

The Ascension of Jesus Christ

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Turning the World Upside Down / Ascension of Christ; Promises; Obedience; Commission / Acts 1:9–11

Acts 1:9-11 shows us that the mission that Jesus gave his apostles included his ascension into heaven.

Introduction

Edward Lorenz worked as a meteorology professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) from 1948 until his retirement in 1987.

Lorenz was one of the early pioneers figuring out weather patterns using computers. He worked on computer programs that simulated weather patterns.

One day, Lorenz entered some numbers into his computer program and then left his office to get a cup of coffee while the machine ran its calculations.

When he returned to his office, he was shocked by the result of his simulation.

Lorenz's computer model was based on 12 variables, representing things like temperature and wind speed, whose values could be depicted on graphs as lines rising and falling over time.

On that particular day, Lorenz was repeating a simulation he'd run earlier—but he had rounded off one variable from .506127 to .506.

To his surprise, that tiny alteration drastically transformed the whole pattern his program produced, over two months of simulated weather.

Lorenz was a meticulous researcher. He decided to run the entire simulation again, this time with the complete variable of .506127.

His intuition told him that a variation of less than one part in one thousand could not possibly change the results so drastically.

To his amazement, however, when the computer produced the final result with his complete variable of .506127, it was completely different from the earlier result with the variable of .506.

Lorenz could not believe what he was seeing.

His observation led to a powerful insight into the way nature works, namely, that *small changes can have large consequences*.

As he later explained, a tiny atmospheric disturbance in Peking, no greater than the flap of a butterfly's wing, should give rise a week or so later to a Force Twelve hurricane in New York.

Lorenz's insight that small changes can have large consequences became known as "the Butterfly Effect."

As a side note, the Butterfly Effect, also known as "sensitive dependence on initial conditions," has a profound corollary: forecasting future weather conditions can be nearly impossible (<https://www.technologyreview.com/2011/02/22/196987/when-the-butterfly-effect-took-flight/>).

So, when your favorite meteorologist gets the weather forecast wrong, you can blame it on the butterflies in Peking! Apparently, the weather satellites did not pick up the extra flap in their wings.

Fortunately, life in general is not subject to the chaotic "Butterfly Effect."

But, once in a while, a small change can have large consequences.

For example, a nail made the difference between victory and defeat in the children's nursery rhyme, "For Want of a Nail":

For want of a nail, the shoe was lost.
For want of a shoe, the horse was lost.
For want of a horse, the rider was lost.
For want of a rider, the message was lost.
For want of a message, the battle was lost.
For want of a battle, the kingdom was lost.
And all for the want of a horseshoe nail
(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/For_Want_of_a_Nail)

What is true for a single nail can sometimes be true for a single life. James Allan Francis wrote:

He was born in an obscure village,
The child of a peasant woman.
He grew up in still another village,
Where he worked in a carpenter shop
Until he was thirty.
Then for three years
He was an itinerant preacher.
He never wrote a book.
He never held an office.
He never had a family or owned a house.
He didn't go to college.
He never visited a big city.
He never traveled two hundred miles
From the place where he was born.
He did none of the things
One usually associates with greatness.
He had no credentials but himself.
He was only thirty-three
When the tide of public opinion turned against him.
His friends ran away.
He was turned over to his enemies
And went through the mockery of a trial.
He was nailed to a cross
Between two thieves.
While he was dying,
His executioners gambled for his clothing,
The only property he had on Earth.
When he was dead,
He was laid in a borrowed grave
Through the pity of a friend.
Twenty centuries have come and gone,
And today he is the central figure
Of the human race,
And the leader of mankind's progress.

All the armies that ever marched,
All the navies that ever sailed,
All the parliaments that ever sat,
All the kings that ever reigned,
Put together have not affected
The life of man on Earth
As much as that
One Solitary Life (James Allen Francis, *The Real Jesus and Other Sermons*,
Judson Press, 1926, pp. 123-124).

This is the “Butterfly Effect.” It is not operating in meteorology but in history.

The life of Jesus had and continues to have a massive “Butterfly Effect” in the world.

This is what Luke wanted to get across to Theophilus when he wrote his second book, which we call the Book of Acts.

Luke wanted Theophilus to see what Jesus continued to do and teach after his death and resurrection.

After his resurrection, Jesus spent forty days with his apostles. He was teaching them about the kingdom of God ([Acts 1:3](#)).

During these forty days, Jesus would appear periodically to his apostles. He would teach them, eat with them, and then disappear until he appeared again to them.

During these forty days, Jesus also set down and clarified his mission for his apostles. This included four key events.

First, Jesus commissioned the apostles ([Acts 1:6-8](#)).

Second, Jesus ascended into heaven, which took place forty days after his resurrection ([Acts 1:9-11](#)).

Third, the apostles devoted themselves to prayer, presumably for the promised Holy Spirit ([Acts 1:12-14](#)).

