

## **Ephesians 1:15-23 and Luke 24:44-53**

Obviously, we are reading the conclusion of Luke's Gospel here, and it might seem kind of abrupt. He wraps it up pretty quickly after the resurrection. Now, he knows about the forty days of post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. He mentions them at the beginning of Acts. But he doesn't devote space to it in his Gospel. He goes very quickly from Jesus' appearance on the evening of the resurrection to the Great Commission to the Ascension.

In the ancient world, writers were limited in how long they could make one book by the length of a scroll. If you make the scroll too long, then it was too unwieldy to try to read it. Books as we know them didn't really come along until the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, or so. Luke is the longest book of the New Testament. He couldn't go much further. So writers had to be selective about what they included and excluded. And what Luke includes here is significant material.

First of all, that Jesus is the fulfillment of all Scripture. All Scripture points to him. The Old Testament pointed forward to Jesus. The New Testament points us back to him. He is the cornerstone, the apex of God's revelation.

Jesus says, "Everything written about me in Moses, the prophets, and the Psalms must come true." This is the whole Old Testament. We divide the Old Testament into four divisions, but in Jesus' day, and still today in Hebrew circles, the Old Testament only had three divisions.

"Moses" refers to the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. And in Deuteronomy 18, Moses wrote of a greater prophet who would come later.

"The Prophets" were most of the Old Testament, everything else except Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon. The most notable prophet for his writing about Jesus was Isaiah, who foretold of a son of David who would reign forever, who would bring salvation to the whole world, and who would accomplish this by means of his own suffering.

Those other five books, not part of the Torah or the prophets, were called the Writings. Since the Psalms were the largest part of the Writings, they often simply said "the Psalms" when referring to all the writings. Psalm 22 especially is notable for its depiction of the crucifixion. Together, the whole Old Testament pointed to Christ: His suffering, his death, and his resurrection.

"Jesus opens their minds to understand all this." Scripture is illumined by God. Jesus does it for the disciples. The Holy Spirit does it for us.

We can and should study Scripture. We should cross-reference it. That is we should interpret Scripture by Scripture. If we don't understand passage A, then we should go looking elsewhere. It may be that passages B and C help us understand A. And we should read what others have said about Scripture. The collective understanding of God's word down through the centuries is part of our tradition, and tradition is a valuable tool for understanding the truth. When I go to prepare a sermon, I write notes about what I think it means, but I also go looking for what others have said about it. I read study notes and commentaries. I don't want to rely just on my interpretation because I might be wrong. There's a better chance of me being wrong than of all the scholars who have ever studied a passage being wrong.

But there is another essential Bible study tool: Prayer. Unless our understanding of Scripture and interpretation of it relies on God, then we are in grave danger of missing the truth.

Jesus goes on, "With my authority, take this message of repentance and the offer of salvation to all the world." Jesus is fulfilling the words of the prophet Isaiah here again. In chapters 42-44 of Isaiah, he foretold of Israel receiving the Holy Spirit and being witnesses to all the world of God's salvation. That prophecy is fulfilled in the Church, which is the New Israel. We are appointed to be witnesses to all the world and endowed with the Spirit. The Spirit allows us prophesy, that is to speak inspired words from God. Jesus tells us in Luke 12, that even if we are brought up on trial for our faith, we should not be afraid, because "the Holy Spirit will teach you what to say."

So with Jesus' authority, we carry his message to all the nations. And he empowers the Church to do this by his Holy Spirit. The work of Christ becomes the work of the Church. And then he ascends back into heaven.

The Ascension is both an ending and a beginning. It is the end of Jesus' work on earth, a dividing line between the time when Jesus is with them in person and the time of doing his work and waiting for his return in glory. And it's a beginning of the Church, the Body of Christ, taking up the work of Christ, under the authority and with the power of the One seated on the highest throne.

The Ascension serves two essential functions. First, it is a coronation, the King ascending to his throne.

Paul uses that as a message of comfort and encouragement to the Ephesians. "May you know the power of God that seated Christ on the highest throne, far above any ruler, power, authority, or leader." Paul uses a four-fold formula there. In the Hebrew way of thinking a four-fold formula describes the entirety of something, in this

case, the entirety of spiritual powers. That's what Paul is talking about, spiritual powers. In the minds of many first century people, especially those coming out of pagan belief systems, there were great numbers of spiritual powers at work, some good, and some evil. And if a spiritual power has it out for you, then your only hope is to find a higher power and appeal to it for help and protection. But Paul's encouragement is that we know the One seated on the highest throne. And we know that he is for us, not against us. He is enthroned "for the benefit of the Church."

Second, the Ascension is a succession narrative.

It should call to our minds the most famous succession narrative in the Bible, the story of Elijah and Elisha. Elijah asks his disciple, Elisha, what he wants, and he answers, "To receive a double portion of your spirit." Then Elijah is taken up to heaven, and Elisha goes on to continue his work, doing the same things Elijah has been doing.

Well, our master, Jesus, has been taken up into heaven, and his disciples, the Church, have been appointed to go on doing his work, filled with his Spirit, until he returns.

And I would say that in some sense, the Church completes the coronation of Christ by its work. Here's what I mean. Jesus is already seated on the highest throne, ruler over all creation. But Jesus doesn't really rule over all things yet. There is one place where he does not rule. He doesn't rule in the hearts of those who have not heard of him or who have not put their faith in him. His rule is made more complete every time the Church proclaims the Gospel and Christ is enthroned in the heart of a new believer. His reign is more complete every time that happens.

The Church's work is not in any way isolated from the Ascension. It is done under the authority and with the gift of the Spirit given by the One seated on the highest throne. And in turn, the Church's work brings fullness and completeness to the reign of Christ. The Ascension is an integral part of our understanding our mission and our role in the world. It's an important day in the life of the Church, and one that we don't often give as much attention to as we do to Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. But I hope we all appreciate it a little more today.