

# 50 Days of Wonder: He Ascended Into Heaven

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[ 0 : 00 ] Would you open your Bibles, please, at Luke 24? We start a series today, a little five-week series, beginning in Luke 24, in one of the most important sections of the whole of the Bible, really.

Several years ago, I was in London. I traveled from Canada, and I had to catch a train to the south of England, and I went through the station, which is now called St Pancras, which is the place where every international traveler meets up and goes somewhere else, and it's terrifying. There are thousands of people meeting up, and there are boards with these exotic destinations like Moscow, Istanbul, and Nokonee.

It's an amazing place where everyone who's going anywhere seems to be going through there, and that is a little, that's what it feels like here in Luke 24, and then over the next few weeks.

All the major themes of the Bible come together. We see God, the Father, God, the Son, and God, the Holy Spirit working in a way, perhaps, we see nowhere else. We see the fulfillment of everything that goes before.

[ 1 : 17 ] These passages set the direction for the church. They answer the question, what should we be doing? Who are we as a church? What's the destiny of the world? And other important questions.

And I've called the series, as you can see there on the sheet, 50 Days of Wonder. And we want to start at the day Jesus rose from the dead, through the next 40 days, when he appeared to his disciples, past the day when he was ascended into heaven, taken up into heaven, to the pouring out of the Holy Spirit.

And I've called it 50 Days of Wonder, he ascended into heaven. Because at the center of this railway, or this junction, this hub, is the ascension of Jesus into heaven.

Now, every week, every week in one of the creeds, we say he ascended into heaven. But I wonder whether it takes the kind of place in our hearts that it ought to.

And most people outside the church think Christianity is about Christmas and Easter because we make a great big fuss about Christmas and Easter, which is absolutely right. We ought to. But if you ask them about the ascension, they're going to say, really?

[ 2 : 30 ] Jesus ascended into heaven? What does that have to do with me? But it is so important in the New Testament, it is described not just once, but twice.

Both times by the guy who wrote more of the New Testament than anyone else, who is? Luke. Yeah. At the end of his gospel, he describes it.

And in two weeks' time, when we're in Acts chapter 1, we'll see where it's described in a little bit more detail. Today, we're going to focus in Luke 24. And if we have time, we might flick around a bit.

But the next four weeks, we're going to end up in Acts 1 and 2. 50 days of wonder because that's what it was. One of the first things you notice, if you read the last chapter of the gospel of Luke, Luke 24, you'll notice on the day of the resurrection that every time we meet the followers of Jesus, they're disappointed, disheartened, discouraged, downcast, despairing.

But look at the last two verses of Luke 24. And they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy and were continually in the temple, praising God.

[ 3 : 46 ] This is the good news of great joy for all people, including you and including me. And so I want to look today just at this end of Luke 24.

And I know it's very familiar ground for most of us. But there are three things that are very surprising. CTC, perk up your ears. Three things that are very surprising and they all start with the same letter.

And the first has to do with scripture. So we pick the story up at verse 44. This is the evening of the resurrection. And Jesus is appearing to his disciples in the upper room and he's cast your eyes up a few verses.

They think he's a ghost, which is exactly what you and I would have done had we been there. And he shows them his hands and his feet, his flesh and bones, and he takes a piece of fish to eat. And then verse 44, Now I think the great surprise here is that he tells them nothing new.

[ 5 : 06 ] Instead, he takes them back to Moses, the prophets, and the Psalms, to the Old Testament scriptures. And I think that, doesn't that seem a bit strange to you?

If you had risen from the dead, if you had just conquered death and hell and Satan, risen victorious, wouldn't you want to say something new?

Wouldn't you want to say, this was what it was like, guys. I can still walk on water or something like that. But Jesus doesn't. He takes them back to the scriptures because apart from the scriptures, we don't have a clue to understanding Jesus' resurrection.

