus our King. And so we joyfully worship.

CONCLUSION

If you remember the opening passage of Luke's gospel, Luke says that he desired to write an orderly account of the life and ministry of Jesus for particular reason: that we might be certain of the things taught about Jesus.

From there the birth of John the Baptist is foretold by an angel and then the birth of Jesus is foretold. The coming of Jesus is the focus of the opening chapter of Luke and the ascension of Jesus is the conclusion of Luke's gospel. As we finish this series through Luke, it's important that we see this "coming" and "going" of Jesus that frames the gospel as a whole.

David Gooding writes, "between [Jesus' coming and going], 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."⁴

If you have never trusted in Christ, the One who came to save and ascended to reign, the One who is coming again to bring about the end of death, sin, and Satan, we would implore you to turn from your sin and self-righteousness, and trust in Christ.

⁴ David Gooding, *According to Luke: A New Exposition of the Third Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 9.

For those of us who have done that, as we wrap this year and a half journey through Luke's gospel, let's remember what it has taught us about Jesus. He is the Son of God, who has taken away our sins, rose from the dead, and reigns over the kingdom we now are a part of. And today, we are united to him there while we wait here for his eventual return.

VERSES

Luke 24:50-53

Acts 1:1-2

Ezekiel 28:13-14

Ezekiel 28:15-16

Psalms 2:1-9

Psalms 110:1

Ephesians 4:1-6

Judges 21:25

Matthew 28:18-20

Revelation 2:9-10

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Have you ever given much thought to the ascension of Jesus as a distinct and separate event from his resurrection?

Why should the reign of Jesus over his kingdom promote unity within the church?

How does the reign of Jesus give you confidence to share the gospel with others?

How does the reign of Jesus encourage patience in your suffering?

How does the reign of Jesus spur you on to joyful worship?

Thinking back on our series through Luke, is there a particular sermon/passage that the Lord used in a special way to encourage, convict, comfort, or challenge you?