

Luke 24:44-53: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Luke chapter 24, verses 44 to 53. Then he said to them, These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.

Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and said to them, Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer, and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things, and 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.

And he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. While he blessed them he parted from them, and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple, blessing God.

Luke chapter 24, verses 44 to 53 are found at the very conclusion of the book of Luke. Like the conclusions of the books of Genesis, Deuteronomy and Joshua, it ends with departure and a blessing upon those who remain.

[1 : 2 2] These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you. Jesus is still there, but he's no longer there in some way. He's moving on, and this is on his way out.

He's giving this message. He explains how the entire scripture, the law, the prophets, and the Psalms, had to be fulfilled. Now he speaks here of the Psalms instead of the writings, which would be one of the three categories that the Old Testament was regularly divided into.

Psalms seems to substitute for the writings. And he says all of these things have to be fulfilled in his suffering and resurrection from the dead. But not just in those things, also in the ministry of the church that follows.

The Old Testament narrative in Christ's teaching crackles with anticipation of Christ. And Christ opens our eyes to understand the Old Testament text. Now it's important to recognize that there is an event of illumination that goes on in both directions here.

The scriptures enable us truly to see the Christ, and the Christ enables us truly to see the scriptures. Christ brings light to the entire preceding narrative, while also being in direct continuity with and illuminated by it.

[2 : 3 1] When we read the Old Testament, we are better able to understand Christ. And as we see Christ, we are better able to understand the Old Testament text. It's important to consider the way that Luke uses the scripture.

He's not primarily presenting us with direct prediction and fulfillment, but rather with the way that Christ both clarifies and brings to resolution all the themes and truths of the Old Testament.

The whole world of the scripture comes into focus in Christ. Once we see Christ, it all makes so much sense. He is David's greater son who must suffer like his father.

And this is one of the reasons why the Psalms are especially prominent in Luke's understanding, and why presumably he speaks of the Psalms instead of the writings. The Psalms present us with the voice of the suffering king.

And in the Psalms we hear David, but we also hear David's son, the Christ. Luke also draws heavily upon the background of Isaiah, especially chapters 40 to 66.

[3 : 3 1] The suffering Messiah of the Psalms and of the books of Samuel is also the suffering servant of Isaiah's prophecy. We can also see the ministry to the Gentiles that arises out of the servant's work that is important for Luke's understanding.

For instance, in Isaiah chapter 49 verse 6, It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel.

I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth. This is the sort of background from Isaiah that Christ has in mind when he says, Thus it is written that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

Christ is the one who raises up the tribes of Israel, but also the one whose light will go out to the nations. The second volume of Luke's writings, the book of Acts, is also a book, then, that fulfills Old Testament prophecy.

The ministry of the church, its witness to the nations beginning with Jerusalem, is an essential part of the picture anticipated by the Old Testament. And this is something that Luke makes very clear within his telling of that story.

[4 : 44] Christ's statement here concerning his work as the fulfillment of the Old Testament, and then the ministry of the church as continuing that, is essentially the sermon that Peter gives on the day of Pentecost, where he unpacks this and uses Old Testament prophecy and statements from the Psalms and other things to fill out the picture.

But, in principle, everything is here. Christ is the one who will send the Spirit, the promise of the Father. Note the explicit presence of each one of the persons of the Trinity here, along with the fact that Christ is the one who is sending the promise of the Father, which speaks to his authority, that he has divine authority.

The Spirit is power from on high. Power for ministry, power for mission. It's a power that's the power of Christ himself. We've seen from the very beginning of the book that Christ is the one who is conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, as Mary is overshadowed by the Holy Spirit.

In chapter 4, the Spirit descends upon him at his baptism, and now the church will be baptised too. It is, however, important that the disciples stay in Jerusalem until this event takes place.

Jerusalem is the staging ground of this great new work of God. It's the place from which the word of the Lord goes out to the nations. It's the site of the temple from which the living waters flow.

[6 : 08] And the gift of the Spirit in the book of Acts very much begins at that point, in that site and location. Jesus is a new Elijah. Throughout the book of Luke, Luke has used a lot of themes from Elijah and Elisha's story to connect with the story of Christ.

