

The Ascension of Jesus, A New Chapter Begins

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[0 : 00] is the Lord. Now in just a moment we're going to read from the book of Acts, from Acts chapter 1 verses 1 to 11.

But this is not just the beginning of a new book, which it is, but it's the commencement of a new chapter in redemptive history. It's what we call a watershed moment, a moment in history where things change dramatically and irreversibly. Let me give you an example. On the 10th of January 49 BC, General Julius Caesar, governor of Gaul, stood at the edge of a river. It was rather more a wide stream than a river, but the river was called the Rubicon. And generals were prohibited from crossing the Rubicon with their armies, because a general who crossed the Rubicon would be crossing from Gaul into Italy, into Rome, and would therefore be a threat to the Roman Republic. Well if you know the story, Caesar crosses the Rubicon, he utters those famous words, the die is cast, and before too long. The Roman Republic fell, the Roman Empire commenced, and Julius Caesar became the first emperor of that empire. So there was a watershed moment. History changed on that pivot.

We turn to Acts chapter 1, and we have a game-changing moment in the history of, in the human history, history, and in the redemptive history of God, because the Lord Jesus Christ ascends, and the Lord Jesus Christ ascends as a pre-view, or as a prerequisite for the Holy Spirit being poured out. God is up to something, and human history has never been the same again. Acts chapter 1, in my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach, until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of 40 days and spoke about the kingdom of God. On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command, do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John, baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. Then he gathered round him, then they gathered round him and asked him,

Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel? He said to them, it is not for you to know the times or dates the father has set by his own authority, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes.

[3 : 28] And a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. Men of Galilee, they said, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus who has been taken from you into heaven will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven. May God bless to us this reading of his word.

So already we have looked at two of three psalms in which the ascension of our Lord Jesus is prefigured. Psalm 68, when you ascended on high, you took many captives. You received gifts from people, even from the rebellious, that you, Lord God, might dwell there. Praise be to the Lord, to God our Savior, who daily bears our burdens. Our God is a God who saves. From the sovereign Lord comes escape from death. Victory, triumph, salvation, praise. Psalm 47, which we just sang a moment ago. God has ascended amid shouts of joy. The Lord amid the sounding trumpets. Sing praises to God, sing praises. Sing praises to our King, sing praises. For God is the King of all the earth. Sing to him a psalm of praise. This ascended King is worthy of all praise, is worthy of all honor, is worthy of the sounding of trumpets and the praise of every voice. Now if we had more time this evening, we could have sung from Psalm 24. Lift up your heads, you gates. Be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle. Lift up your heads, you gates. Lift them up, you ancient doors, that

the King of glory may come in. Who is he? The King of glory, this King of glory. The Lord almighty. He is the King of glory.

These psalms point us to the identity of the ascended one, that he is none other than God himself. These psalms point us to the work of the ascended one, that he is the God who saves, the God who bears burdens, the God who is high and lifted up, and the God who is King of the nation. And he is worthy of all joy and praise, honor and glory. Long live the King. So in this preview or prefiguring, we have a picture of the ascension. And now when we come to the gospel and the book of Acts, we have the event itself. And that's one of the great values of reading both the Old and the New Testament together. Because very often what we see is promise and fulfillment, preview and the main event. And it gives us an idea of how significant and how important these events are and how we ought to respond to them. So as we look at Luke and as we look at Acts, we will see that there is a key movement. Literally, the Lord Jesus is moving.

But that this movement is accompanied with a message. Both a message before and a message after. And this is a great reminder because what we need not only is a record of the events, and that's what the Bible does. The Bible gives us a record of the events, the life of Jesus, the death of Jesus, the resurrection of Jesus, the ascension of Jesus. It's an accurate, reliable record. But the Bible does more than that. Because what we need is not only the work of God, we need the word of God to explain the work. Otherwise, it seems perplexing, does it not?

Unless we have an explanation of the cross, what do we see? We see a guiltless man bearing sin. We see a morally pure man being punished. We see a guiltless man being found guilty. And it really is confusing. But the Apostle Paul gives us an insight in verse 18 of 1 Corinthians chapter 1.

