

The Ascent of Joy

by John Piper

The ascension of Jesus is a crucial event in Christian theology, marking the beginning of Jesus' exaltation to the right hand of God and his role as mediator and intercessor for humanity.

Duration: 27:34

Scripture: Psalm 103:2, Luke 24:50-53, Ephesians 6:12, 1 Peter 3:22

Topics: "Spiritual Blindness", "Glory Of Jesus"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the concept of a veil that lies on the minds of people, preventing them from seeing the true significance of Jesus. The speaker uses various examples, such as the space shuttle, nuclear explosions, and advanced technology, to illustrate the distractions and worldly influences that can blind people to the glory of Jesus. However, the speaker emphasizes that Jesus has assured his disciples of his return and the ultimate reunion with him. The sermon concludes with a prayer for God to remove the veil from the eyes of the listeners and help them recognize the surpassing glory of Jesus.

Transcript

I would like you to turn in your Bibles with me to Luke chapter 24, the end of the chapter. I'd like to read just the last several verses beginning at verse 50. Luke 24, 50.

Jesus led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. And while he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy and were continually in the temple blessing God.

In the book of Acts, which Luke writes to complete the story of what Jesus began to do and to teach, he tells us in those first three verses of Acts, in the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day in which he was taken up after he had given commandment through his Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. To them he presented himself after his passion by many proofs appearing to them during 40 days, speaking to them of the kingdom of God. Therefore, we learn that the ascension of Jesus happened 40 days after the resurrection.

If it had happened in 1981, Jesus would have risen on April 19th and would have ascended day before yesterday on Friday of this week. And we, if we had been those disciples, would find ourselves now in Jerusalem waiting the day of Pentecost some 10 days later. And therefore, what I'd like to do is focus today on the ascension and next Sunday on the meaning of Pentecost.

According to Luke 24, 45, we need help to understand the significance of what's happening here. We need to have an almighty sovereign lifting of a veil. Jesus said there in Luke 24, 45, or Luke said, then he, Jesus opened their minds to understand the scriptures until the Lord takes this casing that's on our minds off.

We simply cannot perceive and appreciate the genuine significance, the amazing significance of the ascension of our Lord. And that's why Paul taught that there is a veil that lies over the minds of people until it's removed by Christ that keeps them from seeing the beauty of Christ and his splendor. Now, I, I want us to pray that God will do that for us.

And I think it might be helpful to make our prayer more earnest if we know what it looks like on the inside of that veil. So you can tell right now whether you've got it on. I'll tell you what it looks like inside.

It's a little different for every person, but in general, the motifs are similar in our day. If you have this veil lying on your mind, you see the space shuttle Columbia taking off with unbelievable light and heat and force. And you see two huge mushrooming clouds over Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

And you see micro and macro computer systems controlling unbelievably complex processes and procedures in our day. And you see political giants, national and international, wielding unprecedented influence. And through a teeny little patch that's worn thin, you see far, far away and very, very small, an obscure Jewish teacher being taken up in a cloud while a few of his friends stand around and watch.

The veil is not dark inside. It is covered with the dazzling fabric of our modern 20th century industrial age. And you judge for yourselves whether or not you need to have the veil lifted, whether or not you need any help to see that what you see is not real.

But Jesus is vastly greater in his significance. Let's pray together. Oh, Lord, our Lord, how magnificent is your name in all the earth? We confess that we are so much more taken up with the things that we can see immediately than we are with you.

But we also confess, Lord Jesus, that we believe that you died for our sins, that you rose again on the third day, that you ascended and sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high, and that you will come again with unbelievable glory and myriads of angels. I beg of you, Lord Jesus, take the veil away this morning from my eyes and from the eyes of these people here, that we might see what that means. Grant us, oh Lord, to see that you are coming with a glory like the galaxies, that you are going to roll up the sky like a scroll and throw it away, that you are going to cleave the earth and sweep it clean with worldwide judgment, that you are going to reign and establish a new heavens and a new earth in a universe of righteousness and holiness.

Oh, grant us, Father, to see that what we see is teeny and you are big, that our biggest bombs are the cap pistols in heaven, that our most complex computers are the tinker toys in heaven. And, oh God, may we grant to you the honor of acknowledging and feeling that the ascension of Jesus Christ is vastly more glorious in its effects than any of our space operations. Have mercy on our blindness, Father.

We are unbelievably prone to be more enamored by what is immediate and present and dazzling, the mere manufacturings of man. Oh, that we might remember that the nations are but dust and lighter than dust. In the balances, they go up.

And so make our minds sober, I pray, and tear the veil away that we might see your ascension for what it really is. I ask it through your precious name and blood. Amen.

Luke recorded the ascension for us twice, once at the end of his gospel, which we just read, and once in the book of Acts, which Greg read for us. In Luke 24, 50, the ascension takes place in Bethany. In Acts chapter 1, verse 11, he gives evidently the insight that it took place on the Mount of Olives.

