

Luke 24:48-53 and Acts 1:1-11 (DHT)

⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things, ⁴⁹and behold, I am sending the promise of My Father upon you; but you must remain in the city until you should be clothed with power from on high. ⁵⁰Then he led them out as far as Bethany and having lifted up his hands he blessed them. ⁵¹And while he was blessing them, he was separated from them and carried up into heaven. ⁵²Having worshiped him, they returned to Jerusalem with great joy. ⁵³And they were all continually blessing God in the temple.

¹Indeed, O Theophilus, the first account I made concerned all Jesus began to do and teach ²until the day he was taken up, after commanding the apostles whom he had chosen by the Holy Spirit ³to whom he also presented himself alive by many proofs after his suffering, appearing to them for forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

⁴Being gathered together, he instructed them not to depart from Jerusalem and wait for “what you heard from me:” the promise of the Father. ⁵“Indeed, John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not in many days.”

⁶Indeed, those gathered together were asking him, saying: “Lord, at this time, are you restoring the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷He said to them: “It is not yours to know the exact-time or general-time that the Father set by his own authority, ⁸but you will receive dynamic-power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

⁹Having said these things, beholding him, he was taken up, and a cloud hid him from their eyes. ¹⁰As they fixed their eyes into heaven as he was going, behold, two men in white apparel stood by ¹¹who said: “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? Having been taken up from you into heaven, this Jesus will come just as you saw him going into heaven.

Is the Gospel Past-Tense?

Throughout the ages, Christians, preachers, teachers, and theologians have obediently proclaimed the person and work of Jesus as the basis of salvation. Born of a virgin, God became man in the person of Jesus—past tense. The life of Jesus was marked by resisting temptation in its totality, a suffering we do not know. So, we rightly confess that Jesus lived a sinless life—past tense. On the cross, Jesus innocently died for our sins—past tense. On the third day, for our justification by faith, Jesus was raised from the dead—again, past tense.

In this era of Christendom, conservative evangelicalism has stopped here. Of course, that’s even if they make it that far. I have found many conservative churches stop at the death of Jesus. Believe Jesus died for your sins, and you will be saved, some say. But this simply is not true. What does Romans 4-5 say? After talking about Abraham being justified by faith, not works, Paul says we likewise are justified by faith and calls on us to have faith specifically in the resurrection of Jesus; Jesus was *raised for our justification*. It takes no faith to believe a man who lived 2,000 years ago died—even atheists believe that! It does, however, take faith to believe a man who lived 2,000 years ago was *raised* from the dead—that takes faith! This is not to suggest nothing was

accomplished on the cross; I’m simply telling you the death of Jesus on the cross is meaningless without the resurrection. And yet, while it is not the intention, many churches in our era still short-change the Gospel by stopping at the resurrection. Most of the Gospel is rooted in past-tense events of history, but the person and work of Jesus—the Gospel itself—is not merely a past-tense series of events.

At the transfiguration, the messianic deity; everlasting sonship of Jesus was confirmed to the disciples in the unveiling of his glory; definitively declared the King of Glory. After his transfiguration, in Luke 9:51, Jesus determined to go to Jerusalem to begin his *exodus*, which would culminate in a single event. During his whole journey to Jerusalem his eyes were not *just* fixed on going to the cross or being raised from the dead. His eyes were *also* fixed on his ascension from Jerusalem to be seated at the right hand of the Father, exalted over all creation.

Yes, the death and resurrection of Jesus are of utmost significance and yes, you must put your faith in the resurrection of Jesus to be saved, but we must not forget that the ascension of Jesus also plays a critical role in securing our eternal salvation. Over the last two centuries in particular, the ascension of Jesus has been neglected. But this was not so in church history. I am not aware of any major creed or confession from church history that omits the ascension of Jesus from their summaries of the essential beliefs about Jesus and the Christian faith.¹ The Gospel, in which any and all who have faith are saved, is not merely past tense; the work of Jesus did not end nearly 2,000 years ago; rather, it *began*.