If we want to understand Jesus' cross, his resurrection, and what he's doing now, we have to go back to the scriptures. And I know we haven't done Luke 24. Well, we did look at it at Easter time, but that's over a month ago, and it's hard to expect you to remember that.

We did look at it as a series a few years ago as well. But just to jog your memory, this same thing has been happening all day. In the first scene, when the women go to the tomb, in verses 5 to 6, the angels appear, and what do the angels say?

[ 6 : 24 ] Verse 5, down the bottom of verse 5, why do you seek the living among the dead? I mean, there's some reproach there, isn't there? Verse 6, He's not here, He has risen. Remember that He told you, while He was still with you in Galilee, the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and crucified, and on the third day rise.

And they remembered His words. That's right. It's exactly the same on the road to Emmaus, in that long middle passage, from verses 13 onwards. Jesus comes beside two of His followers, who are walking away from Jerusalem, as the evening falls.

They don't even recognize Him. And they're discouraged, and downhearted, and disappointed. And they've heard rumors that Jesus has risen, but they think that's silly. And what does Jesus say to them? Verse 25, does He tell them anything new?

He says, O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe, all the prophets have spoken. Was it not necessary that Christ should suffer these things, and enter into His glory? And beginning with Moses and the prophets, He interpreted to them in all the scriptures, all the things concerning Himself.

See? He doesn't say, look, it's me, it's me, it's me. He gives them a lengthy Bible study from the Old Testament, because it's through the study of the scriptures, we come to know the real and risen Jesus.

[ 7 : 38 ] Exactly the same in the upper room. Ever thought about, why didn't Jesus, after He rose from the dead, just zip back up to heaven? I mean, He could have spent a couple of days appearing to hundreds and hundreds of people.

Why does He stay 40 days before He ascends to heaven? He's no longer with them in the same way He was before the resurrection, because He says, while I was with you, I said these things.

See, in the same human body that Jesus lived in, and died in, has now been raised and transformed, but He waits 40 days before He ascends to the Father, why does He do that?

And I think, I think the main reason is because during those 40 days, Jesus does two things, not one. See, the first thing Jesus does, He appears to His followers, proving that He's been raised, showing them His perfect body.

And I don't know if you've ever thought about what a wonderfully kind and gracious act that was. I mean, imagine Jesus' mother Mary, if the last thing she saw of Him was Him being pulled down from the cross in the Pieta.

[ 8 : 47 ] That's not her last view of Him. Or imagine if Peter, the last words he had with Jesus were words of denial. They're not because Jesus recommissioned him on the beach.

Imagine if Jesus' brother James never met the risen Jesus, would never have the book of James. No, no. He appeared to people, and that created a kind of faith.

But that's not all He did. There is a second thing that Jesus did in those 40 days. He didn't just appear, but He teaches, He teaches, He teaches the Bible.

He interprets the Old Testament. He connects what's happened to Him to different parts of the Old Testament. And in a few weeks' time, when we get to the book of Acts, and we hear the Apostle Peter preach his first Christian sermon, it's a sermon on Old Testament texts about Jesus Christ. He's learnt His lesson. And Jesus wants to show these followers and us the timeless, critical power and importance of the Scriptures, because the risen body of Jesus is not enough to give us faith. [ 9 : 53 ] Let me say that again. If Jesus were to appear here today, minus the Scriptures, it would not be enough to create faith in us. And in this new stage of ministry is the risen Jesus.

Thankfully, He has given us the Scriptures. The way He leads us, the way He directs us, is through His Old Testament, through the Old Testament Scriptures and through His words, which are never obsolete.

That is why you can tell a living church. A living church will always put a high premium on the Old Testament Scriptures. They'll preach the Old Testament Scriptures. A living Christian will always put a high premium on the Scriptures and the Old Testament particularly.

Now, of course, you say we're far too busy to seriously read our own Bible. My calendar is far too full to spend time praying and reading, particularly the Old Testament.

