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# WHY THE DISCIPLES REJOICED AT JESUS' ASCENSION

Luke 24:50-53

By

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Luke Lesson 117

## Why the Disciples Rejoiced at Jesus' Ascension Luke 24:50-53

Usually good-byes are sad times. Thankfully, modern technology has lessened the impact of being separated from loved ones. A hundred years ago, if your loved one went to Africa, he would get on a boat and you would not see him again for months, if not years. But today, even if he goes half way around the world, he is still just a day's flight from home. A hundred years ago, a letter would take months to go by boat to another continent, whereas now by email you can have daily interaction with someone almost anywhere in the world.

The most difficult good-byes, however, are those that are final in this life. When you know that you will not be seeing your loved one again this side of heaven, you are filled with sorrow at the parting. For this reason, it seems strange that the disciples' response to Jesus' final parting from them as He ascended into heaven was not grief and sorrow, but great joy. Luke began his gospel with the angels announcing to the shepherds concerning Jesus' birth, "I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people" (Luke 2:10). Now Luke leaves his readers to ponder the thought, "Why did the disciples have great joy when Jesus ascended?" He wants us to ask ourselves, "Is my life filled with great joy because Jesus is ascended? Am I continually blessing God because Jesus ascended on high?"

Seeing Jesus ascended on high should cause us  
to worship Him and rejoice.

Before we look at the implications of Jesus' ascension, we should be clear that it did *not* occur on the same day as the resurrection, as some critics allege. If we only had Luke 24, we might think so. But in Acts 1:3-11, Luke makes it plain that this event took place 40 days after His resurrection. It is inconceivable that Luke there contradicted himself here. The two accounts are not at odds with each other.

There are at least three reasons that Jesus' ascension should cause us to worship Him and rejoice:

1. Jesus' ascension should cause us to worship Him and rejoice because it signifies the completion of His earthly ministry.

Jesus did not leave this earth because He had been rejected and crucified by sinful men. He did not say, "If that's the way you're going to treat Me, then I'm out of here!" He didn't leave in defeat or frustration. He left because He had accomplished the work that the Father had sent Him to do (John 17:4). On the night before His death, Jesus told His disciples, "I came forth from the Father and have come into the world; I am leaving the world again and going to the Father" (John 16:28).

What was the work that Jesus came into this world to accomplish? We don't have to speculate. The angel told Joseph plainly, "He will save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). The problem of the human race is that our rebellion from God separated us from Him. Through Adam's sin, the entire human race was plunged into sin and its penalty, death (Rom. 5:12). No amount of good works or penance can take away our sins and reconcile us to the holy God. Thus we are lost and in need of a Savior. We cannot save ourselves. The mission of Jesus, as He states in Luke 19:10, was "to seek and to save that which was lost."

As Luke 1:26-38 makes plain, Jesus' birth was no ordinary human birth. Rather, a woman who had not had relations with a man conceived Jesus through the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit coming upon her, so that Jesus is uniquely the Son of God, God in human flesh. By His holy life, lived in dependence upon the Father, Jesus showed us how men and women should live. By His sacrificial death on the cross, He paid the penalty for our sins. His bodily resurrection from the dead is proof that God accepted His sacrifice and that God's full approval is upon Jesus, His anointed one. Thus now the risen Christ commissions His disciples to proclaim repentance for forgiveness of sins in His name to all the nations, beginning in Jerusalem (24:47).

Jesus' ascension into heaven was the fulfillment of the prophecy that He made to the Jewish leaders during His trial, "But from

now on the son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God" (22:69). There, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, He awaits the time that the Father has ordained to make His enemies a footstool for His feet (Ps. 110:1; 1 Cor. 15:25; Heb. 10:12-13). As the writer of Hebrews (1:13) states, God never told any of the angels that they should sit at His right hand until He made their enemies a footstool for their feet. But of Jesus, the Son of God, He says, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, and the righteous scepter is the scepter of Your kingdom" (1:8).