[8 : 07] He said, for the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God. You see, to the observer, it seems ridiculous. And yet to us, we see the power of God. So not only do we need to understand the event, we need to understand what it means. So God not only records for us in Luke's gospel and in the book of Acts the event, but God gives us an explanation so that we can understand the event and then apply that lesson to our own hearts and lives. So the first, let's look at the movement itself. And the ascension is a key moment.

It's a key moment in the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God. In fact, it's kind of like a bookend. If you think of Bethlehem as one bookend and the ascension would be the other bookend. We have a 33-year ministry, 33 years in which Jesus was physically on earth, begins in Bethlehem and ends with the ascension. And by way of a personal confession, I can't remember the last time I preached on the ascension on its own. It would be, I mean, I couldn't imagine not preaching on the Bethlehem, the birth of Jesus. I couldn't imagine not preaching on the death of Jesus, not preaching on the resurrection of Jesus. But it was when I was preparing a message a couple weeks ago on the exaltation of Jesus. I realized how little time and attention I personally have given to the ascension of our Lord, which is completely out of proportion to the time and attention which the Bible gives to it, Old Testament and New Testament. So this movement is key in the life and ministry of Jesus.

And this movement brings one key chapter to an end and commences a new chapter. And in fact, we'll see that actually all three major events of the New Testament are brought together in Acts chapter 1 verses 8 to 11. Quite remarkable. So the movement literally, Jesus Christ physically ascends. He was physically present on earth and he physically ascended to heaven. How did that happen? I don't know. You see, the Bible so often presents something without an explanation. How can a human being physically ascend? It is miraculous.

It is beyond human explanation. How can God become a human being? I don't know. It seems impossible. And yet it happened. How can a human being live a life of perfection? No sin. It seems impossible. And yet it happened.

[11 : 16] How can a human being who is both God and man die? It seems impossible. And yet it happened. So we see the ministry of Jesus punctuated by these key events that remind us that he is no ordinary human being.

No ordinary teacher, preacher, prophet. His birth signaled his uniqueness. And his ascension highlighted or underscored that uniqueness. You'll see in the book of Luke and in the book of Acts that the moment or the movement is sandwiched between two messages. And we'll take a moment to look at both of those messages to see what is happening here. So if you took a look for a moment just back at the Luke passage in Luke chapter 24, before Jesus ascends, he teaches. And

if you ever feel like you don't get the Bible, if you ever feel like you read and you're just not grasping what's going on, you're in good company. Because the disciples were exactly at that place.

They simply did not understand what Jesus was doing. At least three times he said, I am going to be handed over. I am going to be crucified. I am going to die, be buried, and rise on the third day. The third day came. Lo and behold, he rose. And none of the disciples expected it. His teaching was clear. His ministry was direct. And not only did he say it, but he repeated the point several times, and yet they didn't get it. Likewise, these disciples that were walking on the road to Emmaus, they didn't get it. So Jesus summarizes his ministry. Look at verse 45 at the end of Luke's gospel, Luke 24. Then he opened their minds so that they could understand the scriptures.

He told them, this is what is written. The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day. And repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations.

[13 : 46] Beginning at Jerusalem, you are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my father has promised, but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.

So Jesus is telling us that there is now a message with a ministry. That the message of Jesus is accompanied with ministry that will be conducted by the spirit himself. Jesus will ascend. He will return. The spirit will be poured out. And in so doing, repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached to all nations. So we have an indication that something big is happening. Something big is about to happen. Something big has happened. He died. He rose. But something big is about to happen.

He is going to ascend. He is going to ascend. And the spirit is going to come down to be poured out. Now, in theology, we speak of redemptive events. In the Old Testament, the major redemptive event was the exodus. The people of God were slaves. One moment, one day, the next day they were out of Egypt on their way to the promised land. It was an event which illustrated the power of God, the grace of God, but it illustrated his redemptive plan and purpose. What we have here is the key redemptive events in the New Testament. And these are events of the first magnitude. We cannot find anything more important than this. And when I say first magnitude, let me give you an illustration. Near where I live in New Jersey is the Barnegat Inlet. The Barnegat Inlet is a very narrow stretch of water which connects a large bay, the Barnegat Bay, with an even larger ocean, the

Atlantic Ocean. It's very narrow. There's rocks that you can see. There's rocks that you can't see. There's shoals of sand that shift quite significantly. So for almost 200 years, there's a lighthouse that has stood at the inlet because the lighthouse needs to warn ships. This is the inlet. There's rocks here.

