

The Church Acts Up: The Ascension (Promises Promises) Acts 1:1-12

Portions contributed by David Owens "The Ascension." At Sermon Central.Com

"The two hardest things to say in life are hello for the first time and goodbye for the last." (Moirra Rogers).

We have all experienced some very memorable goodbyes in our life; some real and some fictional.

- On June 13, 1948, **Babe Ruth** stood in Yankee Stadium, eaten up with cancer and with tears in his eyes, said goodbye. He died two months later.
- In the closing scene from the movie The Extra Terrestrial **E.T.** moves to enter the spaceship that has returned to rescue him, but then he pauses and turning to Elliot says, "Come..." Elliot quietly replies "Stay..." E.T. puts his finger to his heart and says "Ouch." Elliot tearfully mimics the same action, "Ouch." They embrace; then E.T. puts his glowing finger to Elliot's forehead. "I'll... be... right... here."

That's a goodbye to keep in mind. We can always keep our loved ones in memory, but it doesn't replace being with our loved ones. Some of the hardest goodbyes that anyone has to say are to family when they move to another state, or as soldiers go off to war. It is also especially hard to say goodbye to an elderly friend or loved because we know that it might be the last time we will see them.

Today we will look into one of the most memorable and very real of "goodbyes"--when Jesus said goodbye to His disciples--we know this as the Ascension.

The most important events in Jesus' life certainly include His birth, baptism, temptation, transfiguration, crucifixion, resurrection, and His ascension.

Yet, the Ascension is largely overshadowed by the Incarnation and Resurrection. Christmas and Easter are great celebrations, but Ascension Day goes by barely recognized--yet it is no minor episode. It has been said, that "**Easter is incomplete, Pentecost is impeded, and the Second Coming is impossible without the Ascension**" (Robert Ramsey). Our Lord's ascension is a climactic, glorious event--it is His exaltation to the right hand of the Father. Paul writes,

He who descended
is the very One who ascended
higher than all the heavens,
in order to fill the whole universe
(Eph 4:10).

Jesus humbly came to this earth; descending into our sin-ruined planet and carrying our sins in his person to the grave. Now He is seen returning to glory. It's important that this event is described in the Bible. Luke tells us it took place "*before their very eyes.*" He wants us to know that something tangible, something real took place. Just as with the Resurrection, there were eyewitnesses to this historical event.

It was a unique and spectacular moment! They all watched Him float up into the sky getting farther and farther away until a cloud hid him from their sight. Notice that Luke does not record how many of Jesus' followers viewed his Ascension; conceivably it could again be as many as the 500 who witnessed His resurrection. The point is that this was no vision. Jesus' ascension was a real event about which many people could again say with confidence, "we are witnesses."

The Bible also tells us that Jesus ascended bodily. This means that He took into the Father's presence the evidence of His sacrificial death—His own scarred, bloodied, wounded, flesh. Just as the blood of the Jewish Temple sacrifices was brought into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement and sprinkled upon the Mercy Seat of the Ark of the Covenant, so Jesus ascended to Heaven as both Priest and Sacrifice. As the author of Hebrews writes,

with his own blood
(not the blood of goats and calves)
Jesus entered the Most Holy Place
once for all time and secured
our redemption forever.

Hebrews 9:12

His sacrifice satisfied God's divine justice once for all. Our Savior was received home as a beloved Son returning from a long and hazardous journey. The Ascension is the climax of His earthly ministry.

On that day, after Jesus had ascended, His followers lingered on the Mount of Olives, awe struck, continuing to stare into an empty sky until two angels roused them from their immobility, reassuring them that this was all part of God's eternal plan. Luke's Gospel then concludes that they "*returned to Jerusalem with great joy*" (24:52).

Loss of Jesus physical presence with His Ascension would prove to be a blessing because it prepared His followers for the coming of Jesus' spiritual presence, no longer confined to the limitations of time or one physical body. **St Augustine** once prayed "*You ascended from before our eyes, and we turned back grieving, only to find You in our hearts.*" Jesus is present in us, wherever we go. He is our constant companion.

