

SHORT STUDIES

THE LIFE OF JESUS, AFTER THE ASCENSION
(LUKE 24:50-53; ACTS 1:9-11)*

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If you were to ask in a Christian library or Christian bookstore for a book on the life of Jesus, you would find a wide selection of titles. Many authors have written about the life of our Lord. In the Westminster Seminary Library the cards under the "biography and life of Jesus" fill four inches of drawer space. Almost all of these books will begin with his birth and end with his resurrection. A few might mention his ascension to be with the Father.

But Christians praise God that Jesus is still alive; Jesus lives now. Why then should his biography end in the year AD 30? What has he been doing since then? What is he doing now? What is he going to do? The books entitled *The Life of Christ* need a second volume. I want to work with you in developing the contents of this second volume, to remind us all that Jesus is alive, ministering in the presence of the Father, on behalf of his people.

We all surely recognize that the contents of our "biography" appear elsewhere. The lectures that became William Milligan's *The Ascension and Heavenly Priesthood of Our Lord* were delivered in 1891, little more than 100 years ago. Peter Toon's recent work, *The Ascension of Our Lord*, covers essentially the same ground and from a perspective more fully consistent with that of most of us. Some works on the person and work of Jesus will touch these subjects. And, of course, so will commentaries on many parts of the Bible. Any book on the Christian's great and present blessings should have clear focus on the present ministry of Jesus. But we will imagine a "biography of Jesus," in large part to remind us that he is indeed alive now and will continue to live throughout our history and throughout all eternity.

You may find the chapter titles in this biography a bit strange, because they focus on the risen Jesus, in heaven. The subjects are less tangible,

* [Editor's note: This article is an address originally delivered by the author on the occasion of his inauguration as Professor of Practical Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary on May 29, 1991. Appropriately, the form of the address, consonant with the character of the appointment, reflects the homiletical interests of Professor Fuller.]

harder to grasp than those in Volume I, which talks of his birth and miracles and teaching, his life and death. But do not be deceived. These subjects are no less real, no less important, no less specifically set forth in God's revelation.

Let me also make clear that each of these subjects is worthy of a lifetime of study. What a great joy there is for the individual Christian or for the Christian minister to devote her or his lifetime to studying what the living Jesus is doing now. The Larger Catechism encourages us to study this portion of Christ's life, when it says, ". . . after his resurrection . . . he, in our nature and as our head, triumphing over enemies, visibly went up into the highest heavens, there to receive gifts for men, to raise up our affections thither, and to prepare a place for us, where himself is, and shall continue till the second coming at the end of the world."

The title of the first chapter of our book has to be "Jesus Ascended." The ascension is assumed as a fact throughout the New Testament. Paul said, "I desire to depart and be with Christ" (Phil 1:23). In the same letter he made clear that "God exalted Jesus to the highest place." The entire book of Hebrews assumes the ascension, and in the book of Revelation Jesus speaks to John from his ascended position.

Only in two places, however, at the end of Luke and the beginning of Acts, is the ascension specifically mentioned. In each passage Luke describes the experience of the disciples at the time of our Lord's ascension. In Acts 1:9-11, the words "into heaven" occur four times. The disciples were not looking "toward heaven" but actually "into heaven." Verse 11 tells us that they actually saw Jesus go into heaven. The word "saw" is related to the English word "theater," and we can imagine that the disciples were witnesses to a striking spectacle, making use of the entire universe, seen and unseen, as its stage.

Jesus ascended then to a place—"into heaven." We must think of a specific locality, however difficult that may be. It is "an abiding place," It is "the Father's house." It is the place where the angels present themselves before the Father, where the resurrected Jesus is, and where risen saints join their Savior. Heb 7:26 says that Jesus "has been exalted above the heavens." We may understand this to mean, not that he has passed to some far corner of the sky, beyond the last star, or among the stars, but that he has been exalted to a place beyond and above all material creation.

We also understand that Jesus' ascension involves a change of state, as the curtain closes, not to open again until his return. The eye of our body cannot now see Jesus. But that in no way reduces our assurance in his existence with the Father and in his continuing ministry. Joseph Addison Alexander, the first professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, affirmed, "... our Saviour did not vanish or miraculously disappear . . . but simply passed beyond the boundary of vision" (*Acts*, 14).

