

The Ascension

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Date: 03 April 2016

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] We make a big deal of the birth of Jesus. We make an even bigger deal of the death and resurrection of Jesus, and that's as it should be. But what about the ascension of Jesus?

I think often it's hardly on our radar. It is the case that the event doesn't occupy the column inches in the Gospels that the other events mentioned do occupy. Matthew and John don't record the event at all. In John's Gospel, Jesus does speak of the event as He anticipates it happening, but there isn't a record of the actual event. Mark does so very fleetingly in the disputed ending to his Gospel. And in the Gospel of Luke, where we will be focusing our attention this morning, the occasion is given four verses right at the end of Luke's Gospel, and we'll be turning to think about that brief account just in a moment. Now, it has to be said, and particularly with reference to Luke, that Luke also speaks, and more extensively, of the ascension in his second book, in the book of Acts. We read from that in the first chapter. Maybe it is the case that the ascension is not that big a deal, hence the relatively little record that we have of it. It's just Jesus going home. He came from heaven. Well, now at the ascension, He's going home. But I think the ascension is, to use the language you're using, is a big deal. It's a big deal in the big story of redemption, the place that it occupies in that big story. But it's also a big deal in terms of the practical implications of the ascension for you and for me today as we live as followers of Jesus, as His disciples. So, let's turn to Luke chapter 24. Let's just read these four verses right at the end of Luke's Gospel, page 1062 in the church

Bible. Luke 24, verse 50. When He had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, He lifted up His hands and blessed them. While He was blessing them, He left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshiped Him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they stayed continually at the temple, praising God. The way we're going to tackle this account is by identifying the actors in the story and noting the part that each of these actors plays. Who do you think the actors are? We've just read the verses. I think anybody, having read these verses, having heard these verses read, will say, well, Jesus, He is the principal actor in this account. That would be a reasonable conclusion. You might quickly also say, well, the disciples, they're there, and we're told about them, how they responded to the ascension. We might think, well, that's it. There's Jesus and there's the disciples. But there is another actor, and that is God, God the Father. And we're going to notice the part that He plays in a moment. So, really, we're saying that there are three actors, each of whom has a part to play or played a part on this occasion. So, we want to think about them in turn. The order we'll do that is we'll think first of God, particularly God the Father, and the part that He plays in the ascension. Then Jesus, the one who ascends to heaven, and then the disciples, the part that they play. That's the order in which we'll think about the passage before us. First of all, then, God the Father. And I guess the reasonable question that could be posed is, does God the Father do anything? Is He involved at all? Well, let's notice the language that Luke uses there in verse 51, where he actually speaks of the very moment when Jesus ascends to heaven. We read there, while He was blessing them, that is, while Jesus was blessing the disciples, He left them and was taken up into heaven. Notice especially the verb and the form of the verb. Jesus was taken up into heaven. The verb is in the passive form. Jesus is the object of the verb.

Who is the subject? Who is the one who does the taking up? Jesus doesn't take Himself up. He is taken up into heaven. So, who is it that takes Jesus up? That's the question that we pose. And the answer, given how we've introduced the question, will be very evident. It is the Father. God the Father takes Jesus up into heaven. The Father delights in bringing Jesus home. There's maybe another clue, well, not maybe, there is another clue, pointing in the same direction concerning the Father's participation given by Luke in the account that He provides for us in Acts chapter 1. We're not going to refer to this often, but maybe on one or two occasions. But in Acts chapter 1 and in

verse 9, notice what is said about the circumstances of Jesus being taken up. We read, after He said this, He was taken up before their very eyes, the same language that we have in Luke's gospel. And then we read, and a cloud hid Him from their sight. A cloud hid Him from their sight. I wonder what is the significance of the cloud that appeared on the occasion of Jesus being taken up. Well, we know that in the Old Testament, on significant occasions, the cloud served as a symbol, indeed more than a symbol, as evidence of God's presence. If we just think of two or three very significant occasions when that was so, at the

[6 : 41] Exodus, in Exodus chapter 13, and in verse 21, where we're being told about the circumstances that would surround the people of God as they are transported from Egypt to the promised land. And we read, by day, the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. It was a symbol of God's presence with them. But then also on the Day of Atonement, such a significant day in the calendar of God's people. In Leviticus chapter 16, in the first two verses, we read of an occasion when God spoke to Moses concerning this day. And what do we read there in Leviticus chapter 16?

