

Did Jesus Ascend Twice to Heaven?

Before this question is answered, one must understand the conversation between the thief and Jesus while both were being crucified. When the thief asks Jesus, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom," Jesus responds, "today you shall be with Me in Paradise." Here Jesus indicates that the thief received salvation on that day of the crucifixion, and the spirits of both go up to heaven.

Further biblical evidence for Jesus' spirit going to heaven is seen as Jesus speaks just before dying, "Father, into your hands I commit My spirit" (Luke 23:46).

However, while Jesus' Spirit goes to heaven, it is not the same as ascending in His resurrected and glorified body. Jesus makes a reference to being in the "heart of the earth" for three days (Matt 12:40), which presumably refers to His body.

The question "did Jesus ascend twice to heaven?" arises from two verse passages:

Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to Him in Hebrew, "Rabboni!" (which means, Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, 'I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.'" (John 20:16-17)

So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. (Acts 1:6-9)

After His resurrection and announcing His intention of ascending to Mary, did Jesus ascend immediately to heaven? If this did occur, what was the purpose of ascending without any witnesses and then return only to ascend again in Acts 1:9?

Jesus speaks of "going away" twice: 1) ascending after the resurrection and 2) dying on the cross.

Jesus speaks of "going away" in the context of ascending to heaven in His resurrected body. With His purpose on earth coming to end at the crucifixion (John 12:27-28), Jesus prepares His disciples for His concluding return to heaven. In two instances (John 13:3; 14:28), Jesus pairs the return to God with coming forth from God in the singular sense as in a complete cycle. In addition, Jesus sends the Holy Spirit when He departs.

During supper, the devil having already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon, to betray Him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God, got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself. (John 13:2-4)

"Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also. (John 14:1-3)

"But now I am going to Him who sent Me; and none of you asks Me, 'Where are You going?' But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you. And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment; concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me; and concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father and you no longer see Me; and concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged. (John 16:5-11)

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“These things I have spoken to you in figurative language; an hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figurative language, but will tell you plainly of the Father. In that day you will ask in My name, and I do not say to you that I will request of the Father on your behalf; for the Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me and have believed that I came forth from the Father. I came forth from the Father and have come into the world; I am leaving the world again and going to the Father.” (John 16:25-28)

When Jesus speaks of “going away” in the context of dying on the cross, it is to reassure the disciples that He will see them again. In all of these instances, it is after He speaks in the context of not seeing them anymore (John 14:19 follows John 14:1-18, John 14:27-29 follows John 14:23-27, John 16:16-20 follows John 16:5-15).

“I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. After a little while the world will no longer see Me, but you will see Me; because I live, you will live also. (John 14:19)

Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful. You heard that I said to you, ‘I go away, and I will come to you.’ If you loved Me, you would have rejoiced because I go to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. Now I have told you before it happens, so that when it happens, you may believe. (John 14:27-29)

“A little while, and you will no longer see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me.” Some of His disciples then said to one another, “What is this thing He is telling us, ‘A little while, and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me’; and, ‘because I go to the Father’?” So they were saying, “What is this that He says, ‘A little while’? We do not know what He is talking about.” Jesus knew that they wished to question Him, and He said to them, “Are you deliberating together about this, that I said, ‘A little while, and you will not see Me, and again a little while, and you will see Me’? Truly, truly, I say to you, that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will grieve, but your grief will be turned into joy. (John 16:16-20)

When speaking to the disciples before the crucifixion, it appears that Jesus speaks of “going back” or “going to His Father” in the context of ascending only once. And because of the finality of the Ascension, the disciples know that they will see Jesus again after “they won’t see Him for a little while” and before He “goes back to God.”

The disciples are unaware of the impending crucifixion; thus, they do not understand the context not seeing Jesus for a little while (John 20:9). They are only aware of only one event, when Jesus goes back to God, which will herald the last time the disciples will see Him. It is in this context that Jesus speaks to Mary:

Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to Him in Hebrew, “Rabboni!” (which means, Teacher). Jesus said to her, “Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, ‘I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.’” (John 20:16-17)

By sending the message through Mary, “for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, ‘I ascend to My Father,’” the disciples would immediately understand that the first “going away” of Jesus just occurred and that the final “going away” will occur soon. While Jesus seemingly indicates an immediate ascension, the disciples know that they will see Him before He goes away for good.