Luke 24:52 indicates that the disciples were filled with great joy as "Jesus was taken up into heaven." A writer of fiction might tell us that they were

sad, or mourned, or lamented the loss of their leader. But in his ascension they saw his glorious return to the Father. They knew the power of his blessing (v. 51); in fact, they now felt the confirmation of every promise. The veil had been removed, however briefly; the curtain had been pulled back; and the whole of God's plan was made clear. The cross, the humiliation, the pain, the agony was now all victory, Jesus' victory and their victory. And so they were filled with joy, praising God.

The first chapter of our biography of Jesus is important because it describes the ascension. But it is only the first chapter. Chapter two might be called "Jesus Presents Himself to the Father." This section will have to be written very carefully. For example, if we were to title this chapter "Jesus Presents His Sacrifice (rather than himself) to the Father," we might write these words:

"Every high priest made offerings, shed the blood of sacrificial animals. But then that blood was sprinkled on the altar of God and on occasion in the holy place of the tabernacle and the temple. Shedding blood is giving sacrifice, giving a life; sprinkling blood is applying the sacrifice, both to the people and also to God. Jesus must present his sacrifice in the inner sanctuary of a temple not made with hands, beyond the heavens. Louis Berkhof summarized: 'Christ entered the heavenly Holy Place with His completed, perfect, and all-sufficient sacrifice and offered it to the Father' (*Systematic Theology*, 402)."

Our chapter on Jesus' presenting his sacrifice to the Father might continue, "This presentation is the ultimate priestly act. A unique priest, after the order of Melchizedek, he presents to the Father a sacrifice that is sufficient for the sins of all of his people. That sacrifice is not only acceptable, it is perfect. All humiliation, sorrow, pain has ended. No more will he walk through the valley of the shadow of death; death has itself been conquered." Some dangers do arise when we separate Jesus' sacrificial death on earth from the presentation of that sacrifice in heaven. The words "It is finished," uttered before the ascension, indicate to the Father, "Your word is fulfilled, your will is accomplished." For God's people those words mean, "Jesus is victorious. You are victorious, too." As he lectured at Dallas Theological Seminary in 1983, Peter Toon argued persuasively against those who defend "the doctrine of the perpetual offering of Christ in heaven to the Father." He made clear what must be affirmed: "not only the sacrifice, but also the offering or presentation of it, is over forever." Dr. Toon does not want us to understand an exact parallel between Aaron's application of the blood in the Holy of Holies on each Day of Atonement and the application of the blood of Jesus in "the temple not made with hands."

We want to avoid the hazards of suggestion that the sacrifice of Jesus in some way is a continuing process. So we shall reflect further on the matter, title the chapter, "Jesus Presents Himself to the Father," and affirm the words of Professor Murray: "Christ appears in the presence of God at the

right hand of the throne of the majesty in the heavens to present himself as the perfected high priest" ("The Heavenly Priestly Activity of Christ," 6).

We shall rejoice in the reflection of John Brown, whose ministry of biblical exegesis and application began in Edinburgh 170 years ago: "When the Messiah . . . had finished on the cross his expiatory sacrifice, he entered into the true holy place, to present, as it were, to God the evidence of the completeness of the atonement he had made, and to follow it up by a never-ceasing interposition in behalf of his people, founded on his all-perfect atoning sacrifice."

As we work through this chapter, "Jesus Presents Himself to the Father," we shall be grateful for the sacrifice that is all-sufficient for our sin, indeed for all sin, and one that is fully acceptable to the Father, so that he is both "just and the justifier of him who has faith in Jesus." And we shall rejoice that Jesus is in the presence of the Father.

Certainly a chapter of our book bears the title, "Jesus Receives a Crown." It was "for the joy set before him that Jesus endured the cross, scorning its shame, and then sat down at the right hand of God." That crown represents the glory of union with the Father, co-equal, co-eternal. The will of the Father and word of the Father were fully accomplished; now the joy of the Son with the Father is infinite.

But the crown also means that "Jesus Rules as King." This chapter can do no more than present an outline; it is the subject for a lifetime of study and reflection and application. He rules in his church, and in each Christian, and in the world. The ascension focuses on the enthronement of the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Imagine the heavens reverberating with the echoes of Psalm 24, as heaven's choirs celebrate the arrival of the King.

The Father "gave him a name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:9-12). The divine work of love is completed, and the crowning of the king is the confirmation. He is given a name above every other name. Is it a specific name that we are to imagine? Perhaps that name is "Jesus," "King Jesus." That's the name the angels gave him, "for he shall save his people from their sins." It means "the Lord is our deliverer." That name was his life. He came to give his life a ransom for many. Of people like lonely, lost Zacchaeus, it was said, "The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:10). Paul said, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1 Tim 1:15). How appropriate would that name be for our king, "King Jesus."