There's sand here. Because prior to the lighthouse, hundreds of ships foundered on the rocks. Hundreds of ships sank just a few hundred yards from the beach. And when they first built this lighthouse, they equipped the lighthouse with a fourth magnitude light. There's a problem. The light was not strong enough. It was not bright enough. It couldn't be seen far enough. So the engineers realized that something needed to be done differently. So they fitted the Barnegat lighthouse with a light of the first magnitude. The brightest light that can be seen most clearly. The light that can be seen from the greatest distance. Why? Because this is a dangerous place. And sailors need to know that's the Barnegat light. That's the Barnegat inlet. And unless we're careful, we will join that list of ships that have sunk on its sands and on its rocks. We turn to the New Testament and we see that there are three events that are of the first magnitude. The brightest, the most significant, the most substantial. And these events shine clearly. Event number one, Jesus has arrived. Jesus has arrived, Bethlehem. Jesus has lived 30 years or so in relative obscurity. Jesus conducted a public ministry of three years. He preached. He taught.

[17 : 48] He told parables. He healed the sick. He performed miracles. He was betrayed. He was handed over. He was, you know, the story. He was condemned. He was sentenced to death, death on a cross. He was executed. He died and he was buried. And on the third day he rose again.

That's the first magnitude one event, the arrival of Jesus. The second magnitude one event, you can't get brighter, you can't get more significant, is the arrival or the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. And that's what's happening at this pivot.

Because Jesus says there's a change happening. That repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached to all the nations. You're going to begin in Jerusalem. You're going to continue to Judea. You're going to continue to Samaria. And you're going to continue to the ends of the earth. But here's a problem. This message is now entrusted to very weak messengers.

The disciples, the 11 surviving disciples, are characterized by weakness, are characterized by ignorance, are characterized by slowness and dullness. So how on earth can God entrust such a message to such an audience to such messengers? That's event number two. We need power from on high.

And that power is found in a person. And the person is the Holy Spirit. And that's why in the introduction to the book of Acts, Luke takes great care to tell us that the Holy Spirit is active.

[19 : 36] The Holy Spirit is active in the Word of God. And the Holy Spirit will soon be poured out. Verse 5 in Acts chapter 1, for John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. This is a game changer. This is a watershed event. And again, personal confession.

Most of my first 25 years of preaching, I would have focused on event one. I would have had very little to say on the Holy Spirit, very little to say on the Pentecost event. But I realized that that's an omission that is glaring. And you can't sustain that scripturally, because otherwise, without the Spirit, we are completely incapable. Without the Spirit, we are weak, we are blind, we are dull. We need God himself to work and to work in such a way. Because the Spirit empowers us, weak people. The Spirit enables us, incapable people. And the Spirit equips us so that we can fulfill the work of God. If you want to find out more about the Spirit, read those chapters, chapters 14, 15, and 16 of John's Gospel. John chapter 16, for example, Jesus says, nevertheless, 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. Going away is the ascension. He goes up to heaven, and he goes up to heaven with the promise that he will send the Spirit. And when he, the Spirit, comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment. So we have a ministry to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins. And the Spirit himself will take that message and apply that message to human hearts and to human lives. Sin, righteousness and judgment.

Concerning sin, because they do not believe me. Concerning righteousness, because they do go to the Father and you will see me no longer. Concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.

So the Spirit is promised. And Jesus says, it's to your advantage. And this is the remarkable thing. Jesus says, I'm going. And in going, that is to your advantage, not disadvantage.

[22 : 16] Our natural response is, Jesus, I'd like to see you. I'd like to have you here. I'd like to have you right by my side. And you can imagine the disciples who had seen him for three years, they're saying, how can you possibly mean that you going away is to our advantage?