What I need is something quick, like it doesn't take too much work. I need a spiritual jolt, like a spiritual espresso. I just need one small, warm idea or an inspiring thought.

[ 11 : 03 ] And, you know, it's much easier to read devotional things than it is to read the Bible itself, isn't it? You're all supposed to go, no, no, not... In the fall, we're going to look at the book of Ezekiel.

We're going to dive into the deep end. And here's your summer homework. I want you to read the book of Ezekiel. If you're part of CTC, you need to know that part of growing as a Christian is reading deeply in the Old Testament.

It's not always easy. But if you want to understand Jesus Christ, you want to know Jesus more, that is where we turn. So you see, the 40 days between Jesus' resurrection and ascension were not just a series of happy reunions where he showed his body.

It's more like an intensive seminar. Jesus prepares his followers for his leaving and the mission until he returns. We don't have time to do this today, but it's very interesting if you look at verse 44, Jesus gives his followers the key to understanding the Old Testament.

He says, it's all about me. That is the key to what's written both in the Old Testament and the New Testament is that it's all about Jesus. He's the goal, the focus, he is the one story.

[ 12 : 21 ] So the only way the risen Jesus becomes real to us by the Holy Spirit is as we understand the Scriptures. The only way we understand the Scriptures is if Christ opens our minds to understand them and the only way he understands our minds to understand the Scriptures is when we see that Christ is the key.

Did you not notice when we read together Psalm 8 in the service? Psalm 8 is about Jesus and later, not now, you can have a look at that in Hebrews 2.

See, we keep putting ourselves at the center. We keep pushing Jesus out of the center and Jesus keeps sending us back to the Scriptures which puts him at the center and we'll see how this works in the next few weeks.

So that's the first surprise. The first surprise at the resurrection is Jesus doesn't tell them anything new but he sends them back to the Scriptures. This is what's going to be permanent until he comes again. The second surprise also starts with the same letter and that is verse 49 he tells them to stay.

If you look down at verse 49 behold I am sending the promise of my Father upon you but stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high. It's a great surprise to me preparing this week.

[ 13 : 32 ] I thought this section was full of commands where Jesus was commissioning his church to go out and witness and he does hint at that. There's only one command there's only one instruction from Jesus to his disciples in this last half of Luke 24 and it's this word stay.

He doesn't tell them be happy he doesn't tell them worship me he doesn't tell them even to go out and preach the gospel he says stay in Jerusalem and I think that's a bit of a surprise for two reasons.

First is the natural reaction to seeing the risen Jesus is you want to tell everyone you possibly can. Remember when the angel appeared to the women and said Jesus had risen what did they do? They raced back to the other disciples and told them or the two when they got to Emmaus and they recognized the risen Jesus what did they do? Even though it was night and they're about 10

kilometers away from Jerusalem they ran they ran back to tell the other disciples and now in the upper room Jesus has shown them he's risen he's eating fish munching fish and he's taught them the scriptures the most natural thing for the disciples to do is to get up and race out and tell everyone but Jesus says stop stay wait I think that's surprising and I think it's surprising for another reason it's surprising for this reason because Jesus had told them from the scriptures that they are to be his witnesses you see verse 46 and verse 47 just before he says stay he summarizes the message of the Bible and he does it in three words and in the original these three words are in the same form which is highly unusual and if you just look down at 46 47 the words are to suffer to rise to be proclaimed you see he opened their minds to understand he said to them thus it is written that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead and that repentance and forgiveness of sins be proclaimed in his name to all nations beginning in Jerusalem you are witnesses to these things and then he says stay in other words