Jesus has used it in his teaching. He's spoken about the examples of Elijah and Elisha. He's performed miracles that are similar to those of Elijah and Elisha. And in these ways, his ministry can be understood through the lens of their ministry.

As Jesus ascends into heaven, we should think of Elijah's ascension into heaven. Elijah's ascension is Elisha's Pentecost. As Elijah ascends into heaven, his spirit is given to Elisha, who continues the ministry of Elijah in the spirit and the power of Elijah.

And this is the same thing that we're seeing with Christ. As Christ ascends, his spirit will be given so that the church can continue what he has started and bring it to its completion. The gift of Elijah's spirit was seen in the descending mantle.

And Jesus here speaks of his disciples being clothed with power from on high. This language is probably there to draw our attention to that Old Testament background.

[7 : 23] There is something else that I think might be helpful as a background in the Old Testament here. And that's found in the first establishment of Saul as the king of Israel.

In 1 Samuel chapter 10, Samuel declares that there will be a series of three signs that will occur to Saul that will be demonstrations that he is to be the true king.

Beginning at verse 1, we read, Then Samuel took a flask of oil and poured it on his head and kissed him and said, Has not the Lord anointed you to be the prince over his people Israel?

And you shall reign over the people of the Lord, and you will save them from the hand of their surrounding enemies. And this shall be the sign to you that the Lord has anointed you to be prince over his heritage.

When you depart from me this day, you will meet two men by Rachel's tomb in the territory of Benjamin at Zelza. And they will say to you, The donkeys that you want to seek are found. And now your father has ceased to care about the donkeys and is anxious about you, saying, What shall I do about my son?

[8 : 26] Then you shall go on from there, Father, and come to the oak of Table. Three men going up to God at Bethel will meet you there, one carrying three young goats, another carrying three loaves of bread, and another carrying a skin of wine.

And they will greet you and give you two loaves of bread, which you shall accept from their hand. After that you shall come to Gibeath Elohim, where there is a garrison of the Philistines. And there, as soon as you come to the city, you will meet a group of prophets coming down from the high place with harp, tambourine, flute, and lyre before them, prophesying.

Then the Spirit of the Lord will rush upon you, and you will prophesy with them, and be turned into another man. Now when these signs meet you, do what your hand finds to do, for God is with you. Now the interesting thing in the book of Luke is that there are three occasions towards the end of his ministry where Christ declares to his disciples that they have to do something, and as they do something, something will befall them.

In chapter 19, verse 29, When he drew near to Bethphage and Bethany, at the mount that is called Olivet, he sent two of the disciples, saying, Go into the village in front of you, where on entering you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever yet sat.

[9 : 41] Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you why you are untying it, you shall say this, the Lord has need of it. And then later on in chapter 22, verse 10, Behold, when you have entered the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you.

Follow him into the house that he enters, and tell the master of the house, The teacher says to you, Where is the guest room, where I might eat the Passover with my disciples? And he will show you a large upper room furnished. Prepare it there.

At the Last Supper, Jesus says to his disciples, You are those who have stayed with me in my trials, and I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table, in my kingdom, and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

So we've had two signs. We've had a sign associated with the colt, which connects with the donkeys, which we read in the story of Saul. And we've had a second sign.

A sign where a man is carrying a water pitcher that leads them to a place where they will eat a meal. In the story of Saul, there are men carrying the stuff for a meal.

[10 : 48] Three goats, three loaves of bread, and a skin of wine. And this man carrying the water pitcher, who leads them to the place where they will celebrate the Passover, relates to that.

But that leaves us with the question, Is there a third and final sign? I believe that there is, and it's found in the passage that we've just been studying. In Saul's sign, the prophets are descending from the high place with musical instruments and song, and prophesying.

And then the Spirit of the Lord will rush upon Saul, and he will prophesy with them, and be turned into another man. I believe that we see this in what Jesus declares concerning the forthcoming event of Pentecost.

As they tarry in the city of Jerusalem, power from on high will come upon them. They will become new men, and as a result, they will bear witness, and do things that they would not have been able to do previously.

