

The Importance of the Ascension Luke 24:44-53

Dear Friends in Christ Our Risen and Ascended Lord,

The Ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven is an event of great importance, not only for Jesus, but also for you. The Ascension is full of significance in the historical life of Jesus here on Earth - and in his continuing ministry for us in heaven.

Although the Ascension occupies a place on the church's calendar, it seems overshadowed by Good Friday and outshone by the glory of Easter morning. Unfortunately this means that many Christians miss the tremendous truth that the Ascension of Jesus Christ has to teach us. Critics of the Bible say that Jesus didn't need to take a journey into space! Some have ridiculed his Ascension by calling Jesus the first astronaut! Let's get to the truth of the matter by thinking first of its **historical importance**.

The gospel writer Luke is known as a careful historian. When he recorded the birth of Jesus he rooted the event in its historical setting within the Roman Empire. ". . . *Caesar Augustus issued a decree . . .*" He continued that same precision at the end of our Lord's earthly ministry by recalling the place of the Ascension - at Bethany, outside of Jerusalem. He dated the event - 40 days after the Easter Sunday resurrection. He emphasized the presence of eyewitnesses - the Ascension took place, he writes "before their very eyes" (Acts 1:9 NIV). Yes, the Ascension was a real event of history. In Luke 24 we read first what Jesus did during those 40 days between Easter and Ascension. He took his disciples back to school.

⁴⁴He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." ⁴⁵Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

During the forty days between Easter Sunday and the Day of Ascension, our Lord went back and instructed his disciples from the Old Testament. He opened their minds to understand the many prophecies in Scriptures concerning his suffering and death and resurrection, and how they were all fulfilled in him. He must have told them, for instance, that the prophet Isaiah was referring to him when he wrote, "*But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.*" (Isaiah 53:5 NIV). Quite simply, this is saying that Jesus bore the punishment for the sins of the world, including your sins and mine.

He instructed them from the Scriptures regarding everything they could now see had come to pass. He explained God's plan for our salvation, the forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus. The second thing Jesus did was to give the disciples a commission to proclaim the Good News of sins forgiven to all nations beginning at Jerusalem, to be witnesses in his behalf. And then He concluded with verse 49 telling them, "Don't go anywhere yet . . . stay in the city of Jerusalem until you're clothed with power from on high." You have your commission, you now understand how every Old Testament prophecy was fulfilled in my life and death and resurrection. You are now ready to go and proclaim the message of the forgiveness of sins, the gospel, to the ends of the earth. But don't go anywhere until you're empowered from on high.

Some people are puzzled as to why Jesus waited around on earth forty days after his resurrection. That specific period of time is no accident. Jesus had endured the devil's temptation for forty days in the wilderness at the beginning of his public ministry. But now the tables were turned. In the post-resurrection/pre-ascension period Jesus triumphantly displayed his victory over death and the devil in front of his faithful followers so that they might share in the joy of his victory.

But there was another reason. Those forty days of his appearing after the resurrection were of immense value to the believers. They established the reality of his resurrection from death to life. A single sighting of the risen Christ may have been open to question, but his continuous encounters with the disciples and many others removed all doubt of even the most skeptical among them and assured them that he had conquered death.

⁵⁰ When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. ⁵¹ While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven.

The Ascension will always remain a mystery in the sense that it's beyond the scope of human experience. It takes us into the realm of the supernatural. And it happened very simply and quickly. The Master and his followers were gathered on the slopes of Mt. Olive. When Jesus had delivered his farewell message to the disciples he lifted up his nail-scarred hands in blessing. Then his body began to rise supernaturally, and eventually a cloud hid him from their sight. What a fitting end to his earthly ministry!

It's not surprising that the supernatural should be evident at Jesus' departure because it was equally present in his birth and resurrection. Just as in the case of the resurrection, some would deny a literal Ascension because it's considered unscientific. There's the objection that it would be impossible for a body to just rise up against the pull of gravity, but this overlooks the fact that in the resurrected and glorified body of Christ, higher laws were in operation. So it was with the Lord Jesus on the Day of Ascension. Just as death and the grave could not hold Jesus when the Father raised him from the dead, so the earth could not hold Jesus when the time came for him to return to the Father.

There are scholars and theologians who doubt the literal Ascension. They say, "it's the spiritual significance that matters." Thank God for the spiritual meaning, but it seems to me that the point they miss is that there would be no assurance of the spiritual meaning of the Ascension, or the resurrection for that matter, if these wonderful events did not have a firm historical basis. We can say without any hesitation Jesus "*was taken up into heaven*" (Luke 24:51 NIV).

The Ascension of Jesus signaled the end of his work of redemption, his active and passive obedience. It was essential that there should be a clear-cut event to bring this chapter to a close. Jesus' numerous appearances to his followers, couldn't go on forever. It would be odd if these appearances should grow fewer and fewer until they finally stopped. That could cause confusion and raise more questions than it answered. No, there had to be a definite moment when the Jesus of earth would become the Christ of heaven. The Ascension of Jesus was that moment.

For the disciples who witnessed the Ascension, it was the day when their dependence on Jesus' physical presence came to an end. Now they were linked to someone who was independent of space and time. Luke tells us that the disciples did not leave the scene broken-hearted.

