

Ascension Dissension: *Are we better without Jesus?*

Luke 24:50-53; Acts 1:9-12

"Nevertheless, I tell you the truth that it is to your advantage that I go away..."

John 16:7

Introduction: Jesus made shocking statements. This was not for shock value alone, since He always spoke the truth and always said what was loving, but these stunned audiences nonetheless. "If anyone would come after me, let Him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." (Luke 9:23-24) "Strive to enter the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able." (Luke 13:24) "If anyone comes to me and does not HATE his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:26) "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and but the one who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 18:14) But perhaps the most shocking and perplexing statement He made to the disciples was on the night before His crucifixion as He prepared them for what was going to unfold over the next days and weeks. He told them about the coming Spirit, and how it would be **better for them that He went away!** Think about that?!!! When is it ever *better* when a loved one goes away? Spouse? NOPE. Kid away to college? Uh-uh. In Laws going back home? Maybe. But here was Jesus pointing to the time after He died and rose again, to the event that gets so lost in our memory, His ascension back to the Father.

We make a big deal about Christmas - Jesus birthday - because celebrating life is easy and fun. We make a big deal about the day He died (Good Friday) and a bigger one on the day He rose again (Easter). But when was the last time we celebrated the day of Jesus' ascension? Maybe its because only Luke records the ascension¹, and he does so in an extremely abbreviated fashion, almost like he ran out of room on the scroll he was working on and had to finish it off. Maybe its because we don't like the fact that Jesus is gone and leaves us with sadness. Perhaps its because we've never actually thought about the significance at all. We know that the early church thought highly of this foundational event. **1 Timothy 4:16** is most likely an early church hymn sung: ***Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of Godliness, "He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory."*** For them, this was not a nebulous, secondary, or unimportant doctrine but one that was life-giving and central to understanding Jesus.

But there is perhaps an even more important reason why the ascension is downplayed in the gospels and our thinking is that it was to **our advantage** that He went away. Not only was this necessary for Jesus to complete His mission, but it was necessary for us to receive ours. Yes its painful to send our kids away in adulthood, but in the end its good for them. The ascension announced the triumph of Jesus and empowered us for the gospel we pronounce to the world. We will look at what took place at His ascension, what Jesus is doing now, and how everything changed for us in His absence.

The Departure (Luke 24:50-53)

Luke 24:50-53 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.

¹ Mark records it in his gospel, but Mark 16:9-20 is not in the earliest manuscripts, which causes us to draw key doctrines from its narrative.

Acts 1:9-12 And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, **and a cloud** took him out of their sight.¹⁰ And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes,¹¹ 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."¹² Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away.

Blessing Given

We have looked at a few instances where Jesus interacted with His disciples *after* His resurrection: the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, the eleven disciples in the upper room, and somewhere during that time to Peter particularly. These each happened on Easter night. We also looked at Jesus restoring Peter later in Galilee, as He had breakfast with the disciples. It helps give us a picture to answer the question: *what did Jesus do between the resurrection and the ascension.*

Luke fills in these blanks in the beginning of the Book of Acts. Luke covered what Jesus *began* to do and teach, while Acts chronicled the work of the Spirit in the life of the Apostles. In Acts 1:3 we see that Jesus did several specific things in this gap:

1. He presented Himself by many convincing proofs - like showing His hands and feet, by the crazy catch of fish (John 21:6), and by appearing and disappearing to them (He could walk through walls and stuff)
2. He appeared to them for 40 days (50 day gap between Passover and Pentecost)
3. He spoke to them about the **Kingdom of God**

This last point is especially important. Jesus had opened the disciples minds to understand the Scripture (Luke 24:45), so now they were clear about what Jesus was doing and what the future held. Though they still had questions about timing (don't we all? Acts 1:6), their presuppositions and preferential view of the future was clarified. Jesus led them up the **Bethany** which was on the **Mount of Olives**, and began to bless them. This was not the formulaic blessings of the OT, but reminding them of the blessings they (and all believers) would receive. **Ephesians 1:3** says, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ ***with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.***" He would have reminded them of the work He had done, the fulfillment of His death and resurrection, and how they were loved, received mercy, and access to the Father. The text gives the impression that *while* He was saying this, meaning as His hands were lifted up and giving an ongoing blessing, He was lifted away in a cloud, rising up like a lost balloon at the Fair, becoming smaller and smaller as He rose away from them.