In the book of 1 Samuel, we see the signs that are given to Saul occur again. In chapter 16, verse 20, And Jesse took a donkey laden with bread, and a skin of wine, and a young goat, and sent them by David, his son, to Saul.

[12 : 02] And David, while he's with Saul, plays his musical instrument, so that Saul will be relieved from the spirit that has been troubling him. We're seeing the signs play out again. And here in the book of Luke, they play out once more.

The greater David has come, and with him come the signs of the kingdom, the signs of God's reign about to be established. And one of those signs is the sign of Pentecost.

God is going to make these disciples new men, so that they will be able to carry out the work of his kingdom, as he intends. Christ leads his disciples out of the city to Bethany, and there he blesses them.

Bethany was the site where Christ's triumphal entry had originated. And as he's blessing them, he departs. His blessing might make us think of priestly themes. He's the one who's going to intercede for them in heaven.

And he will bless them as a priest. The story of Luke begins with a priest going into the temple at the hour of incense, and it ends with a priest entering heaven itself, who's going to bless his people.

[13 : 05] He is taken up into heaven, to God's right hand. This is a point that is incredibly important for Luke, something that he underlines within the book of Acts. This is the fact of Christ's continuing authority.

We can think of it as Christ's departure here, but it's also Christ's arrival. The ascension is not just a departure, it's an arrival. And it's a new triumphal entry. Just as the triumphal entry began at Bethany, now there's another triumphal entry beginning at Bethany.

And here we return to the themes of the beginning of the book. I've already mentioned the beginning of the book, with Zechariah going into the temple and the people praying outside. Now there's a reversal of those themes, as the greater high priest enters into heaven itself, and the people go and pray at the temple.

In Luke chapter 1, verses 8 to 10, we read, Now while he was serving as priest before God, when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. And now at the end, we have the one who goes up in the cloud, the cloud of incense, as it were, into heaven itself.

[14:22] And now there's a new assembly at the temple. Those who are worshipping Jesus, returning to Jerusalem with great joy, continually in the temple, blessing God. There is a symmetry to the book.

And we see this more clearly as we go through other themes from the beginning. There's the prophecy of Simeon in the temple. Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation, that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.

These are the themes to which Christ returns in his teaching at the end of the book. We might also think of the story of Anna. Anna is someone who is worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day.

And coming up at that very hour, she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who are waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem. This is what the disciples do.

There's a repeat of this pattern. Now think of the way that there is a greater symmetry here. Christ descends 40 days after his resurrection. And here, this is 40 days after his birth.

[15:29] 40 days after his birth, 40 days after his new birth. And the action of Anna in response to the revelation of the glory of Jesus is the action of the disciples in response to the revelation of the glory of the ascended Christ.

If he went up to the earthly temple on the 40th day after his birth, now he's ascending to the heavenly temple on the 40th day after his resurrection. We might also think of the response of the shepherds after they see Christ in the manger.

And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen as it had been told to them. These are all the things that we're seeing repeated again at the end of the book.

The book is coming full circle. But when we arrive back at the beginning, we notice that everything has changed. We're seeing the same themes. We're seeing the temple. We're seeing prayer. We're seeing glorifying God.

We're seeing people returning with joy. But even though we find ourselves at the same point, it's as if everything has changed. The whole story of Luke has intervened between these points.

[16:30] And now we're back at the beginning. But we're seeing things with completely new eyes. And we're sharing with the joy and the delight and the worship and the praising of the disciples.

This passage then brings to a close the story of the book of Luke. But it also sets things up for the book of Acts, where this incident is largely repeated again. The story is both closed with the end of Christ's earthly ministry.

But it's also bursting out into the ministry of the church in the book of Acts, as it anticipates what's going to happen next. That in fulfillment of the law, the prophets and the Psalms, repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be proclaimed in Christ's name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

And now, as we finish the book of Luke, we're waiting to get into the book of Acts, to see how that will be fulfilled. A question to consider. As Christ descends into heaven, the response of the disciples, among other things, is to worship him.

This is a startling statement, as it makes very clear that Christ is seen not just as a great human leader, not just as a wise sage and teacher, but as one who is God himself.

[17:41] Where else in the book of Luke does Luke's understanding of Christ as divine come to the surface?