The Lord spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, who died when they approached the Lord. The Lord said to Moses, tell your brother Aaron not to come whenever he chooses into the most holy place behind the curtain in front of the atonement cover on the ark, or else he will die, because I appear in the cloud over the atonement cover. Another very significant occasion where God presences himself with his people in this very particular way, in the form of a cloud.

Another occasion, we won't look up the passage for reasons of time, but there's another significant occasion when King Solomon returns the ark of the covenant to the temple. And we're told there in 1 Kings of how the cloud filled the temple, the glory of God represented by the cloud. The presence of God filled the temple. And so the picture of a cloud is a picture that very clearly points to the presence of God. And of course, that ties in with what we're saying. It is God who takes Jesus up. Jesus was taken up into heaven. The Father takes him up to his right hand. And even as we acknowledge that in regard to this event, the ascension, it's just a reminder of the active involvement of the Father at each step in the saving work of Jesus. We might sometimes imagine, or perhaps some imagine, that the Father is somewhat passive in our salvation. It's Jesus who does all the hard work. The Father's in heaven waiting for

Jesus to do all that needs to be done. And that would be a caricature that simply doesn't correspond to the reality. If we think simply of the events surrounding Easter leading up to the ascension, it's the Father who raised Jesus onto the cross to all intents and purposes. It's the Father who does that. We think of the words of the prophet Isaiah in chapter 53, and yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer. It's the Father who is responsible for ensuring that Jesus is raised on to the cross. We think of Peter's sermon at Pentecost in Acts chapter 2 from verse 22. The same truth is acknowledged by Peter. Acts 2 verse 22. Men of Israel, listen to this. Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did among you through him as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge. And you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. And Peter goes on. God, the Father, raised Jesus onto the cross. But then, as we were thinking about last Sunday, the Father raised Jesus from the dead. The very verb that is used in all the Gospels is in the same passive form. Jesus didn't raise himself from the dead. The Father raised him from the dead. And then, now at the ascension, the Father raised Jesus into heaven. We can maybe speak of the three R's of Easter regarding the

Father's involvement. He raised his Son onto the cross. He raised his Son from the grave, and now he raises his Son into heaven to seat him on his throne. But we have some more questions to pose and answer concerning what the Father does. The next question is, who does the Father take into heaven? Now, that seems so blindingly obvious a question and certainly an answer. Well, obviously, it's Jesus who is taken up into heaven. But it is a particular matter concerning Jesus that I want you to take careful note of, and it is this. The Father takes up the man, Jesus, into heaven. It is the incarnate Jesus who is taken up into heaven. Jesus is taken up into heaven in bodily form. He doesn't dispense with his body as he ascends into heaven. It's not that, well, I've done my bit as a man. Now I'm going back to heaven. I don't need this body anymore. No, now my soul will go into heaven. No, not at all. That the language used is so explicit to avoid any kind of misunderstanding on this point. You know, we read of the disciples looking at Jesus as he ascends into heaven. And

we read that in Acts that he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They see Jesus in bodily form ascending into heaven. And then, of course, we have what the angels say, that as he was taken, so he will return. And the implication is clear in this same bodily form. This is very important. The incarnation is permanent. Jesus returns home but he returns home different to when he came. He was sent as the Son of God to become a man.

[13:07] He returns as the Son of God who has become and remains a man. And that is very important for us because we are men and women.

Just to maybe illustrate the importance of that, that seated on the throne is a man. Just indulge me as I imagine a conversation that will never take place at the pearly gates, if there are even pearly gates. A believer stands at the gates of heaven in the hope and expectation that he will be ushered into the presence of God. An angel looks at him from head to toe and challenges him. This is heaven. You don't belong here. You're a man. You're a woman. You're a sinner. You don't belong here.

And the believer responds to the angel. But my friend, look at the throne. Look at the throne and look at the one seated on the throne.

He's a man and he's my friend. You see, it's so important that it is the man, Jesus, who ascended into heaven and who is seated on the throne of heaven even now. Rabbi Duncan, as he was popularly known, a professor of Hebrew and Old Testament, three church college in the 19th century, expressed this astonishing reality memorably, the dust of the earth on the throne of heaven. And that is the reality.

The dust of the earth on the throne of heaven. Jesus, the man, the God-man, seated on heaven's throne. The Father takes Jesus. But where does the Father take Jesus? Well, we've already spoken of this.

[15:03] What does Paul say in his letter to the Philippians in chapter 2 and in verse 9? We read, Therefore God exalted him to the highest place. The Father takes Jesus to his heavenly throne, seated at the right hand of the Father. That is where he is taken. And we'll come back to this in a moment when we think about what Jesus does, his part in the ascension and in what follows.