Biblical-Theology of the Ascension

The culmination of the earthly life and ministry of Jesus is the ascension, and the ascension answers a lingering question from the Hebrew Bible (HB). God created the universe with the Garden of Eden as the Holy of Holies to his “Cosmic Temple.” Ezekiel 28:11-19 tells us this Garden of Eden was set on a mountaintop.² Even if the temple was technically at a lower elevation, you were said to “go up” to the temple. In the Book of Acts when the followers of Jesus from all over the region go to Jerusalem—from North, South, East, and West they are said to go “up” to Jerusalem or “down” from Jerusalem. So, we have the Garden of Eden as the first earthly Holy of

¹ The Canons of Dort does not use the word “ascension” or “ascended” but does describe the present ministry of Jesus at the right hand of God as distinct from his death and resurrection.

² Just like other Ancient Near East (ANE) religious systems, the biblical temple is depicted as being on a mountain.

Holies in the first earthly temple, and the priests of that temple were tasked with mediating God’s glory to the ends of the earth. This first priestly couple failed to keep their hands clean and their hearts pure; they lifted up their soul to what was false, and so they descended from the Mountain of God into exile.

Fast forward to Exodus 19. After rescuing them from Egypt, God called on Israel to ascend the mountain so the whole nation would be consecrated as a kingdom of priests to mediate God’s glory to the ends of the earth. But the Israelites refused to ascend the Mountain of God, so God called Aaron and his descendants to serve as priests on behalf of the Israelites in the Tabernacle, which the Book of Hebrews tells us was a mere model of the heavenly prototype.

Nearly all of Leviticus is an attempt to answer this question: How can an unholy priest enter the Holy of Holies on behalf of a sinful people? Or more simply: Who shall ascend the mountain of YHWH? These priests were allowed to enter just one day a year to make atonement for the sins of the nation, but their own sins had to be dealt with as well.³ If a priest followed the proper protocols, then he could enter to offer the sacrifice, and then there were protocols for making sure the sacrifices were proper. There had to be a proper priest *and* a proper sacrifice. Just like how the tabernacle was a model of the heavenly prototype, so also were the sacrifices models of the true and final sacrifice offered by the messiah. We are told throughout Leviticus that when sacrifices were done in accordance with the instructions of God, the aroma ascended from the earthly model of the sacred space into the actual sacred space in heaven where it was received by God, thus accomplishing what was hoped for when the sacrifice was made. Or more simply, *the sacrifice had to be received by God for the sacrifice to accomplish anything*. Answering the question “Who shall ascend the mountain of the Lord?” is complicated when the priests who did the figural ascending were themselves sinful.

As Israel’s history progressed, so also did their hope in the messiah. Integral to their messianic hope was that messiah would be innocent and entirely obey God; a prophet-like-Moses, yet a prophet-greater-than-Moses. He is the servant who suffers innocently on behalf of the people of Israel. Isaiah 53 tells us the Messiah will appear in the form of a man—a man with a less-than-spectacular appearance but who will nonetheless live a spectacular life; spectacular because he

³ Jewish tradition records that priests entered with a rope tied around them just in case they had not properly cleansed themselves prior to entering because if they did not follow the procedures, then like Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu they would drop dead in the Holy of Holies, and so the rope was a way to retrieve their bodies.

will be totally without blemish having never once disobeyed any command of God. It is this suffering servant who will be crushed to death by God as an offering for sin. “My servant will be successful; he will be raised and lifted up and greatly exalted.”⁴ Resurrection, ascension, and exaltation—to Isaiah and the NT writers these are related, yet distinct events.