Now, I don't think that's a discrepancy because Bethany was a little village about two miles, not quite two miles to the east and south of Jerusalem. And the Mount of Olives was right next to it. And Luke clues us in, in chapter 19, verse 29, how he understands these two geographical locations in relation to each other.

He says there, Jesus drew near to Bethany at the Mount called Olivet. And so the two were so close together that if you were on the Mount of Olives, you could say, I am at Bethany. And therefore the one gives the political location and the other gives the geographical location.

So the ascension took place some 9,000 feet or so outside the Jerusalem walls on the Mount of Olives in that place where Jesus so often met with his disciples for prayer and for fellowship. Now we know from Acts chapter 1, verses 6 to 8, that after they had gathered together that last time, they talked about the kingdom. They talked about the work remaining to be done.

You must be my witnesses now. But in Luke chapter 24, all Luke wants to do is give us a little glimpse of that farewell and what it was like. He says in verse 50, he led them out as far as Bethany and then lifting up his hands, he blessed them.

And while he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. The last thing Jesus says to these beloved friends is a blessing. And then God exalts him to his right hand in heaven.

And the response of the disciples then in the next verses is threefold. They worship Jesus. They return with joy to Jerusalem and they bless God continually in the temple.

Now, if you have the Revised Standard Version, you'll notice in verse 52 that they omit. They worshiped him and put it in a footnote. I think that probably the New International Version and the others are correct in keeping that in the text, because I think very likely it represents the most original manuscript.

And so I think there's a threefold response. And the text should read they worshiped him. They returned to Jerusalem with joy and were continually in the temple blessing God.

Now, we might expect that that separation would be tearful. And I don't doubt that there were tears, but evidently something turned it into joy so that they could return to Jerusalem with rejoicing. I think it was an ascent of joy.

We must do justice to this and find out why. What made it an ascent of joy? Ordinarily, when your best beloved goes on a long journey and leaves you behind, you don't go home rejoicing. You cry.

In order for that crying to be turned into rejoicing, I think you have to be persuaded of two things. One, it's not over. I'm going to see her again.

Or in addition to, you have to be persuaded that it's good for us both to be apart. Jesus supplied both of that information. He said about six weeks earlier to these disciples, you remember, there's going to come a day, men, when the world is going to be filled with fear and then the powers of the heavens will be

shaken and then they will see the son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.

I am coming back. You can have that assurance. And in Acts chapter one, verse 11, after Jesus had gone, the angels are there.

And what do they say? They say, this Jesus who was taken away from you up into heaven will come in the same way as you have seen him go. He gives them the reassurance that this is not the end. There will be a reunion.

And so they could go on their way rejoicing, even though there was a separation. And that's true today for us, too. Peter, who was no doubt there, wrote in his first letter to us Gentiles, he says, without having seen him, you love him.

And though you do not now see him, you rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy if you set your hope fully on the grace that is coming to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. The separation is not final. There will be a reunion.

But in order for the ascension of Jesus to be an ascent of joy, we not only have to have assurance of reunion, there has to be assurance that it's going to be good for us to be sure that we're going to see him again, talk with him face to face, serve him in his very shadow. That takes the stinger out of the separation. But it isn't sufficient to send us on our way rejoicing in the meantime.

If you have a friend that is sentenced to prison and you take him to the prison gates and he says, I will come back to you in 10 years, that may give a silver lining around the cloud, but the cloud is big and dark for those 10 years and you cannot easily go on your way rejoicing. I think that if their crying can be turned to rejoicing as it was, we have to know something else, namely that it is best for Jesus and best for us that he go away. And then if we believe that we can rejoice.

It's more like sending your nine year old off to camp or your 18 year old off to college. It's best. And therefore, there can be rejoicing even if the separation hurts.

And that's the way it was. The ascension of Jesus did mark something good for Jesus. The greatest possible blessing came to Jesus and the greatest possible blessing is coming to us who remain behind.

And I think it's very likely that the reason God took him up in the midst of his blessing, as it says, is to show that the leaving is a blessing itself and not just Jesus words. Jesus entered upon his eternal. Sovereign state of exaltation with his father in heaven, and we participate now in the benefits of that exaltation.

Let's look at these two things. In John 14, 28, Jesus said, You heard me say, I go away and I will come to you. If you loved me, you would rejoice that I go to my father for the father is greater than I. Jesus longed to be with the father.

Oh, how he loved the father. He said, I came from the father and I've come into the world again. I am leaving the world and going to the father.

Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory that I had with you before the world was. Oh, how Jesus loved to be with the father, how he wanted the glory restored to him, which he had abandoned in order to come save us sinners. The severing between the father and the son was awful.