Joyful worship expressed

There must have been a mixture of sadness, wonder, awe, and amazement, and at the same time a fearless calm. Their eyes were opened, their doubts were gone, and their understanding clear. As they were still gazing, Acts says that 2 men, angels, told them to stop looking up because though He had gone away, He would return again in the same way. **And the disciples got it!** This was NOT the same group of timid, scared, doubting, and troubled bunch huddled in a room on Easter night. This was a group that was encouraged, pumped, and ready to move forward.

The text says that they **worshiped Him**, which is the first time Luke records the disciples worshipping, and he waited until Jesus was gone. They returned to Jerusalem, the place of their greatest failure and shame, and did it **with great joy**. Sadness and fear had now given way to joy and boldness. They went to the Temple and were blessing and praising God continually. Jesus was gone, but they worshiped like never before. Jesus had left but their heart and minds were alive. They were ready.

This is a great reminder for us. If we are going to be witnesses of the gospel of Jesus, it will inevitably flow directly out of worship! Worship was NOT based on great circumstances (Jesus had just left) or great feelings (Jesus had just left!), but on the realization of who Jesus really is, what He has promised, and what He has left us to do.

The Fulfillment

But what does all this mean? What was it all for? There are two areas where the Ascension changed everything: the fulfillment of Jesus' mission and the response of heaven, and the advantage left for us. The first gives the power and purpose of the second, so we will start there.

He regains His glory (John 17:5)

When Jesus came to earth, it was an act of love, mercy, and grace, but it was also the ultimate condescension. He who was rich was made to be poor (2 Cor. 8:9) becoming a slave and humbling Himself to the point of death on a cross (Phil 2:7-8). When Jesus prayed to the Father before the cross, He not only longed for the Father to glorify Him on the cross (John 17:1) so that the Father would Himself be glorified, but Jesus also longed to have the glory that He once had in the presence of the Father before the world existed (John 17:5).

So as Jesus ascended in a cloud to the Father, He received and regained the glory that He had given up on earth, except this time there was something eternally new. You see Jesus was glorified, but NOT the way He was before the world existed. He was no longer spirit (as the Father is spirit - John 4:24), but had a body that was prepared for eternity. He also returned to heaven with a new name, **JESUS**, that at this name one day every knee would bow and tongue confess that **Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father** (Phil. 2:10-11). He is now in glory with the Father, and yet this is the Jesus that we will see one day (1 John 3:2) when we are reunited with Him.

He sat down in power (Luke 22:69)

When Jesus was before the Pharisees in His trial, He told them "*But from now on the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God.*" Here He is seated today (Col. 1:1; Eph. 1:20). The right hand of any king was the position of authority and power. The divine attributes that Jesus voluntarily give up His independent us of returned, as He now had restored power and authority. As Jesus was seated, He was given all authority over other rulers, powers, and dominion as well as every name that is and ever will be named. This means that our mission cannot fail since all authority has been given to Him (Matt. 28:19-20), and He is now the head over the church (Eph. 1:22). That means that Jesus is the assurance of our mission and the future of the church, which frees us up to live courageously, knowing that positionally we are seated with Him (Eph. 2:6)

He prepares a place (John 14:1-3)

Jesus went away to heaven to make preparation for our arrival. The description of the eternal kingdom is one of heaven and earth united (Rev. 21:9-21). Jesus prepares a place for us so that when He returns we can be with Him! That is the point. Its not about the mansions and the rooms, its a place prepared so that we can be with Him forever. Remember that God created this universe in 6 days. Jesus has been preparing our eternal dwelling since His ascension. Its going to be phenomenal.

