

Jesus' Ascension and Second Coming

Acts 1:9-11

"I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth...I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord..." We regularly recite those words from the Apostles' Creed in our worship services, as have Christian churches for centuries and centuries. The words of that creed go on to include these words about Jesus, "The third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. From there he will come to judge the living and the dead."

That is what we have before us this morning. First, the ascension—"He ascended into heaven." And then, added on by Luke as an historically faithful quotation from the two angels who spoke to Jesus' disciples, "This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven."

Simple words which define world-changing events. And as I did when I began my sermon last week, I want you to imagine that you are there among these disciples in Jerusalem. Luke writes such that you can easily do that, you can easily put yourself into the actual event he describes. You are listening to Jesus speaking to you. He has just promised you that the Holy Spirit will come upon you, with power! And while you are watching,

I. "HE WAS TAKEN UP."

v.9

Let me emphasize a few details first, regarding...

A. The doctrine of Jesus' ascension.

Perhaps I am stating the obvious for you, and I hope that I am, but it isn't obvious for everyone, not for unbelievers. It is not obvious to some because this is a distinctly supernatural event. Nobody saw the actual resurrection, for what was found that Sunday morning was an empty tomb and some grave clothes lying on the ground. But now everybody is watching. Jesus has appeared to his disciples for the past forty days, in the flesh. I can't tell you all the details about that flesh, except that it was a resurrected a body. He was no longer confined to the physical existence of earth, but he still had a body. And he appeared to his disciples physically. Remember Thomas...

John 20:24 "Now Thomas, called the Twin, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 The other disciples therefore said to him, "We have seen the Lord." So he said to them, "Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe." 26 And after eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, "Peace to you!" 27 Then He said to Thomas, "Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing." 28 And Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!" 29 Jesus said to him, "Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Remember the warning to faithful Mary, who never wavered in her love for Jesus,

John 20:17 Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God."

Jesus had a body, a resurrected, glorified body. But still he appeared on earth, for 40 days. Until he was taken up. Until the ascension. “While they watched, He was taken up,” verse 9. “They looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up,” verse 10. And we are told in verse 11, he “was taken up from you into heaven.”

He left their sight. He left the earth. Verse 9 tells us “a cloud received Him out of their sight.” Luke records in his gospel account,

Luke 24:51 “Now it came to pass, while He blessed them, that He was parted from them and carried up into heaven.”

So the obvious comment is this—this really happened. If you were standing there, that is what you would have seen, exactly as those words describe it. That’s the doctrine of the ascension. And we believe that to be true, just as we believe in the resurrection. The resurrection is rightly emphasized as the focal point and climax of all that Jesus came to earth to accomplish. It is the definitive moment when his humiliation was ended and his exaltation begun. So the gospel can be summarized this way,

1 Cor. 15:3 “For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.”

Saving faith can be defined this way,

Rom. 10:9 “...if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.”

But I believe I can accurately and faithfully say this, if you don’t believe in the ascension also, you don’t actually believe in the resurrection! They are inseparably connected, as one must

necessarily lead to the other. So the doctrine of the ascension is an essential Christian doctrine, it is wrapped up in and included in any declaration of faith in the resurrection. “The third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.” You cannot have one without the other.

As Luke tells us about this ascension, notice his emphasis upon the eyewitness account,

B. The human witness of Jesus’ ascension.

As I emphasized already in verse 9, we read, “while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight.” They were standing there watching, all the disciples gathered together at Jerusalem. Verse 10 is even a bit more emphatic in describing the attention that was given to this supernatural event, beginning with the words,

v.10 “And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up...”

In the language Luke’s gospel, “He was parted from them and carried up into heaven.” So they all saw it. Heaven is separated from earth in that earth has a physical dimension and identity. We can’t really define heaven in terms of a location, in terms of a place, because it’s current existence is spiritual, in what the Bible refers to as ‘the heavenly realms’ or the “heavenly places.” It is best defined, perhaps, as the presence of God. But from our human perspective on earth, the reference to heaven is to look up to the skies, knowing and understanding that we are not considering a place to which our human spaceships could ever visit. It’s not a place that can be defined by our human, scientific exploration and study of what we call space. But again, from our perspective on earth, we look up to see the path by which Jesus entered heaven. And that is exactly what Jesus’ disciples were

doing. And this is exactly what they saw: “while they looked steadfastly toward heaven...He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight.”

To state what I believe is obvious for you—that actually happened. With the eyewitness testimony of all of Jesus’ disciples. And with,

C. The divine witness of Jesus’ ascension.

Here’s the whole of sentence beginning in,

v.10 “And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, 11 who also said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven?”

And then the explanation,

v.11b “This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.”

There is really no question or doubt that those two men in white apparel were angels, angels given an appearance that could be seen by human beings. Angels are real creatures, created by God, but created only as spirits without body or any physical existence. We read of a similar angelic appearance at the empty tomb,

Mat. 28:1 “Now after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week began to dawn, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb. 2 And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat on it. 3 His countenance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow. 4 And the guards shook for fear of him, and became like dead men. 5 But the angel answered and said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for

I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. 6 He is not here; for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. 7 And go quickly and tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead, and indeed He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him. Behold, I have told you.”

So that’s how angels are described when they appear to us, a “countenance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow.” Real creatures, witnessing to mankind of a real, supernatural event. Jesus was taken up into heaven, in the flesh. In his body, his human nature. He remains the God-man, two distinct natures inseparably joined together, fully God and fully man. So just believing in the resurrection means believing in a bodily resurrection, so also belief in the ascension. Jesus the God-man was taken up from the earth “and a cloud received Him out of their sight.”