Jesus says if you take the Old Testament and you take the entire Old Testament you can summarize it in three words if you go from creation to the flood from the flood to Abraham from Abraham to Egypt from Egypt to the promised land from the promised land to the King David from the King David to the exile you know what it's about it's about the suffering of Christ the resurrection of Christ and the proclamation of forgiveness of sins in Christ's name that is Jesus' summary of God's purpose for the world and of those three things the suffering of Christ and the rising of Christ have already happened Jesus has done them but there's only one that's left and that's our responsibility and that is to proclaim his name so let me just pause on this and say the mission of the church is not complicated it's bringing the whole world to repentance and faith through this gospel that's our mission it's calling other people to turn away from their sins to repent of their sins and to receive God's forgiveness through Christ alone to every person in this nation don't you find that when you're singing the national anthem and you say oh Canada we stand on guard for thee that's the kind of thing you pray for but then Jesus says stay don't start yet why?

[17:17] for the very simple reason that we have no power to do it we don't have any power to repent or to witness to Christ apart from the Holy Spirit he says verse 49 I'm sending the promise of my father stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high now we will see this when we come to the book of Ezekiel in the fall term but when God promises his Holy Spirit the Spirit comes into us and creates new hearts in us he takes out the rocky the stony hard hearts hearts of stone and puts in hearts of flesh so that we can love him and follow him and then empowers us to tell the story of the resurrection of Christ but you see without the Holy Spirit without the power of the Holy Spirit we have no we have utterly no spiritual impact on others and we have no hope of spiritual power in ourselves we can have the best liturgy the best music the best community groups you can have the finest preaching but apart from the Holy Spirit it has no power to drive out sin or to change lives you see the first surprise is the scriptures the second surprise is the command to stay because

Jesus wants to hold the scriptures and the power of the Spirit together because you see without the power of the Spirit the scriptures are just dead words and without the scriptures well we imagine we make the Holy Spirit do what we want the Spirit always shines through this word he shines the light on Jesus Christ inflames our hearts with love for him and empowers us to live and that's the second surprise stay first surprise scripture second surprise stay third surprise it's the same Jesus who ascends here we come to the ascension I feel like pausing and taking questions but I'm I'm going to keep going now in verse 50 we change scenes there's a fast move to the end of the 40 days of appearances we come to the last day of his appearances and in verse 50 this is Jesus final appearance and leaving he's finished his time on earth and he's not going to return again to the earth until he comes to judge the living and the dead verse 50 he led them out as far as Bethany across the Kidron he lifted up his hands and he blessed them and while he blessed them he parted from them and was carried up into heaven that's it and just like the incarnation and the death of Jesus and the resurrection

Luke gives us one sentence on it mind you he'll come back to it in the book of Acts and in the original it means as he's blessing them he gradually he gradually goes away from them into heaven and I imagine if you have just come and you want to you read this text in isolation it looks a bit like a special effect doesn't it from a movie and you know you wouldn't be the first person who struggles with this and throughout history Christians have tried to spiritualize this they've tried to say oh it didn't really happen like this it's just a vision the disciples had all together at once but the way it's recorded here and in the book of Acts and the way it's spoken about in the rest of the New

Testament means it happens just the way Luke said it here and it's important to know that heaven in the Bible heaven isn't up there beyond planet Z or the furthest galaxy physically heaven is being in the presence of God and the best explanation

I've ever heard of how heaven and earth relate to each other is it's like light through Venetian blinds you know Venetian blinds the light intersects the Venetian blinds at every point because our world and heaven intersect one another we can't see the reality but every now and again God pulls away the veil and we're allowed to see what's going on what takes place what you know what God sees and that's what's happening here the veil is pulled back and the risen Jesus enters heaven bodily with his human body the same risen Jesus who had just been speaking to them he doesn't leave his body behind and float up in other words the incarnation of Jesus continues this is mind-blowing stuff for the first time not just since creation but for the first time in all eternity part of creation part of our world is taken into heaven it gives me goosebumps as I'm talking about it

