

Luke 24:44-53

The Great Commission and Ascension

It was finally time to go. He had finished the work for which He was sent. Jesus understood the perfect plan of His Father, and He understood that His opportunities to minister to His disciples now were very few. Still there were things to say. These were His final words, and final words are important.

For the 118th time we turn to Luke's account of the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Luke begins to conclude his narrative as Jesus gives His disciples a comprehensive review of all of salvation history beginning with Genesis. In so doing Luke is recording what has come to be known to Christians around the world as the Great Commission. This was the final mandate of Jesus, speaking to His disciples, for the Church writ large to proclaim the gospel of salvation until He returned. Though He spoke to His disciples, His words are for us as well. There can be no dispute that it is the passing on of the truths of Scripture which serves as the bedrock of evangelism. As Paul reminded one of his own disciples, "the things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Timothy 2:2).

We all understand that the Christian faith has many components. Fellowship and prayer, studying Scripture and sanctification, practical good works and using our spiritual gifts are all important. But none of these things, in and of themselves, leads to salvation. Only proclaiming the gospel can do that, and that was what Jesus told His disciples to do as He prepared to depart.

The Foundation

Now, as we have seen before from time to time, the chronology of Luke's narrative becomes vague. This scene could have been a continuation of the events of Sunday evening when Jesus suddenly appeared in the room with the disciples, or it could have happened at any time over the next few weeks before His ascension. But, wherever and whenever these words were spoken, the point Jesus wanted to make was that the Scriptures had pointed to the events of the crucifixion and resurrection.

The misunderstanding of Scripture was a systemic problem for the Jews. As we have seen, the Jewish people at the time of Jesus possessed an understanding of the Scriptures as it related to the coming of, and the role of, the Messiah that was wrong in the extreme. They had assumed that the Messiah would be a conqueror, a king. They had assumed that He would drive out the Roman oppressors and restore the nation of Israel. They had assumed that He would reign. It turned out their entire theology regarding the Messiah was wrong. Thus the crucifixion.

So, now that the disciples had finally come to terms with His resurrection, Jesus took the time to remind them that "these are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled" (v. 44). What Jesus was saying was this, that the entirety of Scripture ought to be read in a way that proclaimed the coming of, the death of, and the resurrection of, the Messiah.

“The Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms” (v. 44) represented the three main divisions of the Old Testament to the Jews of His day. The Law referred to the Pentateuch, what we have as the first five books of the Old Testament. The Prophets began with the historical books of Joshua and Judges and included the historical works of 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, and the post-exilic works of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. It also included all of the major and minor prophets. The Psalms were understood to include all of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament such as Proverbs, Job, the Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastes. Jesus was omitting nothing.

He had tried to explain this before.

“³¹Then He took the twelve aside and said to them, ‘behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and all things which are written through the prophets about the Son of Man will be accomplished. ³²For He will be handed over to the Gentiles, and will be mocked and mistreated and spit upon, ³³and after they have scourged Him, they will kill Him; and the third day He will rise again”
(Luke 18:31-33).

But they had not understood. So, now Jesus one last time “opened their minds to understand the Scriptures” (v. 45). Beginning with the Law of Moses, Jesus spoke of the promises that the Messiah would come from the line of Abraham, Judah, and David. He told them of the prophecies that the Messiah would be born of a virgin in Bethlehem. He reminded them that the Scriptures foretold that the Messiah would be betrayed by a close friend, beaten, humiliated, and crucified. I cannot imagine the look on Jesus’ face as He relived the events when “He said to them, ‘thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day” (v. 46). It no doubt took some time, but this time, by God’s grace, it was beginning to make sense.

Even before Pentecost, the disciples showed they finally were beginning to understand. In a room where many of the followers of Jesus had gathered,

“¹⁵Peter stood up in the midst of the brethren (a gathering of about one hundred and twenty persons was there together), and said, ¹⁶brethren, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit foretold by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. ¹⁷For he was counted among us and received his share in this ministry”
(Acts 1:15-17).

And after the coming to the Holy Spirit, in his first great sermon, Peter reminded his listeners that both Joel and the Psalms had testified to the coming of the Messiah in a way that left no doubt that Jesus had fulfilled Scripture (Acts 2:16-28). Another time, before the very Sanhedrin that had called for the execution of Jesus, Peter made the same point.