In my studies on the ascension, I have noticed a tendency of some to conflate the resurrection and ascension. Within his succinct description of the Gospel, one prominent reformed theologian of our day wrote that Jesus was “raised from the dead to the right hand of the Father,”⁵ effectively making the resurrection and the ascension *the same event*. If the resurrection and the ascension are the same event, then our passage would have no reason to highlight the forty days of appearances prior to his ascension as proof of his resurrection. Moreover, the NT gives us a flow of thought leading from death to resurrection and then from ascension to exaltation. A few chapters later, in Acts 7 we read about Jesus’ exaltation when the heavens are opened, and Stephen sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Later NT writers give us the theological significance of Jesus’ exaltation as the state and stature that flowed *from* his ascension.

Isaiah’s poem says the suffering servant will be (1) raised, (2) lifted up, and (3) exalted. And this is what happened to Jesus. Jesus was raised from the dead, proving him to be who he claimed to be and proving the Scriptures to be without error. He was raised to defeat death, he was raised to provide the framework of our hope for future salvation as those who also will be raised from the dead into physical bodies free from sin and its consequences, he was raised to be the principal object of our faith, and he was raised to inaugurate the eternal life of the new creation that begins *now* for his people.

Before his ascension, Jesus promised that his departure meant the arrival of the Advocate. Jesus ascended bodily and visibly so he could send his people the Holy Spirit. Our passage tells us Jesus ascended visibly and bodily to show us precisely how he will come back, in the clouds on the unknown day of his vowed return. Importantly, Jesus ascended in order to bring his own sacrificial death into the heavenly temple and to prepare a place for us.

Jesus brought his own self as the sacrifice into the heavenly temple. Jesus is both the high priest making the offering and is himself the thing being offered. Because Jesus was without sin,

⁴ Isa. 52:13, CSB

⁵ Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology of Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011) page 75.

the sacrifice of Jesus, which was brought into the true heavenly temple, is without blemish, just as it is true that Jesus the priest making the offering is without blemish. Because both the offering and the offerer are holy and clean, Jesus-the-sacrifice offered by Jesus-the-priest was received by God-the-Father. The bodily ascension of Jesus assures us his death actually accomplished something. Heb. 9:11-14 tells us eternal redemption was *secured when* the sacrifice was brought *into* the heavenly Holy of Holies.

Because Jesus’ sacrificial offering of himself was accepted by God the Father, Jesus therefore sits—present tense—at God’s right hand, exalted on the throne as the King of Glory. And it is in this place of enthronement where Jesus intercedes—present tense—for us. While the work of Jesus is frequently spoken of in the past tense, it is the opposite in the book of Hebrews where the work of Jesus is spoken of in the *present* tense. In 7:23-24, the priesthood of Jesus is distinct from the other priesthoods because they died and *remained* dead, but Jesus died and was raised from the dead and thus *holds* his priesthood forever. Because of his total innocence and separation from sinners, the author of Hebrews can reflect in 7:26 on how fitting it is for us to *have* Jesus as our high priest. Thus, in 8:1-2 the author can confidently confess we *have* a high priest who *is* seated at the right hand. And yes, there was a point in the past-tense when Jesus entered for the first time, but in 9:24 the writer reminds that Jesus presently remains in the presence of God on our behalf. Moreover, the cross is the not the center point of Jesus’ work as a mediator; rather, as 9:15 puts it, Jesus *continues to be* a mediator for us. In 12:2 the work of Jesus *continues* into eternity, for that is how he shall *remain* seated at the right hand of the Father. In the ascension of Jesus, we celebrate his *exodus* from Jerusalem when he took his own innocent sacrifice for our sins into the heavenly temple, ultimately *securing* our eternal redemption.

Luke 24 and Acts 1 (Mostly)

In Acts 1 we meet a guy with an interesting name: Theophilus. This is actually the second time he appears in the Bible. Luke and Acts are both dedicated in their introductions to Theophilus. We don’t know much about Theophilus other than that he was a believer. Theophilus was likely quite wealthy, enough so that he could commission Luke to thoroughly investigate the events surrounding Jesus’ earthly life and the ministry of his apostles, and then write two orderly volumes. Luke’s hope is that his writings provide Theophilus some certainty in the things he had been taught.