Jesus, the eternal God, took on human flesh for our salvation. The fact that He is now ascended on high, seated at the right hand of the Father, shows us that He accomplished His mission on earth. And that should fill our hearts with worship for Him and great joy. This is the first time that Luke has stated specifically that the disciples worshiped Jesus. And if Jesus is truly risen and ascended into heaven, as they witnessed, then we can join them in adoration and great joy. It means that our sins are forgiven in His name. We now enjoy reconciliation with God through Jesus' blood. We now have hope both in this life and beyond the grave, because Jesus is at the right hand of the Father on our behalf, waiting that day when He will come again in power and glory to receive us unto Himself. We can worship Him and rejoice because His earthly ministry is completed.

2. Jesus' ascension should cause us to worship Him and rejoice because it signifies the commencement of His heavenly ministry.

Jesus had told the disciples in the upper room, concerning His going away from them and their initial sadness, "If you loved Me, you would have rejoiced because I go to the Father, for the Father is greater than I" (John 14:28). He was not denying His own deity, but rather was referring to the limitations of His humanity. During the time of His earthly ministry, Jesus voluntarily limited Himself in dependence upon the Father. His glory was veiled. He submitted to the Father's will, including the cross. But in returning to the Father, He would be restored to the place of glory and power that was His before the foundation of the world. And, as He promised, He would send the promise of the Father, the Holy Spirit, on the disciples to empower them for life and ministry.

There are many aspects of Jesus' heavenly ministry, but consider these five:

A. Jesus' ascension resumed His glorification with His Father.

In John 17:5, just prior to the crucifixion, Jesus prayed, "Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was." Jesus thereby claimed to be pre-existent with God and one in glory with God, thus possessing the very essence of God Himself. Jesus' prayer was fulfilled by His death, resurrection, and ascension. Peter, James, and John had gotten a brief glimpse of Jesus' glory on the Mount of Transfiguration. But now Jesus is through the time of His humiliation, restored to the unapproachable glory that belongs to God alone.

The apostle John got another glimpse of Jesus in glory in Revelation 1:12-16. His response was not to say, "Hi, Jesus! Good to see you, again!" Rather, he fell at His feet like a dead man. The saints in heaven are gathered around God's throne where they say, "To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever" (Rev. 5:13). Jesus is ascended on high where He shares the glory of the Father.

The fact that Jesus is now ascended to the right hand of the Father, and that He has resumed His preincarnate glory, but now in a human body, gives us hope that He will take us to be with Him. In our resurrected bodies, one day we will share His glory. Jesus is the first man in glory, and thus we have the assurance that He will transform our bodies and take us to heaven to be with Him.

B. Jesus' ascension began His intercessory ministry for His people.

Jesus is now at the right hand of God where He intercedes for us (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25). This intercession involves not only presenting our petitions and needs before the Father. Also, He presents His blood in the very presence of the Father as the propitiation for our sins (Heb. 9:24; 1 John 2:1, 2). Therefore we have continual access to God through Jesus our Advocate.

Have you ever needed to get something done through a high government official? If so, you know that having a connection can greatly speed the process. If you know someone who has access to

the top official you need to see, you can gain a hearing. The ascended Lord Jesus Christ is our connection in the very presence of God! Through Him we have access in the Spirit to the Father (Eph. 2:18). Jesus' ascension to the Father should cause us to worship Him and rejoice because He is there interceding for us.

C. Jesus' ascension began His preparation of a place for His people.

He told His disciples that He went to prepare a place for them and that He would come again and receive them unto Himself, that where He is, there they may be also (John 14:1-3). I don't know why the Lord of creation, who spoke the universe into existence, needs to *prepare* a place for us. Couldn't He just speak the word and it is done? Probably, Jesus was using figurative language so that the disciples could understand. Like a carpenter working on a house, so the Lord is carefully preparing a place in heaven for us to be there with Him throughout eternity. The language pictures the Lord's individual care for us.