“⁸Rulers and elders of the people, ⁹if we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick man, as to how this man has been made well, ¹⁰let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead - by this name this man stands here before you in good health. ¹¹He is the stone which was rejected by you, the builders, but which became the chief corner stone. ¹²And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:8-12).

Other disciples understood these truths as well. Both Stephen (Acts 7) and Philip (Acts 8:26-35) were recorded as having used the Old Testament to proclaim the truth of Jesus as the Messiah.

We must notice, too, that Jesus expressed no regret about the cross. His own testimony removed any doubt that it was an accident or an act of misfortune. Jesus had done for all what He had done for the disciples on the Emmaus Road. He removed the prejudice with which they had studied the Scriptures and given them a true understanding of Scripture as the foundation of God's sovereign plan of salvation.

The Key Element

With a proper understanding of the truth of Scripture as it related to God's plan of salvation, Jesus identified the key element in the preaching of the gospel as the idea of "repentance for forgiveness of sins" (v. 47). This was the provision of the atonement. It was what had been promised that Jesus (even before He was born) would provide, "to give to His people the knowledge of salvation, by the forgiveness of their sins" (Luke 1:77).

This was what Jesus had focused on while He was alive. While He healed people from disease, exorcised demons, calmed storms, fed thousands, and even raised the dead, Jesus' main reason for coming was to provide a way for people to have forgiveness for their sins. And this was not something that began with His death. He preached forgiveness of sins while He was alive. For example, He said,

To a paralytic, "seeing their faith, He said, 'friend, your sins are forgiven you'" (Luke 5:20).

To a sinful woman, "your sins have been forgiven" (Luke 7:48).

To those responsible for His death, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

Forgiveness of sins through faith in the atoning work of Jesus and the repentance from sin was what the early Church taught,

³⁰The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross.

³¹He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins" (Acts 5:30-31).

"Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins" (Acts 10:43).

It is clear from Scripture that these concepts are inextricably linked. There cannot be one without the other. Forgiveness demands repentance. If a person genuinely repents, they will be forgiven. But repentance demands the turning away from sin. This is not merely sorrow for the consequences of sin, or even sorrow for the sin itself. Repentance demands a change in the will of the believer from the indulgence of the sinful nature to the pursuit of righteousness.

And this forgiveness is Christo-centric. We cannot miss the importance of "in His name" (v. 47). Again this idea was central to the teachings of the Church from its conception, "there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved"

(Acts 4:12). The idea of salvation being found only in Christ was so embedded in the early Church teachings that believers were identified as those who “called on the name” of Jesus,

“All those hearing him [Paul] continued to be amazed, and were saying, ‘is this not he who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and who had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?’” (Acts 9:21).

Repentance and the forgiveness of sins are the essence of the gospel. It is where evangelism must begin.

The Context

Jesus explained that this blessing of forgiveness was for “all the nations” (v. 47). The Great Commission was to be a worldwide proclamation. This concept, too, permeates Scripture from the beginning.

“And I will bless those who bless you,
And the one who curses you I will curse.
And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Genesis 12:3).

“⁴¹Also concerning the foreigner who is not of Your people Israel, when he comes from a far country for Your name’s sake ⁴²(for they will hear of Your great name and Your mighty hand, and of Your outstretched arm); when he comes and prays toward this house, ⁴³hear in heaven Your dwelling place, and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to You, in order that all the peoples of the earth may know Your name, to fear You, as do Your people Israel, and that they may know that this house which I have built is called by Your name” (1 Kings 8:41-43).

Yet, though the gospel message was to spread throughout the world, the disciples were to begin in Jerusalem, and they were to begin with the Jews. We cannot miss the fact that Christianity was, from its inception, a distinctly Jewish phenomenon. Jesus said He had been sent to “the lost sheep of Israel” (Matthew 15:24). He was a rabbi. All of the disciples were Jews. Much of His teaching was done in synagogues.

But as the Church began to spread in the decades following the crucifixion, Gentiles also were evangelized. Philip, for example, went to Samaria (Acts 8). Peter had a specific vision regarding evangelizing the Gentiles (Acts 10). One challenge the early Christians faced was the extent to which they were Jews, and the extent to which they were something new and different. This manifested itself most seriously when Gentiles were evangelized. There was much debate regarding what converting Gentiles were required to do in terms of converting to Judaism before they could convert to Christianity. This was resolved (to a certain extent) at the Jerusalem council described in Acts 15, but it remained an issue well into the second century.