In our passages, the first promise connected to the ascension that Jesus made was the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and it is this promise that is referenced in both of our passages. *The reason we have the Holy Spirit is because Jesus ascended.* If you are a Christian, then you have the Holy Spirit living within you. If you have the Holy Spirit living within you, then you live every day with the consequences of the ascension of Jesus. At the end of Luke’s first volume, Jesus told his apostles that they would be clothed with *power* from on high. At the beginning of Luke’s second volume, Jesus told his disciples that they would receive *power* when the Holy Spirit comes upon them. To be clothed with *power* from on high and to be clothed with *power* from the Holy Spirit is the same thing. Can you say this Greek word *dunamis*? This is where we get the word dynamite from. There is dynamic-power that all disciples of Jesus receive when they are indwelt by the Holy Spirit that we would not have had Jesus not ascended to heaven. And those first disciples were clothed with power from on high soon thereafter.

After reminding his disciples of this promise, Jesus instructed them to stay in Jerusalem for a time. Their temporary stay in Jerusalem is rooted in the promise he told them about first. Remain in the city until you are clothed with dynamic-power. Do not depart from Jerusalem and wait for the dynamic-power of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 1:8 continues this idea of the apostles and Jerusalem following the ascension. If you want to understand the Book of Acts at all, you must pay attention to the forgotten red letters of Jesus. This verse *is* the programmatic verse for the entirety of Acts. *You will be my witnesses.* Or as Luke 24:48 says, *you are witnesses of these things.* What things? Right before this in Luke 24 is when Jesus opened his disciples’ minds from all three sub-sections of the HB to how he the Messiah had to suffer, die, and be raised from the dead. His life, death, and resurrection are the things the apostles must witness about. Can you say this Greek word, *martus*. This is where we get the word martyr from. This is the word for witness, and for all the apostles their sharing the Good News about the person and work of Jesus Messiah would lead to their martyrdom. Some would be boiled, burned, and crucified upside down, among other ways, and they rejoiced to have the privilege to be killed for testifying truthfully about the one who already died and rose for them. When that day comes, may we all have courage and boldness such as they.

Acts 1:8 continues: you will be my witnesses *first to Jerusalem, then in Judea and Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth.* This began at Pentecost when Jews from all over the region just so happened to be in the area. When the Holy Spirit was poured out at Pentecost, one of the first

groups of people to be told of what happened in the city Jerusalem were those from the surrounding region of Judea. Several chapters later, we are introduced to Stephen, a prototype deacon, who was stoned for preaching about Jesus. We meet another man, Saul who would later be called Paul, who was the one who signed off on stoning Stephen. The first story we read after Stephen’s stoning is of Philip, another prototype deacon, who preached in Samaria, and then led an Ethiopian Eunuch to faith in Jesus by explaining to him the meaning of the Scriptures, beginning with Isaiah 53. You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem—check! You will be my witnesses in Judea and Samaria—check, check! And you will be my witnesses even to the ends of the earth. This black, sexual minority is the prototype Gentile whose conversion and transformation began the church’s explosive-expansion to the ends of the earth.⁶

We then meet again Paul who was converted and transformed. Paul became the premier preacher-theologian of all church history. He would go anywhere to preach the Gospel. He reasoned with Jews about their own Scriptures in their own synagogues. He reasoned with Gentiles about the missing link in their philosophies. In Acts 17, the city of Athens was flooded with idolatry, but Paul noticed they had an altar to the unknown god on the off chance they forgot a god along the way. Paul proceeded to tell them about the one God they forgot, and in doing so he paraphrases the opening of Psalm 24. Acts 17:23-25 says: *What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.*