Jesus returns to the presence of the father as fully human as you and I are and now in Jesus Christ humanity for the first time dwells secure in the presence of God he had to ascend into heaven it's not some afterthought that he thought of we go back to chapter 9 you remember on the day of the transfiguration another day when heaven is pulled back and Moses and Elijah are seen there walking on the mountain and Jesus face is glorified and the cloud of glory comes down do you remember what Moses and Elijah are talking to Jesus about they're talking to him about his exodus his departure and I imagine Moses saying something like you know I was involved in an exodus it was pretty good you know God rescued his people out of slavery and brought us to the promised land and Jesus said and I'm going to through my exodus bring about the great redemption from the more powerful enemies of sin and death and hell and I'm going to bring them not to the promised land but to the new heavens and the new earth and then just 20 verses later as Jesus turns and sets his face to go toward Jerusalem it says when it came time for him to be received up in other words the ascension is not just something added on it's the plan all along after the death and resurrection of Jesus it wasn't that he would just float away and disappear or go and retire in Tuscany but he would ascend to the right hand of the father he had to ascend and he had to ascend think about it he had to ascend because repentance and faith had to be proclaimed to all the nations which can't be believed apart from the power of the

[ 24 : 05 ] Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit will not be sent until he sits at the right hand of the father he had to ascend because that's the only way that he could dwell with each one of us while he was here on earth even in his risen body he could only bodily be in one place but now his body is seated at the right hand of the father and he's poured out his Holy Spirit he's able to dwell with every single one of us not just here and there but through all our lives in every place until the end of time I think that's why Luke tells us twice that Jesus is blessing them verse 50 and verse 51 he's carried up into heaven while he is blessed in the act of blessing that he has withdrawn into heaven and I'm not certain about this but I imagine what Jesus said was something like the Aaron blessing you know the Lord bless you and keep you and I think he probably put it in first person he said I am blessing you and I will keep you I've made my face shine upon you you've seen the grace of

God and all that I've done and I will send my Holy Spirit and lift up my face upon you and give you peace today and always this is the third surprise in this passage that it's the same Jesus that these men had witnessed now ascends with his body into heaven Jesus of Nazareth born of Mary suffered and died in that body it's exactly that body that's carried into heaven Jesus of Nazareth who took back from death that body transformed through resurrection that human body is now carried into the glory of heaven Jesus of Nazareth who taught and acted under the power of the Holy Spirit will now continue with us by the power of the Holy Spirit because his body is in heaven and this is massively massively encouraging let me just make some application as I finish it's not as though Jesus has left the building and we are to continue the work that's not the deal

Jesus has his own body at the right hand of the father you are not his hands we are not his feet we are not his arms we are not his legs still less is it up to us to incarnate the gospel that is a mistake that was Jesus role still less is it up to us to transform this world Jesus is perfectly able to do that it's not even up to us to realise our full human potential Jesus has done that for us and we live in the light of the fact that he is our full potential I hope you don't tell your kids this it's a terrible burden to carry to have to live up to my human potential and when you start living that way you reduce the gospel to a safety net when I fail but here is the gospel Jesus is Lord seated at the right hand of the father forgiveness and life are ours because he's died and he's raised and he's ascended bodily to

the right hand of the father the gift of the

Holy Spirit is now ours and we may live in the presence of God forever it's only this that explains the worship and the joy at the end of the book you remember before the resurrection he told them he was going away and they're all panicked and frightened and now as he goes away they're not they're not because they can rest on what he's done because the ascension of Jesus doesn't diminish our joy it increases it we see Jesus as he really is the divine son of God fully man he leaves and you know as he leaves he blesses and he blesses and he blesses and he keeps blessing and blessing and blessing and I wonder if that's your picture of Jesus and they go and they wait for him to pour out the Holy Spirit so that we might live in closer union than was even possible while he was here and I think that's why Luke finishes by saying they had great joy do you remember at the beginning of the gospel the angel said for behold I tell you good news of great joy it'll be to all the people and now that

Christ has died and now that Christ has risen and now he has ascended to the right hand of the father we too follow him with great joy so let's kneel and pray