

This evening we will be considering the verses in Acts 1 that describe the ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ into heaven. Luke is the only biblical author who actually describes the ascension of Jesus. He does so in the last few verses of his gospel and in these verses that are our text this evening in Acts 1. There are however a great many texts in the Bible that refer to the ascension and give us aspects of its meaning. The ascension of Jesus into heaven is a very significant part of God's plan of salvation and we will review some of that as we look at this text together this evening.

The actual ascension is described in one verse in this text. Acts 1:9 says, "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." Luke's description of Jesus rising from earth to heaven is based on the report of the apostles. These first 11 verses of Acts are describing Jesus with his apostles – that means the 11 disciples who here are referred to as apostles. In the last section of this chapter, we are told how Judas was replaced by Matthias to bring the number of apostles to 12 again. We will consider the significance of the 12 apostles when we deal with those verses. For now, it is enough to know that the 11 apostles of Jesus witnessed Jesus ascending into heaven. Luke would have based his description here on the accounts of those who were actually there.

It is clear that Luke expects us to believe that what he described here actually happened. Jesus and his apostles are together. Jesus is speaking to them. The last thing he says is that the Holy Spirit would come upon them and that they were to be his witnesses to the end of the earth. And then Jesus begins to rise into the air. And he goes up and up and up until "a cloud took him out of their sight." The angels who are described in verse 10 add this information: "This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

This is something that we can visualize, and it is clear that Luke expects us to accept his description literally. There are all kinds of questions that we can ask. We can ask where heaven is in relation to earth. And there are some interesting things that theologians might say about where heaven is in relation to earth and where Jesus actually went after the cloud took him out of their sight. But we don't need to bother ourselves with such questions. We know that there is an earthly realm where we live. We know that there is a heavenly realm where God is. And we know that Jesus by his ascension went from the earthly realm to the heavenly realm. And that's all we need to know. Luke doesn't bother with expressing this in philosophical language. He just describes what the apostle's saw and what the angels said, and that's good enough. The Bible gives us what we need to know and we understand that there is a great deal that is beyond our ability to understand and that is just fine.

Simon Kistemaker expresses this nicely in his commentary. "We should not discuss the ascension in terms of physics or cosmology, for Scripture does not intend to teach a lesson on the location of heaven.... What Luke conveys is that Jesus leaves this earthly scene and enters heavenly glory." (p. 56)

Verse 9 says that Jesus “was lifted up” and verse 11 says that he “was taken up ... into heaven.” So, Jesus is passive here. He did not ascend into heaven as a result of his own decision or by his own power. He was lifted up. He was taken up. And the clear implication is that he was taken up into heaven by his Father. Remember that Jesus was sent into the world by his Father. Now he is being taken back into heaven by his Father. His mission on earth was complete. In John 16:28 Jesus says to his disciples, “I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father.” This, of course, was before the crucifixion and the resurrection. The way back to the Father was through his death on the cross and his victory over death in the resurrection. But the ascension was his return into heaven. The ascension was the Father taking Jesus back into heaven. Robert Letham writes, “[T]he Father takes him to be with himself, the seal of divine approval on all he has done.” (Systematic Theology, p. 576)

Notice next that one of the obvious things that happened when Jesus ascending into heaven is that Jesus was leaving his disciples. That statement has to be qualified in all kinds of ways because Jesus would end up being with disciples in a much closer way than he had been with them while he was on earth. But there is still the fact that he would no longer be with them in the same way he had been. Notice how the angels in verse 11 refer to Jesus as the one “who was taken up **from you** into heaven....” Jesus would no longer be with his disciples physically on earth. This was a separation. Jesus was taken up from his disciples.

Now you would think that that would make the disciples sad. They loved Jesus and now he was being taken from them. But they are not sad. Listen to how Luke describes the disciples’ reaction to Jesus’ ascension in the last two verses of his gospel. “And they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple blessing God.”

So, Jesus was separated from his disciples in some sense by the ascension, but instead of being sorrowful they were joyful. And that joy had to do with a number of things. If we stick with the hints we glean from these opening verses of the book of Acts, we find that Jesus had just told them to wait for the promise of the Father which is described as being baptized with the Holy Spirit. He had just told them that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit would come upon them. One thing these opening chapters of the book of Acts makes clear is the relationship between Jesus’ ascension and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

So the going away is not a sad event. There was a separation in the sense that Jesus was taken from them. But the passage makes it clear that instead of Jesus’ physical presence with them, they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit and the Bible makes it very clear that that being baptized with the Holy Spirit was a far greater blessing than Jesus’ physical presence had been. Jesus, himself had taught them that. In John 16:7, Jesus addressed the consternation of the disciples because he had told them that he would be leaving them. And he says, “I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.”