The Command

Jesus said that those that have seen these things were to be His witnesses (v. 48). To be a witness was to do nothing more than testify to what they knew. They simply needed to tell what they had seen and heard. Now that they understood the Scriptures, they could use these to elaborate on and provide context for the things they had witnessed. No more was asked of them than that. No more is asked of us as well.

To assist them in their task He was “sending forth the promise of My Father upon you; but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.” (v. 49). This was a promise specific to the inner circle in terms of Pentecost. Pentecost was the fiftieth day after His resurrection and tenth after His ascension. Its effects were immediate and profound (Acts 2:14-36). But though Jesus was speaking directly to His disciples, each believer today is also indwelt by the Holy Spirit. And like the disciples, we, too are challenged with evangelism. Some of us are called to the remotest parts of the earth, but all of can begin where we are.

The Ascension

Only Luke describes the unimaginable ascension, and this passage parallels his account at the beginning of Acts. Here, he gives no details, and summarizes this extraordinary event with seeming haste. Yet the emotions of this last appearance of Jesus before His triumphant return must have been unmistakable. Luke tersely writes that Jesus “led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up His hands and blessed them” (v. 50). Jesus took the eleven out to the eastern slopes on Mount Olivet. They had often been there. Bethany was the home of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. Jesus had stayed there during Passion Week after His triumphal entry into Jerusalem. This particular day must have seemed like any other, since the disciples had become accustomed to the resurrection. Things must have seemed just as they had been before the crucifixion as Jesus continued to talk and teach them.

Suddenly, in an act that must have seemed filled with wonder, He stopped talking and faced them. Then, He lifted His hands and spoke over them a blessing. The lifting of hands was a common gesture in blessing others. More details were added by Luke in his second account of the ascension. There, it seemed that though the disciples now understood the meaning of the crucifixion and the fact of the resurrection, they were still a bit confused as to the chronology of the coming of the kingdom of God.

“⁶So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, ‘Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?’ ⁷He said to them, ‘it is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; ⁸but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth’” (Acts 1:6-8).

And “while He was blessing them, He parted from them and was carried up into heaven” (v. 51). Once again Luke astonishes the reader with such a brief account of so profound an event. Like Enoch and Elijah, Jesus was taken into heaven in plain sight. Again, we must to the book of Acts, where Luke gave more details in his second volume,

“⁹And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. ¹⁰And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them. ¹¹They also said, ‘men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven’” (Acts 1:9-11).

Let us appreciate that this happened in daylight and in plain view. There was no room for mystery. It was magnificent. The disciples must have been awestruck. Let us also take heed to the words of the angelic witnesses as they informed the disciples that in the same way Jesus will return. Until then, Jesus

reigns at the right hand of God the Father where He serves as our high priest, a fact that ought to encourage and motivate believers, “since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession” (Hebrews 4:14).

The response of the disciples was perfect, finally. “⁵²And they, after worshipping Him, returned to Jerusalem with great joy, ⁵³and were continually in the temple praising God” (v. 52-53). How else could they have responded other than by worshipping Him. Notice that they obeyed “with great joy” (v. 52). Though they could have, and no doubt did, clearly miss their friend and teacher, they had reasons to rejoice. They had been with Jesus for a while, and now they knew they would be with Him forever. They rejoiced that they had a task to do in carrying on His work. They rejoiced that they knew He would return, though they thought it would be much sooner than it would be.

The ascension was no mere epilogue to the life and work of Jesus. It was a physical sign that the work He had come to do was completed. It was the ending of any physical limitations on the risen Christ. No longer would He be bound by flesh. It was necessary to prepare for the impending coming of the Holy Spirit. For as Jesus had said, “I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you” (John 16:7). Also, now the work of moving forward the kingdom of God had fallen to believers. And finally, the ascension guarantees that Christ will return. It was no mere epilogue at all.

Takeaways

Luke ends his narrative as He began it, with worship in the temple. The praise of God continued. And so we, too, ought to be continually praising God.

In addition, we cannot miss the fact that the last command Jesus gave to His disciples was to tell others about the kingdom of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. They were to use both their own experiences and the truths of Scripture to share the truths they had finally understood. Jesus was departing, the furthering of God’s plan of salvation was now in the soon to be Spirit-filled hands of these men.

“⁹If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; ¹⁰for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. ¹¹For the Scripture says, ‘whoever believes in Him will not be disappointed.’ ¹²For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him; ¹³for ‘whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ ¹⁴How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher?” (Romans 10:9-14).