The Lord not only said that He would go, a reference to His ascension, but also that He would come again for us. So Jesus' ascension should fill us with great joy, because our future with Him in glory is as secure as His word. He would be a liar if it were not true that He is coming again and that we will be with Him in heaven.

D. Jesus' ascension began His present and future dominion over heaven and earth.

Peter tells us that Jesus is now "at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him" (1 Pet. 3:22). Paul says that Jesus is seated at God's "right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come. And He put all things in subjection under His feet" (Eph. 1:20b-22a). And, yet there is a sense in which all things are not yet subject to Him (1 Cor. 15:27-28; Ps. 110:1; Heb. 10:13). His kingdom is both present and yet future. Presently His enemies are not all yet subject to Him. But when He comes again in power and glory, He will conquer every foe and reign forever and ever.

E. Jesus' ascension resulted in the pouring out of His Holy Spirit on His people.

He told the disciples, "It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper shall not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you" (John 16:7). Through the Holy Spirit, the disciples were empowered to carry on the work of Jesus, extending the good news of salvation to the ends of the earth. As Paul also teaches in Ephesians 4:8, "When He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives, and He gave gifts to men." Thus the Holy Spirit gives spiritual gifts to the church for the building up of the body of Christ (Eph. 4:11-16). The disciples could rejoice at Jesus' ascension because of His present heavenly ministry, which included the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on His people.

Thus Jesus' ascension should cause us to worship Him and rejoice because it signified the completion of His earthly ministry and the commencement of His heavenly ministry.

3. Jesus' ascension should cause us to worship Him and rejoice because it signifies the commencement of our ministry as His earthly representatives.

Why didn't Jesus take His followers with Him into heaven when He ascended? He left them here because He still had work for them to do in His name. As we saw in our last study, their mission (and ours) is to proclaim repentance for forgiveness of sins to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem (24:47). As we also saw, it is essential that we are clothed with the power of the Holy Spirit if we want to succeed in that mission. Our text reveals four other things that we need to be effective representatives for Jesus Christ in this evil world:

A. Christ's representatives must have His blessing on their lives and ministries.

Jesus led the disciples out to the Mount of Olives (Acts 1:12), on the way to the village of Bethany. There "He lifted up His hands and blessed them. While He was blessing them, He parted from them and was carried up into heaven" (Luke 24:50b-51). The picture is that of the Old Testament priest blessing the people after offering the sacrifice for them (Lev. 9:22).

We tend to think of a blessing as a nice gesture that doesn't mean much in terms of actual consequences. But Jesus wasn't just wishing the disciples well when He blessed them. His blessing was *absolutely essential* for them and for us, if we are to carry on His work. Without Jesus' blessing, we can have large and successful ministries that will come to nothing in the end. We can build huge buildings and have thousands of people flocking to our church, but if we lack Jesus' blessing, it's all just wood, hay, and stubble that will be consumed by the fire of His judgment. "Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it" (Ps. 127:1).

Do you covet God's blessing on your life and ministry? Like Jacob wrestling with the angel of God, we should lay hold of Him and say, "I will not let you go unless you bless me" (Gen. 32:26). God's blessing means that the results of our labors are not in proportion to our abilities or efforts. The results have lasting spiritual impact that we never could have achieved in our own strength. In God's work, His blessing means *everything*. Wrestle with Him until you have it!

B. Christ's representatives must worship Him before they work for Him.

As I said, this is the first reference in Luke to the disciples worshipping Jesus. Worship should always precede work. Any work we do for the Lord should be the overflow of our hearts being full of adoration and love for Him. We hear a lot about burnout in ministry. One major cause of burnout is when our work gets ahead of our worship. When we feel that we're just cranking out whatever we do to serve the Lord, we need to stop and get our hearts right before Him. The hands that Jesus lifted up in blessing were pierced hands. As the disciples gazed upward at Jesus, lifting up His hands, they would have been reminded that He gave Himself for them on the cross. That is the motivation for all that we do for the Lord (Gal. 2:20).