And fourth, the apostles chose a new apostle ([Acts 1:15-26](#)).

Only when these four events had taken place, could the apostles begin the mission that Jesus had given to them.

Last time, we examined the first key event, namely, Jesus' commissioning of the apostles.

Today, I want to examine the second key event, which is Jesus' ascension into heaven.

Scripture

Let's read [Acts 1:9-11](#):

⁹ And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰ And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, ¹¹ and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Lesson

[Acts 1:9-11](#) shows us that the mission that Jesus gave his apostles included his ascension into heaven.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Apostles Saw Jesus' Ascension (1:9)
2. The Angels Addressed Jesus' Apostles (1:10-11)

I. The Apostles Saw Jesus' Ascension (1:9)

First, the apostles saw Jesus' ascension.

In his second book, the Book of Acts, Luke wanted Theophilus to learn about what Jesus continued to do and teach after his resurrection.

During the forty days after his resurrection, Jesus taught his apostles about the kingdom of God.

Luke also mentioned an interaction that the apostles had with Jesus at the end of the forty days. They wanted to know if Jesus was going to restore the kingdom to Israel at that time ([Acts 1:6](#)).

In answer to their question, Jesus told them that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them. And then Jesus gave the apostles their commission, which was to be his witnesses “in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” ([Acts 1:8](#)).

Then Luke told Theophilus in verse 9, **“And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.”**

Now you may recall that Luke’s first book, his Gospel, ended with a description of the ascension of Jesus.

It is the ascension of Jesus that ties the two books together, the first ending with Jesus’ ascension and the second beginning with Jesus’ ascension.

Luke told Theophilus about Jesus’ ascension in his Gospel in the following words in [Luke 24:50-53](#):

⁵⁰ And he [that is, Jesus] led them [that is, the apostles] out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. ⁵¹ While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. ⁵² And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, ⁵³ and were continually in the temple blessing God.

Some commentators have suggested that Jesus rose from the dead on Easter Sunday morning. He appeared to various groups of people throughout the day. Then, at the end of that first Easter Sunday morning, he ascended into heaven.

In Acts, of course, Luke explicitly stated that Jesus spent forty days with his apostles after his resurrection and then he ascended into heaven ([Acts 1:3](#)).

That led one commentator to write, “Two Ascensions—one on Easter Day ([Lk. 24:51](#)), the other forty days after ([Acts 1:9](#))—are one too many” (Ernst Haenchen in John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church & the World*, The Bible Speaks Today [Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994], 45).

But that is reading too much into Luke's Gospel. Luke was simply giving a condensed account in his Gospel of Jesus' resurrection appearances and his ascension. There is no need to believe that Luke described two different ascensions.

When I was growing up in South Africa, we recognized Ascension Thursday. Jesus' resurrection, as you know, took place on what we call Easter Sunday. Forty days later, Jesus ascended into heaven. Forty days after Easter Sunday always falls on a Thursday. And so we used to recognize the ascension of Jesus on Ascension Thursday.

Luke wanted Theophilus to know that forty days after Jesus' resurrection, Jesus ascended into heaven. That is why he wrote in verse 9, **“And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.”**

Now, what was the significance of Jesus' ascension?

It seems that Jesus wanted his apostles to know that he was going for good. Over the previous forty days, Jesus had appeared periodically to his apostles. He taught them about the kingdom of God.

The Bible does not give us a description of how many times Jesus appeared to his apostles. But we can assume that Jesus met with them on many occasions.

Undoubtedly, the apostles were getting used to Jesus suddenly appearing... then disappearing... and then reappearing.

Jesus wanted his apostles to know that this was his final departure. He wanted them to know that he was not going to come back to them. He was going to ascend to his Father's right hand. From there Jesus was going to direct his worldwide mission.

Meanwhile, Jesus was going to send the apostles another helper, the Holy Spirit, whom he had promised earlier in verses 5 and 8.

II. The Angels Addressed Jesus' Apostles (1:10-11)

And second, the angels addressed Jesus' apostles.

Luke told Theophilus what happened to the apostles after Jesus ascended into heaven. He wrote in verses 10-11, **“And while they were gazing into heaven as**

he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.’ ”

You may wonder who are the **“two men.”** Most scholars say that they are angels because they were dressed in **white robes** and they addressed the apostles with unusual authority.

These angels told the apostles two important truths.

A. The Angels Promised that Jesus Will Return Again (1:10, 11b)

First, the angels promised that Jesus will return again.

The apostles were gazing into **heaven**. The word **“heaven”** is used four times in verses 10-11.

Luke seems to suggest that the apostles were staring into heaven, wondering what was going to happen next.

Now, we can understand what the apostles were doing, can't we? I imagine if somehow I was whisked up out of your sight right now you would be shocked, amazed, and keep staring at the ceiling where I disappeared. You would wonder what would happen next.