Others may seem to be ruling the universe, in the world. Satan, for example. Or enemies of the Gospel. Make no mistake. Nothing is out of the control of King Jesus. Ultimately he alone is Lord of all. Also make no mistake about this: each Christian yearns and prays that the kingship of Jesus might be evident in his heart or in her life. "King of my life, I crown

him now," is a song that Christians sing from the first moment they understand the gracious love of God in the cross.

As we have been looking through our *Life of Jesus, Volume II*, we have found chapters on the ascension, on his presenting himself before the Father, on the joy that surrounds his crowning and kingship. Now we find a chapter called, "Jesus Prepares a Place for His People."

Christians look forward to a great banquet meal with Jesus. When Jesus praised the faith of the Roman Centurion (Matt 8:10), he said, "I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven." At the conclusion of the Lord's Supper, just before Peter's denial and Jesus' arrest, he told his disciples this: "I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom." Christians rejoice in the possibility of being invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb, as his bride, the church, is united with him for all of eternity. He prepares a place for his people: he is making preparation for a great reunion feast.

He also is preparing "abiding places" for his people. John 14 records these words of Jesus: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you." The word translated "rooms" means "abiding places," places to find rest for your soul, permanent homes for those whom Jesus loves and saves, his sheep, his people. If you are a Christian, right now Jesus is preparing such a place for you. What comfort, what joy, what assurance can be ours until we are with him.

In another way Jesus is preparing a place for his people. Heb 9:24 tells us that Jesus "entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence." Jesus is appearing now before God, for us. The meaning of this beautiful picture in Hebrews may be that he is applying his blood to the holy place, before the presence of God himself, so that one day we can be there, with him, before the Father. It would be most dangerous to come before the presence of the Father, unless Jesus were there first. We would be consumed by the blinding light, the burning fire, the full zeal for purity and righteousness. But Jesus is there now, applying the work of the cross, making it possible for us to follow with him into the presence of the Father.

Praise God that Jesus is preparing a place for his people. The Bible tells us that he is preparing a great banquet, that he is preparing an abiding place for us in the Father's home, and that he makes it possible for sinners like us to stand before the holy God.

By no means is that all that Jesus is doing now. We turn the page and begin another chapter in our *Life of Jesus, Volume II*. This one is called, "Jesus Intercedes for His People." In June of 1958, Professor John Murray gave the G. Campbell Morgan Lecture at Westminster Chapel in London. He spoke of "The Heavenly Priestly Activity of Christ," and impressed this

upon his hearers: "Jesus in heaven is the pleader, the helper, the comforter of those who come to God through him" ("The Heavenly Priestly Activity of Christ," 4).

Recall Heb 4:14-16, which tells us that we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens. That passage tells us that Jesus is both powerful and sympathetic. He must be both. If he were only powerful, he would have no interest in the needs of his people. If he were only sympathetic, but not powerful, he would not be able to help his people, even if he wanted to do so. But he is both powerful and sympathetic. Heb 2:18 states, "Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted." John Murray concludes a discussion of these matters with a reference to Jesus' "omnipotent compassion." Those are powerful and useful words. File them in the computer of your mind, but in such manner that they will appear every time you turn on the switch-- "omnipotent compassion."

Right now in the presence of the Father there is one who prays for his people, for each individual. In 1 John 2:1 the disciple John wrote, "My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense Jesus Christ, the righteous One." Each Christian has an advocate, a lawyer representing him or her before the Father. That advocate is Jesus.

It is apparent that the crucial question in intercession is, "Who is doing the interceding for you; who is trying to get a job for you; who is asking people for funds for your organization; who is it that asks a favor from someone else for you?" The one who intercedes for his people is none other than Jesus. So you find great comfort in him and in his relationship with the Father.

He does more for us than simply to pray. "To intercede" means to complete a transaction with someone else on behalf of a third party, namely us. His intercession involves a whole series of activities, including his coming to earth from the Father, his sacrificial death, and his prayer on our behalf. But surely prayer is included, prayer for you, for me.

At times in life, the pain is great. You may even feel that you cannot pray, because the suffering is so intense. At those times Jesus is praying For you. At other times, perhaps, you do not pray, when you know that you should. Even in those times, Jesus is praying for you. Perhaps at still other times, you pray for the wrong thing—honestly, sincerely, as well as you can know the Lord's will, you pray for something, but it is not the right thing, for you, for your children, for your family, for a friend. Even at those times, Jesus is praying, but for the right thing, for the Lord's will to be done. When we cannot pray, or do not pray, or pray for the wrong thing, Jesus prays for us.