But one final question concerning the Father, and that is what does the action of the Father tell us? That it's the Father who takes Jesus up into heaven. What does that tell us?

Well, by taking up Jesus, the Father is finally and definitively demonstrating his absolute approval and satisfaction with the saving work of Jesus. The Father sent Jesus to fulfill this mission of saving sinners. And by taking Jesus up into heaven, the Father is announcing to all who care to listen, I am satisfied with what my Son has done. I am satisfied that the job has been completed. I am satisfied that all that is necessary for sinners to be saved has been secured by this man who I now take back home.

He announces his satisfaction with what the Son has done. You remember Jesus on the cross cried out, it is finished.

And the Father agrees. He takes Jesus home because his work is complete, perfectly complete.

The ascension then tells us of the Father's satisfaction, but it also tells us of the Son's reward and continuing ministry. He is exalted to the highest place, not to be idle, not to do nothing, but to reign.

[17:02] And that, of course, takes us to the second actor in this drama of the ascension, and that is Jesus, God the Son. What does Jesus do at the ascension? Well, in the verses that we've read, there's just one verb that is attributed to Jesus as the subject, and that is that he blesses his disciples.

Notice there in verse 50, when he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. It would be two verbs, wouldn't it be? But they're very much connected. He blesses his disciples. But then also notice what is said in the following verse.

While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. And focusing on this verb, to bless, and the two forms in which we find it in these two verses, what I'm struck by is the unbroken continuity of Jesus blessing his disciples. You can picture the scene. Jesus lifts up his hands, he's blessing his disciples, but then Luke very carefully says, while he was blessing them, he is taken up into heaven. There's no gap. He doesn't finish blessing them and then move on to being taken up into heaven. No, there's this unbroken continuity in the blessing that Jesus is granting to his disciples. I know there's a danger, there can be a danger of reading too much into this, but I would suggest that this unbroken continuity speaks powerfully of Jesus' permanent and continuing ministry to bless his people. He blessed his disciples as they were gathered there.

He was blessing them as he was taken up, and in unbroken continuity, he continues to bless his disciples.

The question is, how does he do that? How does Jesus continue to bless his people? Well, he does so by the ministry that he exercises in heaven. And the most prominent of those would be the one that we've made reference to, certainly implicitly, by speaking of him being exalted to his throne.

[19 : 23] And in heaven he reigns. He was taken up by the Father that he would occupy his throne. And the ascension fulfills, at least in part, Daniel's prophecy that we read just a few moments ago.

Remind ourselves of what Daniel speaks of there as he looks forward to this occasion. Perhaps not exclusively this occasion, but certainly including this occasion. In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory, and sovereign power. All peoples, nations, and men of every language worshipped him.

His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed. There's so much of the language there that describes surely what happened on this day.

We maybe read it and think, well, it speaks about the Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven. Does that not sound like the opposite direction? But of course, in a vision you can be anywhere. You're not bound by time and space. In a vision Daniel could have been seeing what was happening in heaven. Of course, if you're in heaven, then Jesus was coming. But regardless of how we wish to understand in all the details, the words of Daniel, what is certainly true is that Jesus' continued blessing of his people is through his reign. And why is that of blessing to you? Because though his rule is absolute and encompasses everything and everyone, it is a rule that revolves around his people. He rules for us. He rules on our behalf. He rules for you and me. We are his great concern as he exercises his sovereign dominion. When you went to bed last night, Jesus was ruling. While you slept, he was exercising his rule.

Subduing his enemies. Extending his kingdom. As you got up this morning and munched into your cornflakes, the settled rule of Jesus continued to be exercised, undisturbed and undisturbable.

[21 : 48] As you wait for the results of your tests at the hospital, he rules. As you receive the letter from the guy at HR and you're wondering what is within it, he rules. As you feel the pain and anguish of seeing a son or daughter making some bad decisions, he continues to rule. Jesus rules and he rules now and he will rule forever. That is one of the ways in which he blesses his people by his rule. But also, of course, at the right hand of the Father, we know that he intercedes. He is our great high priest, our sympathetic mediator at the right hand of the Father. He is one of us in heaven, the dust of the earth on the throne of heaven.

And the ascension guarantees for you and me access to heaven. The man Jesus has opened up the way for men and women. He's opened up the way for us in this life as we pray. But he's opened up the way for us in person when we are called home. Jesus blessed the disciples. While he was blessing, he was taken up, and he continues to bless as he reigns, as he intercedes, but then also as he prepares.