Jesus not only emptied himself of everything but love when he became a man, but when he performed that last obedience of death on the cross, God cursed him. And then in a mighty act of indignation over the powers of death, God raised him from the dead. He gives him 40 days to prove himself to his disciples, and now he is coming home.

And what a reunion it was. Let all the house of Israel know that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified. Acts 2 36.

God has highly exalted him and given him a name which is above every name that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow, whether in heaven or on the earth or under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the father. There was never before and there never will be again a coronation day like that. If the angels in heaven, the myriads of angels rejoice at the repentance of one sinner, what must they have done when the son came home, whose blood bought every one of those sinners? I tell you, it was a high day in eternity and will never be repeated again.

Can you imagine those disciples sitting around Jesus on the Mount of Olives and Jesus trying to figure out what to say to them? And he says to them, oh, that you could see what I am about to see. Oh, that you could hear what I am about to hear. Oh, that you could feel the embrace that I am about to feel from my father in heaven.

Oh, that my joy might be in you and your joy might be full. Then you would rejoice and no one could take away your joy. And now the Lord bless you and keep you.

The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you. And he was gone in the midst of his blessing.

And should they not rejoice at the joy of their master? If they loved him, they rejoiced and they did. But the ascension of Jesus was an ascent of joy, not only because of the joy we share in his joy at the father's right hand, but because there are unbelievable benefits that come to us because he ascended to the father's right hand. And I want to just mention three of these.

When Jesus sat down at the father's right hand, he certified once and for all that the atonement that he made on the cross for our sins was complete, could not be added to, was finished. The book of Hebrews puts it like this leading up to it. Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins.

There had to be a sacrifice. Then it contrasts Jesus' sacrifice and the Old Testament animal sacrifices like this. He entered once for all into the holy place, taking not the blood of goats and bulls, but his own blood, thus securing for us an eternal redemption.

And then it relates the ascension to all that like this. Hebrews 10, 11. Every priest stands.

Now notice he stands. Every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice, he sat down at the right hand of the father, for by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.

So when Jesus sat down at the right hand of the father in heaven on his ascension, he gave us a seal. He printed a seal on the cross. It is finished.

And he looks out over his disciples as if to say, I am not leaving because the work of atonement was too hard for me to accomplish. I'm leaving because it was perfectly accomplished. And I'm going to demonstrate it to you by going to sit down at my father's right hand.

But secondly, there does remain something to be done. Christ does not atone for us, bring us to the father and go away and leave us there. We couldn't stand.

He remains the mediator. It remains the eternal dignity of the son of God that we must always throughout eternity come to the father through him. He is our mediator, our go between our intercessor.

Hebrews 7, 25, he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him. Since he always lives to make intercession for us, Romans eight, who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies who is to condemn. It is Jesus who died.

Yes, who was raised from the dead, who sits at God's right hand and who intercedes for us. Therefore, the ascension of Jesus to God's right hand not only certifies to us that the atonement that he made to cover all our sins is perfect, complete, but also he enters upon or inaugurates a ministry of eternal and sympathetic intercession on our behalf. He guarantees that we will always have a sympathetic access to the father.

And finally, the ascension of Jesus is an ascent of joy because it means that Jesus reigns supreme over all his enemies. I found that this morning in preparation, especially comforting. I think Satan does not like this text at all.

When I repeated again and again from first Peter three, Jesus Christ has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God with angels and authorities and powers subject to him. And therefore, in that word, we can renounce Satan, who is under Christ's feet. You remember that Paul said our battle in the Christian life is not against physical infirmities or threats.

It's against principalities and powers and hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. And it's precisely these that the ascension means Jesus subjugated to himself. Ephesians one twenty.

It is all for the church that he did it. God raised him from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places far above all rule and authority and power and dominion above every name that his name not only in this age, but also in that which is to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him head over all things for the church.

I just love that little phrase. They are all subjugated for our sakes. Jesus Christ is the king of the universe, and there is nothing that Satan can do about it, but he can do this.

He can try to lay a veil over your mind this morning. He can try to make a hundred things in the 20th century more bright for you than the kingship of Jesus. And I urge you and beseech you resist him firm in your faith.

Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. He will take the veil away from your eyes and enable you to see the true significance of the ascension, namely that it is a homecoming and a coronation day for the son of God. It is a validation of the perfection of the atonement so that all our sins are canceled.

It's an inauguration of Jesus into his intercessory work in heaven that he will pursue for our sakes for eternity, making access to the father in sympathy as our high priest. And it is also an installation of the sovereign God man over all the enemies of the church for our sakes. And my prayer for us all this morning is that we might respond like those disciples.

Namely, they worship Jesus. They went obediently on their way to Jerusalem, rejoicing, and they were continually saying, bless the Lord, oh, my soul and all that is within me. Bless his holy name.

Bless the Lord. Oh, my soul. And forget not all the benefits of his ascension.

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