So, there is a relationship between Jesus ascending into heaven and the sending of the Holy Spirit. That is very clear from these opening verses of the book of Acts. And Jesus has made it clear that when the Holy Spirit would come they would receive power. What that power enabled them to do is demonstrated in the rest of the book of Acts and the rest of the NT. The main focus in these opening verses of the book of Acts is that the power of the Holy Spirit would equip the apostles for the mission of being witnesses to Jesus to the end of the earth. Jesus ascends into heaven. From there he sends his Spirit upon his disciples and the mission that Jesus gave to his apostles began. These are the two things that Luke associates with Jesus' ascension in these opening verses of Acts – the giving of the Holy Spirit and the mission to witness to Jesus to the end of the earth. So even though Jesus' ascension into heaven was a separation, in that he would no longer be physically present with his disciples, the blessings that he would pour out from heaven would be even more valuable to them than his physical presence had been.

Another point from Luke's description of Jesus' ascension is that Jesus's ascended into heaven as the God-man. And in particular, the ascension is about Jesus ascending into heaven as a man – as a human being. The ascension shows us that Jesus did not stop being a human being when he ascended into heaven to return to his Father. The fact that the apostles witnessed Jesus ascending into heaven assures us that when Jesus returned to his Father, he did not leave his human nature behind. This is an amazing and very significant truth.

At Jesus' conception, the Holy Spirit miraculously joined the divine Son of God with a true and complete human nature so that the child that was born was God and man in one person – Jesus Christ. That is an amazing truth and it shows how much God loves human beings. The Son of God became the God-man so that he would represent his people before God, so that he would suffer and die for us. The ascension shows that the Son of God did not take upon himself a human nature on a temporary basis so that after his work on earth was done he could go back to what he was before. The ascension shows that Jesus was taken back into heaven as a human being who is also God. And he will always be a human being who is also God. Jesus will be the God-man for eternity.

And the reason for that has to do with us – with human beings. That Jesus became a human being in order to die for us is central, but it is not the whole story. We must look at this truth more broadly and say that Jesus became a human being in order to facilitate our relationship with God. The heart of that is his dying for us and living in our place to reconcile us to God. But the reason that Jesus is in heaven as a human being is so he can continue to facilitate our relationship with God. That biblical term for that is "mediator." A mediator is someone who facilitates the relationship between two parties. In 1 Timothy 2:5 Paul writes, "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." That is an eternal state of affairs. And it is rooted in the fact that Jesus is both God and man.

This means that the face of God is the human face of Jesus. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 4:6 that we see "the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." It also means that when God looks at us he sees us in the perfect

humanity of Jesus who is always representing us. Without getting into all the details of that, for Scripture as plenty to say about that, let us just think about the fact that Jesus ascended into heaven as a human to facilitate our relationship with God. The fact that Jesus is in heaven as a human being means that God relates to us through this human being – Jesus Christ who is also God. We see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. God sees the glory of redeemed man in the face of Jesus Christ. The fact that Jesus is in heaven as a man underscores the great value that God places on humans and his relationship with us.

Next, we consider the significance of the cloud. Verse 9 again, “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.” Luke is describing something of unspeakable significance in Jesus ascending into heaven. And his description of the cloud that took Jesus out of their sight is highly significant.

Clouds in the Bible are often associated with the glory of God. At the transfiguration, a cloud overshadowed Jesus and Moses and Elijah and God spoke out of the cloud. In Revelation 1 we are told that Jesus is coming with the clouds. So clouds often are associated with the glory of God and with the movement of God from heaven to earth or from earth to heaven.

Daniel 7:13-14 is an important background text to fill in our understanding of the ascension. In Acts 1:9 we see Jesus ascending from the perspective of the disciples on earth. They look up and see the cloud taking Jesus out of their sight. In Daniel 7:13-14 we see the ascension from the perspective of heaven. These verses describe Jesus entering heaven with the clouds. “I saw in the night vision, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days [God] and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.”

Because we have Acts 1:9 and Daniel 7:13-14, we have inspired descriptions of Jesus’ ascension from the earthly perspective of Jesus rising into the cloud and from the heavenly perspective of Jesus entering heaven with the clouds to appear before God and receive dominion and glory and a kingdom.

NT Wright in his commentary on this passage, describes how the early Christians would have made this connection. “[One] of the central Old Testament promises for the early Christians was in Daniel 7, where ‘one like a son of man’ is brought up, on the clouds of heaven, to the ‘Ancient of Days’, and is presented before him and given kingly power over the nations.... For someone who had long pondered that passage – and there are plenty of signs that the early Christians did just that – the story of Jesus’ ascension would indicate that Daniel 7 had been fulfilled in a dramatic and unexpected way, with the human figure who had suffered at the hands of evil powers of the world now being exalted into the very presence of God himself, there to receive kingly power. This fits so well with the previous passage, (verses 6-8) that it is hard to suppose that Luke did not intend it.” (p.14)

So, think now of the disciples' question to the Lord in verse 6. "Lord will you at this time restore the kingdom of Israel?" They were wrong in their limited expectation concerning the kingdom, but they were right in sensing that something big concerning the kingdom of God was going down. The ascension of Jesus into heaven was Jesus' coronation as the king not just of Israel, but over the whole world. "And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him...." This is the fulfillment of Jesus' words in Matthew 28:18 when he said to his disciples, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."