So we read what the angels said to the apostles in verse 11b, **“This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”**

The angels assured the apostles that Jesus will return again. Moreover, they said that Jesus **“will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”**

What did the angels mean? Did they mean that Jesus would return to the Mount of Olives? Would his return be like a movie played in reverse?

I don't think so.

“This Jesus” refers to the truth that Jesus' return will be *personal*. It will not be somebody else who returns. Rather, it will be Jesus of Nazareth who returns at his Second Advent.

Moreover, the expression “**the same way**” refers to the truth that Jesus’s return will be *visible* and *glorious*. Just as the apostles saw Jesus ascend into heaven, so people will see Jesus visibly when he returns. And just as a glorious cloud enveloped Jesus as he ascended into heaven, so his return will be manifestly glorious.

But there will be differences between Jesus’ ascension and his return.

One difference is that his return will not be private, like his ascension. Only the apostles saw Jesus ascend into heaven. But when Jesus returns, he will do so publicly, as we read in [Revelation 1:7](#), “Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.”

Another difference is that his return not be solitary, like his ascension. Jesus ascended alone into heaven. But when Jesus returns, he will be accompanied by a great host of people and angels (see [Luke 9:26](#); [1 Thessalonians 4:14ff](#); [2 Thessalonians 1:7](#)).

And a final difference is that Jesus’ return will not be localized, like his ascension. Jesus ascended from the Mount of Olives into heaven. But when he returns, it will be “as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other” ([Luke 17:23–24](#)).

So, the first truth that the angels communicated to the apostles was that Jesus will return again.

B. The Angels Urged Obedience to Jesus’ Commission (1:10, 11a)

And second, the angels urged obedience to Jesus’ commission.

Luke wanted Theophilus to know that the apostles needed to get on with the mission that Jesus gave them. Jesus had just told them that they were to be his witnesses “in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” But instead of getting busy and going to “the end of the earth” they were gazing “**into heaven.**”

The apostles were to be busy with their business on earth and not be preoccupied with heaven. As John Stott noted, “Their calling was to be witnesses, not stargazers. The vision they were to cultivate was not upwards in nostalgia to the heaven which had received Jesus, but outwards in compassion

to a lost world which needed him” (John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church & the World*, The Bible Speaks Today [Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994], 51).

Jesus will return again. But until he returns, Jesus wanted his apostles to get on with the task of witnessing. They were to obey his Great Commission of making disciples of all nations.

That task is not given only to the apostles. It is given to all the disciples who followed after the apostles.

Our task is to continue to obey Jesus’ commission. And we are to continue to obey his commission until he returns.

Hiroo Onoda was a lieutenant in the Japanese army stationed on the Philippine island of Lubang during World War II. When his commander left the island, he ordered Onoda to stay and fight.

“It may take three years, it may take five, but whatever happens we’ll come back for you,” he had said.

Onoda faithfully carried out those orders for the next 29 years.

After the war, the Japanese government dropped leaflets to persuade him to come out of hiding but he dismissed them as Allied propaganda.

He was even declared dead in 1959.

In 1974 he encountered Norio Suzuki, a Japanese student who had gone in search of Onoda. Suzuki could not convince Onoda—who insisted he was still awaiting orders—to come out of hiding.

Suzuki left but soon returned with a delegation that included Onoda’s brother and his former commander, who formally relieved the emaciated soldier of duty.

My dear brother and sister in Christ, that is the commitment of a Christian disciple—to obey Jesus’ commission until he returns to relieve us of duty.

Of course, we will know right away when that happens because we will see Jesus when he returns (Jim L. Wilson and Rodger Russell, “Japanese Soldier Continues Fighting until 1974,” in *300 Illustrations for Preachers*, ed. Elliot Ritzema [Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015], n.p.).

Conclusion

I mentioned earlier that during the forty days after Jesus' resurrection, he clarified his mission for his apostles. This included four key events.

First, Jesus commissioned the apostles ([Acts 1:6-8](#)).

Second, Jesus ascended into heaven, which took place forty days after his resurrection ([Acts 1:9-11](#)).

The apostles then returned to Jerusalem to wait for the promised Holy Spirit. That took place ten days after Jesus' ascension.

Before the promised Holy Spirit was given on the Day of Pentecost, the apostles chose a new apostle to succeed Judas.

When the Holy Spirit was then given on the Day of Pentecost, their worldwide mission began.

Luke wanted Theophilus to know that butterflies were flapping their wings. The effects of those small changes are still reverberating around the world today.

If you are a Christian, you are to be active in witnessing to Jesus. Are you doing so? Start by praying for unsaved family members, neighbors, and friends. And tell them about Jesus.

If you are not a Christian, you need to surrender your life to Jesus. Repent of your sin. Believe that he paid the penalty for all your sins. And then get busy telling others about Jesus! Amen.