The intercession of Jesus for his people touches areas of most serious importance. John Murray directs our attention with these words: "The security of salvation is bound up with his intercession and outside of his intercession we must say that there is no salvation" ("The Heavenly

Priestly Activity of Christ," 13). But we are just surveying the various chapters of our book and cannot look at the extensive implications of each section. It is clear, however, that this chapter, called "Jesus Intercedes for His People," must be a part of *The Life of Jesus, Volume II*, and that we will want to study it again and again.

But we turn the page and find another glorious chapter. It is called, "Jesus Is with His People." He is not removed from them. That happens at the deaths of other leaders. Great leaders die, and the nations may mourn their deaths, because they are forever separated from their people. It is not that way with Jesus. He is exalted, not to be separated from his people, but so that he can be forever with them. We speak of "a man in Christ," and we talk of "Christ in us, the hope of glory." In the person of his Holy Spirit, Jesus is with his people. At the end of the book of Hebrews (13:5, 8) we read of God, "Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you" and then of Jesus himself, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and forever." What a blessing it is to know that Jesus is with his people.

Remember the seven letters from Jesus to the churches, found in Revelation 2 and 3. Jesus walks among his churches, his people. He is present wherever his people are, wherever two or three gather in his name. He ministers in his people and through his people. Luke begins the Book of Acts with these words: "In my former book [meaning the Gospel of Luke] I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day that he was taken up to heaven." The Book of Acts then records the things that Jesus continues to do, and all of church history to this moment records the things that Jesus is still doing through his people. He is with his people, and he is working in and through them, to bring glory to himself.

I spoke recently to Ed Clowney about Jesus' presence with his people, and he called my attention to Heb 2:12, words about Jesus: "I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises." He told me to tell you to think of Jesus holding one end of your hymn book while you hold the other end; and Jesus joins with you in singing the praises of the Father. Jesus is neither dead nor gone. He is not distant. He is present, here, now, with his people.

He is with his people. He knows them. He preserves and keeps them. He will not let them go. Praise the Lord. He knows you. He keeps you; he will not let you go.

The last chapter in our book has this title, "Jesus Is Waiting to Come Again." His promise is sure, certain. Listen carefully to John 14:3: "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you may also be where I am." A precious promise, repeated throughout the Bible. "He will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him" (Heb 9:28).

The next event in God's great plan is the return of his Son. Then we who are Christians will experience the fullness of the salvation already purchased on the cross. There will be no more sickness, no more sorrow, no

more death, for these former things will have passed away. Satan will be finally defeated; sin will be no more.

Then we shall be joined with all Christians in heaven, with Jesus. And perhaps we shall write another book, *The Life of Jesus, Volume III*. It will be filled with songs and praise, much like the music and praise of the Book of Revelation. That book will have no last chapter, because its message will continue throughout the timeless expanse of eternity in the presence of God. But that book is the subject for another time.

Let me now remind you of the great blessings that we have, because Jesus is alive. Spend your lifetime reflecting on the great chapters of this special biography. Look at the Table of Contents: Jesus Has Ascended to the Father; Jesus Presents Himself to the Father; Jesus Rules as King; Jesus Is Preparing a Place for His People; Jesus Intercedes for His People; Jesus Is with His People; Jesus Is Waiting to Come Again.

Praise the Father that the Son is alive. He has risen from the dead. He sits at the right hand of God. Praise the Father, and praise the Son.

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Forty days after the resurrection, Jesus and His disciples went to Mount Olivet, near Jerusalem. There, Jesus promised His followers that they would soon receive the Holy Spirit, and He instructed them to remain in Jerusalem until the Spirit had come. Then Jesus blessed them, and as He gave the blessing, He began to ascend into heaven. The account of Jesus's ascension is found in Luke 24:50-51 and Acts 1:9-11. It is plain from Scripture that Jesus's ascension was a literal, bodily return to heaven. He rose from the ground gradually and visibly, observed by many intent onlookers. Theologically and empirically the Ascension of Jesus Christ is at the very heart of the New Testament.¹ If those words, with which Brian Donne closes his recent study of the significance of the ascension of Jesus in the NT, are true of the NT as a whole, an even stronger statement could be made in respect of the ascension in Luke-Acts. If we may assume for one moment that Luke 24:50-53 and Acts 1:9-11 are descriptions of the same incident, Luke has chosen to present the ascension twice, as the culmination and climax of his gospel and as the most striking element in the introduction to his sec