Jesus had spoken a great deal about the coming of God's kingdom while he was on earth. It is interesting that the term kingdom is not used nearly as often in the NT after Jesus rose into heaven. The term kingdom of God or kingdom of heaven is used often by Jesus in Matthew, Mark and Luke, but it is not used very often after that. Instead there is much use of the language of Jesus' exaltation to the right hand of God. Instead, there is much use of the title "Lord" for Jesus. The point of this is that the kingdom idea in Acts and the Epistles is expressed by referring to Jesus as the one who reigns over all to bring to its conclusion, the full consummation of God's rule on earth through the salvation of sinners and the defeat of his enemies.

The disciples asked about the kingdom of God. Jesus, ascending into heaven to receive "dominion and glory and a kingdom that all peoples and nations and languages should serve him," is his answer to their question. The ascension was about Jesus ascending on high in might to reign. From there he will reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The ascension of Jesus into heaven was a great leap forward in God's plan to re-establish his reign on earth. Jesus was installed as king over all and his mission from that position of power and glory is to bring about the next phase of God's plan – to grow his kingdom until all the elect are saved and all his enemies are defeated. The goal of what Jesus is doing from heaven is that every knee shall bow to him and "every tongue [shall] confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Philippians 2:10-11)

So, it is a glorious reality that the ascension of Jesus reveals to us. The one who loves us and gave his life for us has risen from the dead – defeating death – but also has been seated in glory where he rules as the highest authority in heaven and on earth. Jesus Christ the God-man – is Lord of heaven and earth. And he is using his power and authority to complete his mission to defeat evil and the promoters of evil and rescue a vast multitude from Satan's grip and bring them into his kingdom.

He is directing that operation from his throne in heaven. He is equipping that operation through his Holy Spirit. He is using his followers, his disciples in a significant way. His heavenly glory is not visible from earth. It is visible only to those who believe the Word of God. And the only other way that it is visible is in the lives and words of his people who bring his word – the gospel message to the world.

Now after Jesus had ascended into heaven, the apostles were gazing into heaven. Verse 10-11 describes what happens next. "And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold two men stood by them in white

robes, 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.’”

The two men were angels as is clear from their white robes. They confirm what has just happened – “This Jesus, ... was taken up from you into heaven....” They tell of Jesus’ return. “This Jesus ... will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” What they do in this sentence is frame the rest of world history between Jesus’ ascension and his return. And within that frame is Jesus’ mission by the Holy Spirit and through the church. In these verses we have the meaning of the period between Jesus’ ascension and his second coming. From his throne in heaven Jesus will build his church and kingdom through his people by the power of the Holy Spirit.

And the question of the angels to the disciples, sets the tone for their mission. “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven?” It is not surprising that they were looking into heaven. Who would not be looking into heaven having just witnessed Jesus ascension? But the angel’s question serves to highlight the fact that they have been given a mission to witness of Jesus to all the world and that there is a finite allotment of time for that mission to take place. From now on they will be living and witnessing in the light of the fact that one day Jesus is going to return in the same way that they had seen him go.

John Stott explains the significance of the angel’s words. “[T]he angels implied, until Christ comes again, the apostles must get on with their witness, for that was their mandate. There was something fundamentally anomalous [anom-a-lous] about their gazing into the sky when they had been commissioned to go to the ends of the earth. It was the earth not the sky which was to be their preoccupation. Their calling was to be witnesses not stargazers. The vision they were to cultivate was not upwards in nostalgia to the heaven which had received Jesus, but outwards in compassion to a lost world which needed him. It is the same for us.” (p. 51)

It was not that the disciples gazing into heaven was so bad, but the angels were making a point. The apostles had been given instructions by Jesus and they needed to be following those instructions. The task that Jesus had given would need to be fulfilled between Jesus’ ascension and his return. The time between now and then was a time for the mission to witness of Jesus to a lost and needy world. We can think of this in the light of what transpired in the book of Acts. The disciples waited for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. One that happened, they got busy witnessing of Jesus. And they kept at it until they died.

The point is the same as Jesus’ point in Matthew 24:45-46, “Who then is the faithful and wise servant whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes.” “Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes.”

For us this means being engaged in the mission that Jesus has given to the church in the light of the fact that Jesus could return at any moment. That mission involves all of our lives. We witness for Jesus in our daily lives if we are seeking to please him in all that we do. We witness through our work, through our interactions with others, through our words and through our deeds. And we work together as a church in supporting the work of the church by involvement, by prayer, by worshipping, by our gifts. What we do not want Jesus to find us doing when he returns is living in sin and having our heart set on the comforts and pleasures of this world. We are to seek his kingdom first of all.

So we live between Jesus' ascension and his return. We live in the light of the fact that Jesus is Lord of all and is directing and empowering the mission from his place of authority and power and glory at God's right hand. We live in the light of the fact that he has given us the mission to be his witnesses on the earth and that he is going to return at the end of the age to wrap things up in his final victory and the final judgment. As followers of Jesus, we are part of what Jesus is doing. May the overall vision – the big picture that these verses give us – encourage us to be the witnesses that Jesus is calling us to be.