Well, the fact that we are sitting here tonight is a visual demonstration of that fact. There may be some of us who have a Jewish background, but I would suggest that most of us are Gentiles, you know, by our heritage, you know, and those are really the two categories of people.

You're a Jew or you're a non-Jew, a Gentile. And the fact that we Gentile people are gathered to worship Jesus is an illustration that over these last 2,000 years, the promised Spirit has done the work that Jesus says the Spirit will do. He is convicting us of righteousness. He is convicting us of sin.

He is convicting us of the judgment to come. So this key moment now is introduced by virtue of Jesus Jesus returning. Scene 1, the ascension. Jesus physically goes to heaven. The end of that first redemptive event, Bethlehem, life, death, resurrection, ascension. The introduction of event 2, the Spirit and his ministry, the Spirit and his work. And you see today, in every nation state on this planet, not yet every people group, but in every nation state, there is some manifestation of the Christian church. It might not be large. The nation of Turkey, for example, is a nation of 75, probably, 75 million people. The Christian church in Turkey might be 10,000. That's a very small percentage of the Turkish population. But in 1960, it was 12, not 12,000, but 12 people. 12 Turks were Christians in the 60s. Now, maybe 10,000, maybe more. The Spirit is doing the work of the gospel. The Spirit is accompanying the preaching of the gospel, and the Spirit is doing divine work because the Spirit is a divine person. So, just as the movement of Jesus from earth to heaven is previewed with a message,

Jesus explains what he is about and what the Spirit is going to do. But notice there's a message that bookends the event that after the ascension, there's also a message. So, after he had said this, verse 9 in Acts chapter 1, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

[25 : 05] You can imagine what I would have done, what you would have done, we would have just been staring with our mouths open. I've never seen anything like this before. Nobody's ever seen

anything like this before. Verse 10, they were looking intently into heaven, into the sky as he was going. Then suddenly, two men dressed in white stood beside them. Men of Galilee, they said, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven. I said that there are three events. The arrival of Jesus, his life, his death, his resurrection, his ascension, that's event one. First, magnitude events. You can't get more important than the life of Jesus, the death of Jesus, the resurrection of Jesus, the ascension of Jesus. But of equal magnitude and importance is the outpouring of the Spirit. The Spirit who enables, the Spirit who equips, the Spirit who empowers, the Spirit who accompanies the preaching of the gospel. And if you're a Christian here tonight, it's not because you understood the message. You're not a Christian here tonight because you believe. Well, yes, you did. Yes, I mean, you did. But the only way any of us can believe, the only way any of us can understand, is because the Spirit has enlightened us, and the Spirit has enlivened us, and the Spirit has enabled us. Spiritually speaking, we're dead. Dead people can't do anything unless the Spirit makes us alive. So the arrival of the Spirit, which is previewed here,

Acts chapter 2 is the event itself. But there's a third event that's spoken of at a distance, yes, but still it's brought together. Because we're told this same Jesus who just went up, you're looking, he just went up. This same Jesus who has been taken from you into heaven will come back. That's event three. That's another game changer. The arrival of Jesus changed human history. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit changed the course of human history. And the return of Jesus will change the course of human history. These three first magnitude redemptive events brought together in four verses. Why do we have this? So we have an insight into what has happened, what is happening, and what will soon take place. So Jesus goes up physically, Jesus will come back physically. This same Jesus goes up, the same

Jesus comes back. Jesus, his name speaks of his nature, that he is God who saves, the God man who saves. He is same in nature, but different in condition. His earthly ministry was a ministry of poverty, a ministry of humility, of humiliation. But his second arrival, that he will return in glory, that he will return in majesty, that he is in heaven, and he will return. He will literally come back as he literally went to heaven. So what do we do with this? Just a few observations.

We live now by faith, not by sight. We won't see Jesus until he returns or until he takes us home. The disciples had sight faith. They saw Jesus. They physically saw him. They saw his miracles. They heard his teaching. They were present, and they witnessed his resurrection or the outworking of his resurrection. But we have a faith that is characterized not by sight. We believe not because we have seen. We have another reminder here that just as this world was not Jesus's home, he returned to heaven. We need to be reminded that this world is not our home. We will one day be with him in heaven.