Before I move on to the next point, his return, let me first emphasize,

D. The significance of Jesus’ ascension.

Why is this important? Why such an emphasis here, that it would be recorded for us by Luke to be included in Scripture. The commentary that I have made available for you if you want to read and study just a bit on your own, makes this point, page 4, “The Epistle to the Hebrews shows the confidence we can derive from the fact that Jesus our high priest now represents us in God’s heavenly sanctuary.”

That’s the significance—Jesus ascended in order to serve us as high priest in the very presence of God in heaven itself. The reference to Hebrews is this,

Heb. 8:1 “Now this is the main point of the things we are saying: We have such a High Priest, who is seated at the right

hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, 2 a Minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle which the Lord erected, and not man.”

And then, Heb. 9:11 “But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. 12 Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. 13 For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, 14 how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?”

Then finally, Heb. 10:19 “Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, 20 by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, 21 and having a High Priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.”

Jesus entered the presence of God by His ascension, in order to intercede for us in every way that a priest is necessary. And for us, that means we can enter the presence of God ourselves, here and now, not yet in the flesh, but by faith. “Having a High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.”

That’s why the ascension of Jesus is so essential, so that through Him, we can draw to the very presence of God in heaven as well!

But go back to Acts 1, go back to what those two angels said to Jesus’ disciples as he was taken up into heaven.

v.11 “This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven...

II. HE “WILL SO COME IN LIKE MANNER AS YOU SAW HIM GO INTO HEAVEN.”

In like manner...in other words, in the flesh. We believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus. We believe in the bodily ascension of Jesus. And we believe in the bodily return of Jesus. Thus the promise is nothing less than,

A. The doctrine of Jesus’ second coming.

His first coming was, of course, in the incarnation. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary. Born a real man, with a real human nature. And in that humanity, he died, a real, physical and painful death. And he rose again. And went into heaven, and will return!

That promised return is, of course, prominent in Old Testament prophecy. For example,

Dan. 7:13 “I was watching in the night visions, And behold, One like the Son of Man, Coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, And they brought Him near before Him. 14 Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, That all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, Which shall not pass away, And His kingdom the one Which shall not be destroyed.”

It is our clear expectation as well, from the promises of the New Testament. For example, speaking of “those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ,” Paul writes in,

2 Thes. 1:9 “These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, 10 when He comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed.”

1 Thes. 4:13 “But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. 14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. 15 For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. 16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.”

In Jesus’ own words, we read...

Mat. 25:31 “When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. 32 All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. 33 And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. 34 Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world...’ 41 “Then He will also say to those on the left hand, Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his

angels.”

“When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory.”

That’s the doctrine of Jesus’ second coming. And it is our great hope and expectation as Christians. So we read in,

Rev. 22:12 “And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work. 13 I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last.”

Thus the second coming of Jesus proclaims to us,

B. The reality of the final judgment upon the world.

All of those verses I just read have reference to that very judgment. Thus our text,

v.11 “This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.”

He will come in like manner, in bodily form, to separate the sheep from the goats. To judge every one “according to his work.” And as Jesus will be “glorified in His saints and...admired among all those who believe,” the judgment upon wicked unbelievers is unmistakable, as I read from,

2 Thes. 1:9 “These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, 10 when He comes, in that Day...”

So we are given the task of the worldwide outreach of the gospel, as we studied last week. And the preacher of God’s word is given this task,

2 Tim. 4:1 “I charge you therefore before God and the Lord

Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: 2 Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season.”

Peter himself would preach with these words recorded in, Acts 10:39 “And we are witnesses of all things which He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem, whom they killed by hanging on a tree. 40 Him God raised up on the third day, and showed Him openly, 41 not to all the people, but to witnesses chosen before by God, even to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead. 42 And He commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead. 43 To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive forgiveness of sins.”

There will be a final judgment upon the world. For those who live in rebellion and unbelief, it will be the judgment of condemnation of God’s wrath and justice, the judgment of hell. That judgment is well defined by the words of,

Rev. 19:11 “Now I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war. 12 His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns. He had a name written that no one knew except Himself. 13 He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. 14 And the armies in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, followed Him on white horses. 15 Now out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should strike the nations. And He Himself will rule them with a rod of iron. He Himself treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. 16 And He has on His robe and on His thigh a name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.”

That is the great warning of the gospel, but with that warning comes the great hope and promise of the gospel. For those who trust in the Lord Jesus Christ for their salvation, the second coming of Jesus will bring with it,

C. The blessing of the final work of our redemption.

Jesus will “come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.” And for those who are prepared, for those who believe, for those who trust in Jesus alone for their salvation, that second coming will be our glorification. That is the final work of our redemption, a redemption not yet fully accomplished in our own experience. Because we are still mortal and corruptible in our flesh. And we still wage war with sin within our own hearts. We are not yet made perfect in glory. But beloved, we will be!

Our Shorter Catechism so well expresses it. Answer to question 38: “At the resurrection, believers, being raised up in glory, shall be openly acknowledged and acquitted in the day of judgment, and made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God to all eternity.”

Rom. 8:30 “Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.”

That’s what we await. That’s what will happen on that great day when Jesus returns. We shall be glorified. In that context, one of the greatest promises in Scripture is this,

1 John 3:2 “Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.”

Now, let me go back to Acts 1. All of this discussion about the ascension and second coming is so that we won’t simply gaze up

into heaven, but rather that we would get to work doing what we are called and commanded to do, by the power of the Holy Spirit, as we studied last week,

v.8 “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

That is our task and our responsibility until Jesus returns in his triumphant glory at the end of this age.