And the Ascension also means there can be no neutrality about Jesus. We cannot simply pick and choose from His teachings as we do with Socrates, Gandhi or Confucius; remembering the teachings we like, forgetting those we don't. The Ascension is the final proof that we are dealing with more than a man. All the Bible says about who Jesus is makes little sense without the Ascension. **Through His ascent we know we are dealing with God. And, as God, Jesus has left us some specific tasks to be about until he returns.**

But why did He have to go in the first place?

That is the question we will answer today.

Why was the Ascension an absolute necessity for Jesus?

There are several important reasons.

First, the Ascension was a necessity because there had to be a definite moment when Jesus returned to heaven. Like the resurrection it had to be a witnessed event.

Imagine if the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus had just simply petered out; after 40 days of being seen, Jesus just quietly disappears. There would be something forever indefinite about that. People would ask "*well then what happened to the Messiah?*" And all the disciples could reply would be "*we don't know.*" Christianity would have been left with this eternal question mark hanging over its founder's head. And people might have had a valid reason to continue looking for the bones of Jesus. I doubt Christianity would have long survived beyond its original followers.

So there had to be an event marking when the Jesus of earth would become the Christ of heaven. The Ascension marked the transition from His earthly ministry to His heavenly one. Behind Him was the persecution of men; before Him was the applause of angels. Behind Him was the cross; before Him was the crown.

A second reason the Ascension was a necessity, is the fact that Jesus' going allowed for the Spirit's coming.

Just before his death, Jesus told his disciples, "*Now I am going to him who sent me ... Because I have said these things, you are filled with grief. But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away.*"

Unless I go away,
the Counselor will not come to you;
but if I go, I will send him to you."
John 16:5-7

Jesus continued *"I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you."* (Jn. 16:12-14)

So the **going of Jesus allowed for the coming of the Spirit, and the coming of the Spirit ushered in the beginning of the church.** It is impossible to imagine our lives today, either as individual Christians or corporately as the church, without the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit brings me such hope, peace and power, while at the same time convicting me of my sin when I get off course.

A third reason the Ascension was an absolute necessity is the fact that it allowed Jesus to begin His permanent, heavenly ministry.

"With his ascension Jesus left the here for the everywhere.

He left the now for the eternal.

He left the First Century to fill all the centuries" (unknown).

Just as the grave could not hold Him when His Father raised Him from the dead; so the earth could not hold Him when it was time for Him to return to His Father. As the Apostle Peter wrote,

Christ suffered for [our] sins once for all,
the righteous for the unrighteous,
in order to bring you to God.

1 Peter. 3:18

He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit ... And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him. (1 Peter 3:21, 22)

- In heaven, at God's right hand, Jesus is our interceding High Priest, giving us the grace we need for life and service (Heb. 4:14-16).
- He is also our Advocate before the Father, forgiving us when we confess our sins (1 Jn. 1:9-2:2)
- Our exalted and glorified Head of the church, he is now working with and through his people on earth; helping them accomplish His purposes. (Mt. 28:19-20; Mk. 16:20)

And we have proof that Jesus ascended and is now ministering at the right hand of God. In Acts seven, we read about Stephen, the first Christian martyr.

As he was on trial before the Sanhedrin, the Bible says, "But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven

'Look,' he said,
'I see heaven open and
the Son of Man standing
at the right hand of God.'
Acts 7:55

At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul." (Acts 7:55-58)

That same Saul next had his own encounter with the risen and ascended Christ. The Bible says, "As he neared Damascus on his journey [to arrest Christians], suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' 'Who are you, Lord?' Saul asked. 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' he replied. 'Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.'" (Acts 9:3-6)

Then, some seventy years later, the apostle John was on the island of Patmos, exiled by the Roman authorities, when Jesus as the resurrected and ascended Christ appeared to him. John wrote,

"On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet...I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lamp stands, and among the lamp stands was someone 'like a son of man,' dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: '

Do not be afraid.
I am the First and the Last.
I am the Living One; I was dead,
and behold I am alive forever and ever!
And I hold the keys of death and Hades.
Rev. 1:18

So we see the ascended Christ is very much alive and active. He is busy standing beside and empowering his followers as they face trouble and persecution.

One final reason the Ascension was an absolute necessity was the fact that Jesus could not return if He never left.