Because to be with Jesus is to be at home. We are with him. We are united to him, yes. But a day is coming when he will take us to be with him. He's preparing a place, and one day we will be with him there in heaven. For those of us who find assurance difficult, think about it this way.

[29 : 45] Your hope is not here in this world. Your hope is not here in yourself. Your hope is him. And where is he? He's in heaven. And if he's in heaven, one day we will be in heaven. He will complete and conclude his work. So even though we despair sometimes of our own weakness, of our own inability, of our own capacity, he is our security. He is in heaven, and he will come back. He is faithful.

So I want us to notice how significant these events are. And the ascension is that pivot that moves us from the ministry of Jesus on earth to the ministry of the Spirit and previews the return of the coming King in triumph and in great majesty.

My favorite preacher, because I'm a historian, most of my best friends are who have lived long ago, was Charles Spurgeon, and he was preaching on the ascension. And as he concluded, he concluded in this frame. He said, brothers, do not let anyone spiritualize away all this from you. Don't kind of think of these things in spiritual, like abstract terms. He says this, Jesus is coming as a matter of fact. Therefore, go to your sphere of service as a matter of fact. Get to work. Teach the ignorant.

Win the wayward. Instruct children. Everywhere tell out the sweet name of Jesus. As a matter of fact, give of your substance. And don't talk about it. Because what's happening here? The men who were standing looking up into the sky, two angels come and say, don't do that. Don't do that. Don't stare up into heaven. But rather, get to work. This same Jesus who has been taken from you into

heaven will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven. We've been given marching orders. We are to be his witnesses. Here, Jerusalem, Edinburgh, Judea, the rest of Scotland, Samaria, England, Wales, Northern Ireland, if you like, you know, kind of applying that. And to the ends of the earth, to all the nations and to all the peoples. So don't spiritualize it. We need to get to work and to do what he has called us to do. And Spurgeon closed in this way. He said, serve the Lord in some way or other. Serve him always. Serve him intensely. Serve him more and more. Go tomorrow and serve the Lord at the counter or in the workshop or in the field. Go and serve the Lord by helping the poor and needy, the widow and the fatherless. Serve him by teaching the children, especially endeavoring to train our own children. Do what Jesus has given you the power to do. And then men and women of Britain, you will not stand gazing into heaven, but you will wait upon the Lord in power and you will receive the spirit of God.

You will publish to all around the doctrine, believe and live. Then when he comes, he will say to you, well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of thy Lord. So may his grace enable us so to do.

[33 : 04] Amen and amen. Let's pray. Father, we do often find ourselves staring, wondering, yes, in awe, wondering how great you are and how great your work is. But sometimes we fail to do that which we ought to do. Sometimes we're silent. We should speak. Sometimes we're inert. We should act. Sometimes we are passive.

We should be active. But remind us, Lord, that whatever we do, we do not do in our own wisdom, but we do so with your wisdom. Remind us that whatever we do, we do not in our own strength, but the strength of the spirit. Remind us that whatever we do, we are not dependent upon our own resources, but your resources. So help us to remember what Jesus has done. Help us to be aware of what the spirit is doing and help us to recognize that the day is coming when the same Jesus who went up will come back. And when that same Jesus comes back, he will close this era of human history. Help us, Lord, to be doing when that day comes. Help us to serve. Help us to speak. Help us to witness. Help us to encourage. Help us to bear one another's burdens. To encourage one another along the way. And in all things, may all glory, majesty, and honor be yours. God, Father, God, the Son, God, the Holy Spirit, three in one. Amen and amen. Let's close now. We're going to sing Holy Spirit, living breath of God.

Let's join our voices to recognize the person, the work of the Spirit in our lives and in whatever we do in the name of Jesus. The Spirit accompanies us personally and powerfully. Let's stand to sing. Holy Spirit, living breath of God. Breathe new life into my willing soul. Bring the presence of the risen Lord to renew my heart and make me whole.

Cause your word to come alive in me. Give me faith for what I cannot see. Give me passion for your purity.

[36 : 02] Holy Spirit, breathe new life into me.