

Session Thirty-Seven: Jesus Ascends into Heaven

Theme: God's Itinerary

Law/Gospel Focus:

God's itinerary may not always be ours. We may fail to do that which God desires and requires of us. For this very reason Jesus came to earth to do that which we could never accomplish on our own—to live a perfect life to fulfill all that the Law requires of us and to die on the cross to receive the punishment we deserved. Just as Jesus proclaimed victory for us over sin, death, and the power of the devil through His resurrection, His ascension assures us that Jesus took His seat at the right hand of God and now exercises all authority over all creation. We can live each day of our lives confident that Jesus is with us everywhere and at every moment.

Objectives:

By the power of the Holy Spirit working through God's Word we will:

- 1) summarize the events of the ascension and Jesus' final instructions to His disciples;
- 2) describe how through the events of the ascension Jesus provides assurance of His presence—everywhere, at every moment; and
- 3) express with confidence the fact that Jesus is in control and with us always.

Introduction:

Jesus physically left His disciples when He ascended into heaven. One can only imagine that the disciples desired to keep Jesus with them. But God's itinerary would enable the blessings of forgiveness of sins and eternal life that Jesus won on the cross to extend beyond that which any human could imagine. In today's session we will explore God's purpose for Jesus ascension as we witness the events surrounding the ascension.

- 1). How has your itinerary at times been different than God's itinerary for your life?
- 2). What might have occurred if you had followed your itinerary rather than God's?
- 3). How has God used His itinerary to bless your life?

Inform:

Read aloud Acts 1:1-14.

About the Text:

In their worship services during these Sundays of the Easter season, many congregations have read the Scripture lessons that have followed the spread of the resurrection message through the book of Acts. This week, the seventh and last Sunday of Easter, will be celebrated by many congregations as Ascension Sunday, remembering Christ's return to heaven in the first chapter of Acts. Our lesson, therefore, also takes us back to Christ's ascension, predating recent stories about Peter, Stephen, and Paul.

While it appropriately concludes the Easter season, Jesus' ascension is in a larger sense not an ending at all. Luke, the author of Acts, opens the book by saying that his first writing (the Gospel of Luke) told only of what Jesus *began* to do and teach (Acts 1:1-2). Though Jesus will no longer be visibly present on earth, He will continue His work through His Word and Sacraments and those who bear them.

For 40 days since His resurrection, Jesus has been appearing to His disciples (Acts 1:3), leaving no doubt that He is really alive. (It is this 40-day period that our Easter season celebrates.) Several times, as promised, Jesus has appeared in Galilee (Matthew 27:7-10, 16-20; John 21:1-23). Now He gathers His followers in Jerusalem (Acts 1:4-5). The "Great Commissioning" in Matthew 28:16-20 should not be confused with the ascension, for the commissioning took place at one of these Galilean meetings days earlier. Jesus is preparing His disciples for Pentecost, the day when they will receive the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem. In the meantime, though, it is also from here that He will depart. He leads them out just to the east of the city, over the ridge of the Mount of Olives (Acts 1:12) toward Bethany (Luke 24:50).

Here Jesus has one last moment of instruction with His disciples. Since His resurrection, He has been explaining the true purpose of His coming—the forgiveness of sins (Luke 24:45-47). Even at this late date, however, the disciples remain fixed on His establishing an earthly kingdom (Acts 1:6). Jesus is gentle in His correction (1:7), not answering their question directly, but instead pointing to a higher goal: taking His salvation to the world. The itinerary He maps out will also become the outline of the book of Acts: first close to home base (Jerusalem), then in the surrounding regions (the rest of Judea and Samaria), and finally to the ends of the earth (1:8).

After He gives these instructions, Jesus raises His hands in blessing (Luke 24:50-51). As He does so, He is visibly lifted up into the sky until a cloud hides Him from the disciple's eyes (Acts 1:9). Jesus, of course, did not need to be physically elevated in order to enter heaven. In fact, in His state of exaltation (which began with His resurrection), Jesus constantly uses all of His divine attributes. The ascension enabled Jesus' disciples to grasp that His human nature was now also glorified. For that reason, it was also a fulfillment of Jesus' prayer in John 17:1-11.

With His ascension, Jesus took His seat "at the right hand" of God the Father (Ephesians 1:20-23). That is, Jesus, both in His divine and human natures, now exercises all authority over creation, at the behest of the Father. The right hand of God is not to be misunderstood as a place, as if Jesus' human body were now distant in heaven. (Some Christians incorrectly teach that Jesus' divine nature is everywhere but that His body is in heaven only.) Quite the contrary, the

one Christ—both fully human and fully divine—is now omnipresent, rather than in one location only, as Jesus chose to be during his humiliation on earth.

Thus, as the disciples stared up into heaven they need not have felt like they were losing Jesus, He would truly be with them always. As the two “men” in white (angels) reminded them, He would one day return just as really, physically, and visibly as He had ascended.

The ascension story concludes with the little band living in joyful anticipation, praying and worshipping daily in the temple (Acts 1:12-14; Luke 24:52-53). The list of apostles and others (women, including Jesus’ mother Mary, and His brothers, surely at least James and Jude) helps the reader likewise anticipate the day when this handful of faithful would be energized to change the world.

Discussing the Text:

- 1). Why did Jesus command His followers, “Do not leave Jerusalem”?
- 2). What question did Jesus’ disciples ask that indicated they still didn’t understand the purpose for Jesus’ coming to earth?
- 3). How does Jesus respond to their question?
- 4). How does Jesus in His response to the disciples map out the itinerary found in the book of Acts?
- 5). What assurance did the two “men” dressed in white give to the disciples?

Connect:

Jesus ascension and seating at the right hand of God offers comforting applications for us. Perhaps most obviously, Jesus enters heaven as our forerunner. The fact that the human Christ was received into the glory of heaven vividly assures us that all who believe in Him will also ascend. Meanwhile, Jesus is preparing a place for each of us (John 14:2-30).

Second, since His ascension, Jesus has been and will continue to be with each of His children everywhere, at every moment. We may sometimes wish Jesus were with us visibly, but in fact it is so much better that He no longer limits Himself to a particular location. He is always present—both in His divinity and in His humanity. In a unique way, of course, this is especially true in Holy Communion as we receive the true body and blood of Christ. What a comfort to know Jesus is always with us!

Further, at the right hand of God, Jesus is constantly praying for us and for all believers (Romans 8:34). If we appreciate having others pray for us, how much more do we appreciate God’s Son Himself interceding for us.

Finally, the ascended Christ, at God’s right hand, rules all things on earth, including our lives, for the good of His church. Whatever happens, we can be certain of God’s gracious results because

Jesus is in charge (1 Peter 5:9-11). Thus, as we continue the work that Jesus began on earth, we can do so with confidence!

- 1). How does Jesus' ascension and seating at the right hand of God assure us of our future?
- 2) Why is it better that Jesus ascended rather than stay with us on earth?
- 3). How is the Lord's Supper an assurance of Jesus presence?
- 4). Why does Jesus in charge (sitting at the right hand of God) give us comfort and assurance no matter what situations we may encounter in this life?