⁵² Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. ⁵³ And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

Jesus himself had predicted, *"I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father."* (John 16:28 NIV).

We've looked at the historical importance of the Ascension. Now let's look at the **spiritual importance**.

Luke's account of the Ascension placed us in the shoes of the disciples. There they were with eyes uplifted, as Luke records the scene so vividly, *". . . looking intently up into the sky as he was going . . ."* (Acts 1:10 NIV). All too soon the ascending Savior disappeared from their sight.

By divine inspiration, the Evangelist Mark covered the Ascension from the perspective of our Lord's destination. Only the Holy Spirit could have revealed this scene to Mark: *"After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God."* (Mark 16:19 NIV).

What a homecoming! We can only imagine the glory of the welcome given to the ascended Lord Jesus. The apostle Peter confirms this: *"Jesus Christ . . . who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand--with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him."* (1 Peter 3:21-22 NIV).

He is seated at God's right hand, a position of power and honor and glory. But the fact that he has ascended there doesn't imply that his ministry is ended - far from it. Although the Ascension closed his public ministry, it opened a new age of ruling over all things with supreme authority. The Ascension was the final liberation of Jesus from all limitations of space and time. Now he's free to be lovingly and powerfully present with every believer in every place, in every age. As it is, Christ the King is with you and in you by his Spirit every minute of every day wherever you go. The Ascension of Jesus makes it possible for him to be close to each and every one of us at all times.

We have thought about the importance of the Ascension from the historical and spiritual perspectives, now let's look at the **practical importance**.

A practical way of looking at the Ascension is to list what Jesus accomplished in this Ascension. First, the Ascension marked the completion of his work of salvation. After the cross and the resurrection, there was nothing more to do to provide a way for people to be saved. In John 17:4, Jesus says to

God the Father, *"I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do."* (NIV). The work of redemption is done.

Secondly, the Ascension is the end of Jesus' limitations. He says in John 17:5, *"And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began."* (NIV). Jesus had set aside the independent use of his divine authority and power to do the work of our salvation. Now, that period of humiliation was over. He once again assumed his pre-incarnate glory. He came back, in one sense, more than when he left. He left as spirit. He came back as the God/Man whom he remains forever.

Third, the Ascension marked Jesus' exaltation and his coronation. It was then that God gave him the name above every name, *"... that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth ..."* Philippians 2:10 (NIV)

Number four, the Ascension signaled Jesus' sending of the Holy Spirit. John 16:7 (NIV) *"But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you."*

Number five, the ascension marked the passing of the work of evangelism to Jesus' followers. Yes there is Christ's finished work, the work of redemption. The work of evangelism Jesus only began and then he passed the baton to His followers, his followers in the 1st century and in the 21st century.

Number six, the Ascension signaled our Lord's headship over the church. Ephesians 1:20-23 (NIV) *which he exerted in Christ when he raised him 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 title that can be given . . . 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.*

And then, number seven, the ascension marked the start of Jesus' High Priestly work. Jesus is the unique mediator between God and man. (1 Timothy 2:5). His death and resurrection secure our forgiveness, justification, and reconciliation with God. (Romans 4:25–5:1; 2 Corinthians 5:18–21). He now lives to intercede for us. He is your advocate before the Father no matter what accusations are brought against you by Satan and his emissaries. Who's going to lay any successful charge against God's elect? No one. Our defense attorney is Christ, and it is Christ who justified us. Hebrews 4:15 (NIV) *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin.* He has been tempted in every way. So he's a sympathetic and merciful High Priest, who pleads the cause of every believer.

And finally, the ascension guarantees and secures the Second Coming of Christ. In Acts 1:11 two angels explained to the disciples, *"... 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."* (Acts 1:11 NIV). Although his Second Coming will be visible and in person, it won't be in private: *"every eye will see him"* (Revelation 1:7). He ascended alone but he will return in the company of millions of the redeemed from all centuries (1 Thessalonians 4:14). The visible Second Coming of Christ is just as much a fact as the visible Ascension of Christ. Because one happened, it is certain that the other one will happen

too. It gives assurance that God is working out his purposes for his whole creation and that when he is ready, our Lord will return just as surely as he ascended. The all-important, practical call of the Ascension is that we are ready for Christ's return. We are ready only through faith in Jesus.

The Importance of the Ascension for Your Life

Jesus has completed his Father's mission and he now rules with all authority and intercedes with all sympathy as our mediator and high priest. Through faith in Jesus we are guaranteed the forgiveness of sins and eternal life in heaven.

Remember that Jesus is, even now, reigning as king over all and he remains active and engaged in our world and in your life. So live boldly and confidently as a beloved subject of the exalted king of heaven, and know for certain that your labors in the Lord Jesus are not in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58).

If you sufferer trials and afflictions, take heart. Jesus is not indifferent to your struggle. He has endured great suffering himself and is therefore the most merciful and sympathetic counselor and mediator. Take your cares to your ascended Lord who hears your prayers and can respond with all of heaven's authority. Finally hope in a glorious future. The ascended Lord will return as judge and king. He will abolish injustice, end suffering, destroy death and take you into his kingdom of truth, righteousness and love. Best of all, you will then be with the ascended king forever. Amen.