Paul proceeded to proclaim the resurrection of Jesus. The Athenians didn’t know what to do with this. Many laughed it off as absurd, going back to their mute and deaf idols just as many do today with our idolatry-smorgasbord of politics, sports, and identity, isolating and presenting ourselves on social media precisely the way we want—a self-crafted image that reprioritizes fear over safety; emotionalism over stability; that which does not give us life but rather kills us with crippling depression, anxiety, or the pits of meaninglessness; or anything that distracts us from our *only* identity, which is *in-Christ*. Yet, some felt compelled to put their faith in the resurrection, forsaking their idolatry, renouncing the vestiges of the world to instead worship the one true and

⁶ Traditionally, Cornelius in Acts 10 is considered the inauguration of the Gospel to Gentiles in Acts. However, there are some interesting passages from Deutero-Isaiah in direct response to the work of the suffering servant that give more insight as to why the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8 should be seen as the representative of “the ends of the earth” in the church’s mission. I make only passing reference to this because this is outside the scope of this message.

right King of the world. I’ve taken this little detour through Acts because the mission of the church is directly tied to the ascension of Jesus. Paul’s paraphrase from Psalm 24 brings us back to our passages. Here is Psalm 24 in its entirety:

¹*The earth is YHWH’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein,*

²*for he has founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the rivers*

³*Who shall ascend the mountain of YHWH? Who shall stand in his holy place?*

⁴*[Answer] He who has clean hands and a pure heart,*

He who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully.

⁵*He will receive blessing from YHWH and righteousness from the God of his salvation*

⁶*Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob. Selah*

⁷*Lift up your heads, O gates!*

Be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of Glory may come in.

⁸*Who is this King of glory?*

[Answer] YHWH, strong and mighty, YHWH, mighty in battle!

⁹*Lift up your heads, O gates!*

Lift them up, O ancient doors, that the King of Glory may come in.

¹⁰*Who is this King of Glory?*

YHWH of Hosts, He is the King of Glory!

Who shall ascend the mountain of the LORD? The King of Glory shall ascend because he has clean hands; a pure heart. The King of Glory shall ascend into the heavenly temple because he is totally innocent and wholly separate from sin, just as any priest entering the Holy of Holies was *supposed* to be. Psalm 24 depicts the King of Glory ascending the Mountain of the Lord, and as he approaches, even the entry-gates are paying attention and obedient to the voice of God, opening that the one who is at last worthy to enter may do so to reign in strength and might.

Jesus lifted up his hands, and he blessed them. We are not told what he said in this blessing, but Jesus’ blessing over his disciples in Luke 24:49 prompted them, in verses 52-53, to worship Jesus and bless God in the Jerusalem temple. The disciples do not hoard the blessing of God; they blessing they received was redirected outward as an act of worship. While Jesus blessed his disciples, they saw Jesus get carried up or taken up into heaven in the clouds. Then we read a brief explanation from two men standing in white apparel who proclaim to them that Jesus will return, and that he will come again in the same way he left: on the clouds. This isn’t the first appearance

of the two men in white apparel. In Luke 9, these two appeared and explained to three male disciples the true identity of Jesus, thus launching the church’s worship of Jesus. In Luke 24, these two appeared and explained the empty tomb to three female disciples, thus launching the church’s glorious hope in eternal salvation. And in Acts 1, these two appeared and explained to all the disciples that Jesus will return, thus launching the church’s confession that Jesus will come again.

The ascension of Jesus gives the Church its mission; the ascension of Jesus gives the Church the ammunition to pursue *and succeed* at that mission, and that ammunition is the dynamic-power of the Holy Spirit. Let us never forget that it is only because the perfect priest *ascended* into the heavenly temple with the sacrifice of his own unblemished body that any and all who repent, put their faith in his resurrection, and submit their life entirely to the Lordship of Jesus the King of Glory can receive the fruit of our Savior’s labor: our eternal salvation.

Let’s pray.

Almighty God, whose blessed Son our Savior Jesus Christ ascended far above all heavens that he might fill all things: Mercifully give us faith to perceive that, according to his promise, he abides with his Church on earth, even to the end of the ages; through Jesus Christ our Lord and King, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.⁷

⁷ This is a traditional “Ascension Day” prayer.