I'll never forget the only time I heard the late Alan Redpath speak. He told us of a time when his ministry seemed to be prospering. He had speaking opportunities pouring in from around the world. It seemed that all that he dreamed about in ministry was coming true. Right in the middle of this time, he was laid up in the hospital with a stroke. His ministry came screeching to a halt. He

couldn't accept any speaking engagements. He couldn't write any books. All he could do was lie there in bed. He cried out, "Lord, why this? Why now?" He said that the Lord impressed on him, "Alan, you've gotten your work ahead of your worship." I thought, "This man's work was the Lord's work! He isn't some slick TV preacher, with a shallow, self-serving ministry. He is a godly man." But he said that he realized that he needed to put his worship of the Lord back in priority over his work.

In a similar vein, Dr. John G. Mitchell wrote, "Just as much as we really worship, just that far will we bear testimony for Him. We cannot divorce real testimony from real worship" (*Moody Monthly* [12/79], p. 41).

C. Christ's representatives must have His joy undergirding their ministries.

As I said, Luke begins with great joy at the announcement of Jesus' birth and he ends with the disciples filled with great joy after seeing Jesus ascend into heaven. Joy is a theme throughout Luke, but no where it is emphasized more than in Luke 15, where there is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents (15:7, 10), and where the father of the prodigal says, "But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found" (15:32).

As believers, we should be filled with great joy as we think often on the fact that Jesus Christ has forgiven us all our sins. Our joy is multiplied every time we hear of another sinner coming to repentance. As we saw last week, our mission is to proclaim among the nations the good news that if people will repent of their sins, they will experience God's complete forgiveness. Our joy in knowing the Lord Jesus is the basis of our witness for Him.

If you lack joy, I encourage you to read the Psalms every day and write down on 3 by 5 cards all of the verses about joy, gladness, and praise. Set your mind on the things above, where Christ is at God's right hand (Col. 3:1-4). He is there, having made forgiveness for all your sins, interceding for you, with all power and authority in the universe. Don't rest until He gives you His joy. When He does, that joy will draw others to the Savior through you.

D. Christ's representatives will bless Him because of His great blessings to them.

In verse 50, Jesus blessed the disciples; in verse 53, the disciples are in the temple, continually blessing God. Luke wants to show that the church, although it is to reach out to the nations, had its roots in the temple in Jerusalem. It was not a radical breakaway from Judaism, but rather the fulfillment of its many prophecies.

When the shepherds went and saw the baby Jesus, they went away glorifying and praising God (2:20). So here at the end, when the disciples see the risen and ascended Savior, they go away praising (lit., "blessing") God. God has blessed us with all the promises of His Word; we in turn bless God. It's like when my children used to give me a Christmas or birthday present. Where did they get the money to do that? They got it from dad! I gave them the money and they used it to buy me a present and I was delighted to receive back from them part of what I had given them. God gives us every blessing. When we return it to Him with our gifts or with our praise, we are blessing the God who has blessed us.

### Conclusion

The disciples went away from these 40 days of fellowship with the risen Lord, culminating in His ascension, with a new vision of the glory of Christ. John Owen, the Puritan theologian, makes the point that in some measure, all true believers have the eyes of their understanding opened to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ as declared in the gospel. He says, "Our apprehension of this glory is *the spring of all our obedience*, consolation, and hope in this world" (*The Person of Christ* [Sovereign Grace Publishers], p. 243, italics his).

To the extent that we see the glory of the risen and ascended Lord Jesus Christ, we will be filled with worship, great joy, and thanksgiving toward God for His abundant mercies to us. If you lack these things, ask God to reveal Christ to your soul. Seek Him in His Word and don't rest until you find yourself continually gathering with God's people, blessing God.

## Discussion Questions

1. John Owen says that our apprehension of the glory of Christ is the spring of all our obedience, consolation, and hope. What are the implications of this in counseling other believers?
2. Why is joy essential, not optional, for believers?
3. Worship of the Lord must be the foundation of work for the Lord. Would this cure “burnout”?
4. How can we obtain God’s blessing? What requirements are there on our part?

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