As they watched Jesus ascending into heaven, getting farther and farther away until a cloud passed in front of him and hid Jesus from their gaze. That cloud might well have reminded them of the cloud that covered them during the transfiguration, or the cloud that led the nation of Israel in the wilderness in the Old Testament, or the cloud of God's glory that filled the temple (I Kings 8). But unlike the transfiguration, where Jesus remained after the cloud disappeared, in the ascension, Jesus did not remain after the cloud hid Him.

There they stood still intently gazing into the sky, even when there was nothing more to see, when they were interrupted by two men standing beside them. It was obvious they were angels because of their white robes and their knowledge. They said,

Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?
This Jesus, who has been taken up from you
into heaven, will come in the same way
as you saw him go into heaven."
Acts 1:11

Their rebuke is a bit humorous – "*Why are you standing around staring into the sky?*" "*Yes, Jesus is going to come back, but not right now, not today, and hasn't he left you with something to be doing?*" **So the Ascension testifies to the fact of our Lord's return. "He will come back."** Notice that the disciples were not told that they themselves would see the return of Christ. The time is left open, so it is futile and foolish to speculate as to when He will return. As He promised, Jesus has gone to prepare a place for us and He will come back to take us to be with Him (John 14:1-3). When that happens, it will again be according to God the Father's choosing; whether we meet Him at our own death or at the end of ages.

So here we are some 2000 years after the promises of Jesus and His ascension to heaven, still waiting for His return. And like those early disciples, we are not supposed to be just standing idly gazing into the sky; we are to be busy with the tasks our Lord has left for us. Several times Jesus warned us—his followers--about the great importance of continuing to carry out the will of our Master especially in His absence; lest we are caught by surprise when He returns.

Jesus concluded his major end-of-time prophecy saying,

“It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns.”

Matthew 24:46 NIV.

Then He told two parables: one about wise bridesmaids who were prepared for a longer than expected wait – they got into the party – while the unprepared others did not. Then He spoke of a master who, at his departure, left three servants, according to their abilities, with various levels of responsibility in caring for his business. Two of those servants multiplied what was given to them and each was told, “*Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!*” But the one servant who had hidden and then returned exactly what he had been given, was not only not praised, his portion was taken away and given to the others (Mt. 25:21 ff.)

The key to our waiting and working then is not perfection, but faithfulness; good stewardship: being busy with the tasks He has left for us until His return.

- God is pleased when we are busy employing our gifts and talents in the administration of His grace: sharing the Good News that we know with those who haven’t heard it.
- God is pleased when we make wise choices investing our time and our finances for kingdom purposes.
- And God is very pleased when we love one another as He loved us, and as we love our neighbor as ourselves.

But I know it is not easy. As the song says, “*it’s the waiting that is the hardest part.*”

- The battle is tough – Jesus warned that the world would hate us just as it hated him; but to remember that He has already triumphed over that world.
- And overcoming temptation in our lives is difficult – but according to our Bible, as we grow more like our master in our knowledge and holiness this will give us the way to escape temptation (2 Peter 1.4)

**Christ in you,
Your hope of glory.**
Colossians 1:27

- And there are many facing weariness from all kinds of troubles – disease and death, persecution for their faith, conflict and strife, layoffs and mounting bills. But I also know that with the ascension of Jesus and the coming of his Holy Spirit, that **God is now right here with us...** (point to head)... **not just in memory ... but living within us, holding and sealing us for our hope of glory.**
- And someday soon, just as he promised

the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise ... and so we will be with the Lord forever.

1 Thessalonians 4:16-18

Some day the Lord will return and we will never have to say goodbye to Him ever again. That is a promise we can count on – day in and day out; when things are good and when they are bad. I can't wait for that day– how about you?

But a critical question to answer is this: **Are you ready?**

If the Lord returns today, are you ready to meet Him?

And will he find you being faithful ... or will you be surprised?

Your answer to these questions is a matter of spiritual life or spiritual death – it is just that serious!

Jesus said, *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."* (Jn. 3:16)

Jesus said, *"I tell you, unless you repent, you too will perish."* (Lk. 13:3)

The Boy Scouts have a motto:

Be Prepared.

The Marines have a slogan:

Always Faithful.

They will both equally well serve us who claim the title: Christian—be prepared and faithful.

Let's pray about this.