Jesus spoke of this when consoling his disciples. In John's gospel, we won't look up the passage, but in chapter 14, we read of how Jesus promises disciples that he was going to prepare a place for them. In my Father's house are many mansions. I go to prepare a place for you. And so he blesses us as he prepares that place for us, but also as he prepares to return to bring us home.

So God the Father takes up Jesus. Jesus blesses his disciples in these different ways. But then thirdly and finally, what of the disciples? They're the other actors in this drama. What do the disciples do? I think the first thing that we have to acknowledge is that they receive blessing.

Now that may sound very passive, and in many ways it is passive. It's intended to be passive. They receive. Jesus lifted up his hands and blessed them. And it's important to acknowledge that our part in God's big story of salvation is in great measure passive. We receive from God.

[24 : 33] That's the big truth. Not what we do for God. Not the service we can render to God, though that is important. At the heart of the gospel is what we receive from God. We are blessed by God.

The gospel, in its essence, is about what God does for a sinner rather than what a sinner, even a forgiven sinner, can do for God. We receive gratefully, humbly, and joyfully.

So the disciples receive blessing, but we are told more about what they do. We also notice that they worship and praise. In verse 52 we read, then they worshiped Him and returned to Jerusalem with

great joy. And then again in verse 53, they stayed continually at the temple praising God. This is the first time in the gospel that Luke speaks of Jesus being worshiped. Throughout his gospel, he has never used the verb that we have here to describe Jesus being worshiped by somebody or people.

And it seems to me that that is very striking. It speaks of the power to reveal truth of the ascension. Remember in Matthew's account, when we're told of the disciples gathering with Jesus for this same occasion. And there in Matthew's account, we read that when Jesus appears, and this is before the ascension, Matthew does use this word. He says, they worshiped Him, but some doubted.

[26 : 16] But following the ascension, no doubters remain. So glorious and mighty was the revelation of His divine sonship in His majestic ascension that the disciples, all the disciples bow down and worship Him. Now, no doubt their understanding of who He was was growing cumulatively as they pondered on His crucifixion, as they were witnesses to His resurrection, but the deal is sealed, as it were, by the ascension.

Lingering doubts are dispelled as they witness His ascension. And they all bow down, and they all worship Him as the Son of God. But then finally, the disciples obey. What did Jesus tell them in verse 49? We didn't read verse 49, but notice what Jesus says in verse 49, addressing Himself to the disciples. He says, I am going to send you what my Father has promised. Because we know that He's speaking of the Holy Spirit. And then He says, but stay in the city and still, until you have been clothed with power from on high. Very clear instruction is given to the disciples. And what did the disciples do? Well, in verse 53, Luke tells us, and they stayed. They're told to stay, and they do stay. They obey the instruction that they've been given. They obey joyfully. They obey expectantly. They obey publicly in the temple. They're not huddled in an upper room, hiding from everybody else. No, they're at the temple, praising God, joyful for all that they've witnessed, expectant at what is yet to be experienced when Jesus sends the

Holy Spirit and clothes them with power. But there's obedience in their response to the ascended Lord. And it is this same quality of obedience that we are to render to our risen, ascended Savior, obeying Him joyfully, obeying Him expectantly. The circumstances that we find ourselves in are not the same in redemption history as these disciples were, but the nature and the quality of the obedience given is certainly the kind of obedience we are to render to our risen Savior. So three actors, each of them with a part to play. And as we've given some thought to them, I think we can reasonably conclude that the ascension is a big deal. It speaks of the Father's satisfaction with the work of His Son. It points to the

Son's present rule and intercession, and it calls from you and me a response of joyful obedience.

Now in a moment we're going to sing the hymn, Praise My Soul, the King of Heaven. And we can sing these words because of the ascension. Jesus was taken up by the Father to occupy His throne. He is the King of Heaven. And it is to the King of Heaven that we lift up our praises now.

Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You for Your complete satisfaction with the work of Your Son.

We thank You for this approval that was granted in this dramatic and vivid way as You took Him up to occupy His throne. We thank You for your life. And we thank You for your life. And we thank You for that as Jesus blessed His disciples before and even as He was taken up, so in unbroken continuity, we have in heaven one who continues to bless us by His righteous and loving and just rule, by His permanent intercession on our behalf. And we thank You that He is indeed seated at Your right hand, interceding for us even now. And we pray that You would help us to respond to our risen Savior in the manner that the disciples did, that we would respond in joyful and expectant obedience as we would do all that You call us to do. And these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

[30 : 51] Amen.