He makes intercession (Hebrews 7:25)

"The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but he holds His priesthood **permanently**, because He continues forever. Consequently, He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through Him, **since He always lives to make intercession for them.**"

Jesus is the better High Priest, and when He ascended to the Father and sat down, He continued His ministry of intercessory prayer on our behalf before Him (Romans. 8:34). He is advocating for us when we sin, since He is the propitiation for our sins (1 John 2:1-2). John 17 gives us some insight as to the content of His prayers before the Father. For the disciples, He prayed that God would not take them out of the world but to keep them from the evil one (17:15), that they would be sanctified in the truth. But He also extended His prayer to us, to those who would believe through the ministry of the word (17:20). He prays that we would be one, just as the Father and Son are, **so that the world will know that God sent Him.** (17:22). He also prays that we would be **with Him where He is** (17:24). Because Jesus is praying for us, we cannot fail. Because He is praying for us, He loves us and longs to be with us. He is like a good father who can't wait for their kid to come home from break, or the wife whose husband returns from a tour of duty. What He prays is His will, and His will is that we are effective in our witness and prepared (holy) to be with Him forever.

The Advantage

He made way for the Holy Spirit (John 16:7)

Now we come to the advantages that we receive because Jesus left. We started with the statement that it is better for us that Jesus is gone, but we did not continue the verse. He stated that if He went away, the Helper would come, but not until then. The Holy Spirit would convict the world of sin, would guide us in all truth, and seek to glorify Christ. When Jesus was on earth, He self-limited His own glory. That meant in veiled humanity He was not omnipresent, meaning He was bound by space and time. The Holy Spirit indwells every believer at once. In other words, the advantage we have with Jesus gone is that we have God in us, God with us, and God guiding us every moment of every day. It means that we have a personal relationship with God in Christ because we have Him in us. Jesus said that He had many more things He wanted to say and impart, and was limited to do it, so the Holy Spirit would fill in the blanks as He helped us understand Scripture (John 16:12).

One day we will see Jesus. Whether we have to wait in line or we'll get to simultaneously see Him every day, I'm not sure. I hope that we will be able to see, commune with, walk with, and have face to face contact with Him. That will be ultimate. But until then, we have the next best thing. We have the Person that Jesus sent on His behalf. We have the indwelling of God in us.

He passed the baton (Acts 1:1-2)

In some ways Jesus received a coronation, as God received the Son and accepted His sacrifice on the cross and subsequently raised Him from the dead. When Jesus was on the earth, He secured those given to Him by His Father (John 10:28-29), and protected those given to His care (John 17:12). But as He left for the Father's right hand in heaven, the job was not done. He did not ask the Father to take the disciples out of the world, but to keep them there. He had come to present Himself as Messiah, to die, to rise again, and offer life in His name. He was loved and rejected, received and hated, and now it was time for Him to pass the baton. The disciples were given the task to continue it. They were given gifts to establish the church (Eph. 2:20; 4:11) so that the work would perpetuate. There was no "Plan B". The disciples were going to be faithful or it would fail. So Jesus assured that the mission would not fail, by the power of the Spirit, the authority of His being seated, and the prayer He continually offers. We can have confidence, boldness, and assurance because we are carrying on a mission that Jesus Himself started.

He will return in the same way He left (Acts 1:11)

The hope of all of this is that Jesus will return the way that He came. Zechariah 14:4 says, "*On that day His feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives, that lies before Jerusalem on the east, and the Mount of*

Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley, so that one half of the Mount shall move northward, and the other half southward." Because He ascended physically and in reality, He will also return to Jerusalem in the same way. Notice that when the disciples heard this, they did not sulk or dwell on sadness, nor did they look to the sky anymore. They got to work. They had a mission. They began devoting themselves to prayer. They were no longer afraid but moved relentlessly because they knew exactly what life was about.

What are implications for us?

- **If our focus is on our witness, our motivation comes from worship** - This means that private and public worship are imperative. If we want to truly love others, we must make sure that we are loving God in the proper way, through His Word, through His Spirit
- **We must walk by His Spirit because it is to our advantage** - The Spirit is no small gift, but Jesus sent Him so that we could know Him. Jesus said it was better that we have the Spirit. Are we allowing the Spirit to guide? Are we giving Him material to work with? Are we seeking to know Christ through His Word?
- **Jesus finished the work** - He was faithful to accomplish all that the Father had for Him. The ascension signaled that. We can now have full assurance that Jesus wants us to be with Him, but for now has left us here on a mission. That means that whatever circumstance you are going through, we look forward to the future but also know that Jesus Himself is praying for you before the Father.