

The Ascension of Christ II

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 12 June 2011

Preacher: Alex Cowie

[0 : 00] Let's turn now to the book of Acts, and we're going to look at chapter 1, and you'll find that on page 965 of the book of Acts.

We were looking at this earlier on today, but for the sake of folks who weren't able to be with us in the morning, we'll just read the passage again.

Acts chapter 1, and we'll take up the reading from the beginning, and we're going to further consider the ascension of Jesus.

The ascension means his going from earth into heaven. Now, it is generally accepted that the book of Acts was written by Luke, the physician, and he wrote, of course, the Gospel of Luke 2, hence the reference at the beginning.

The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which he was taken up, after he, through the Holy Spirit, had given commandments to the apostles whom he had chosen, to whom he also presented himself alive after his suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days, and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.

[1 : 54] And being assembled together with them, he commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, you have heard from me.

For John, that is the Baptist, John, truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.

Therefore, when they had come together, they asked him, saying, Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel? And he said to them, It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in his own authority, but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be my witnesses or witnesses to me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

Now when he had spoken these things while they watched, he was taken up, and a cloud received him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven, as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven?

This same Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven will so come in like manner as you saw him go into heaven.

[3 : 32] We are going to consider again this same topic, the ascension of Jesus, that is a technical term, from going up from earth into heaven.

And we are going to do this in terms of considering what the ascension has to say to us. Earlier on today we looked at three different points, bringing together how the Lord focused the minds of his disciples, not on curious questions, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel, but on their duty to make disciples of the nations, to bring them in, to come to know the living and true God.

That was their duty, and we looked at that. But I just want to, this evening, take a different slant on it altogether, and consider what the ascension has to say to us.

And there are three things I want to highlight in this. But before we get to it, I just want to remind you of the forty-day period from Jesus laying down his life on the cross, and taking it again, raised by the power of the Father.

God raised him from the dead. And then for forty days he was seen alive, appearing to the disciples, both in Jerusalem, and then away up in the north, in Galilee, where, you remember, he commissioned his disciples.

[5 : 09] All authority in heaven and earth is given to me, therefore go and make disciples, baptizing them, teaching them, and so on.

And he was assuring them of his presence. And you find that in Matthew 28, from verse 18. And then, having done all that, we said already today, they went back south to Jerusalem, and from Jerusalem east to Bethany, and then on to the Mount of Olives.

And we pick up the story, as it were, at this point. He has gone to the Mount of Olives with the disciples, and they are privileged to see him go up bodily from them.

The cloud, as we saw earlier on today, as it were, came and lifted him up, and he was received out of their sight. And we read there just a moment ago that they were standing there, almost mesmerized.

They were looking up, wondering what on earth is happening here. And Jesus has disappeared from their sight in the cloud.

[6 : 26] And it's clear that their whole approach here is, they want him back. They don't want him to go away. They want to hold on to him. They want him to stay.

You see, the question that we looked at this morning, or we consider how the Saviour resisted giving an answer to it that satisfied them.

It's not for you to know. They wanted the kingdom established in Israel. They wanted a rule of Messiah Jesus in Jerusalem over the whole world.

That wasn't going to happen. And here they are longing that he would just come back to them. Now you've gone. Please come back. It's not happening. It was not to be.

But you see, these heavenly visitors told them, it will happen one day, but not yet. You see there we read, this same Jesus, verse 11, who was taken up into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw him go.

[7 : 38] He'll not come immediately, but he will return. And they had to wait. Do you remember, just to wind back a wee bit in the history of this, you remember that on the night in which Jesus was betrayed, he was in what we might call Upper Room, Jerusalem.

An Upper Room somewhere in Jerusalem. And he taught the disciples, you have it there from chapter 13 of John's Gospel right through to the end of chapter 17.

And then they went out across the Kidron Valley. And I'm not sure, this is all very vivid to me, because not only have I studied it, but I've been and seen.

And when you go east from Jerusalem, from the old city, you cross the Kidron Valley, and you go into Gethsemane, if you go directly east.

But if you go, what you might call east-southeast, you go towards the Mount of Olives proper. And what was happening is that Jesus was out on the Mount of Olives proper.

[8 : 52] He was going to be taken from them. But he had said to them in Upper Room, Jerusalem, when he was teaching them, I will come again and receive you to myself.

Although he was going to leave them, he would come back, he would return. He made that absolutely clear. But what he emphasized was, meanwhile, the Church, the people of God, it has a commission from me, which is to be fulfilled.

And in this, you see, Jesus was showing them, as we saw this morning already, that they weren't to spend their days trying to work out difficult questions that are simply beyond this.

Nor are we to spend our days mourning over his absence and his delaying his return. Nor, as we saw, are we to speculate on when he might return.

For the benefit of those who weren't here earlier today, we mentioned that just the other week it hit the national news that there was a group of Christians in the US telling us that the world was going to end a couple of weeks ago, maybe three weeks ago now.

[10 : 23] It didn't happen. It is absolutely crazy for any mortal, for any Christian, no matter how able they are, to tell us they know.

We don't know. The Saviour said it. It's not for us to know. It'll come in its time. And we're not to spend our days speculating over when he might come and what are the signs of his coming.

The signs will come and he'll come when the time comes. And that's it. Our duty is not to satisfy our curiosity or give ourselves a sense of well-being, thinking we know things that we really don't know.

Our business is to be witnesses for Jesus, to receive the good news and to tell it to others, that others might come to know him.

And therefore, the ascension, the going up of Jesus from earth to heaven, tells us first of all about his finished work.

[11 : 39] Jesus' ascension tells us about his finished work. That is, the work he came to do. not just miracles and healings and teachings, but his giving of himself on the cross.

And these disciples, you see, were gazing there on the Mount of Olives, gazing up as Jesus disappeared from their sight. And in the very gazing on him going away, there was a message.

he finished the work he came to do. In theology, we call it redemption accomplished. He came to do what the Father gave him to do.

To die in the place of sinners of mankind. So that the way whereby we might know God is opened up to us, it's good news.

It's a faithful saying, Paul said, and it's worthy to be accepted that Jesus the Messiah came to save sinners.

[12 : 58] To actually do it and to do it by his death. John the Baptist, who we read about him a moment ago, said, look, behold, consider the Lamb of God who bears away the sin of the world.

Not just Jewish people, but the world of Gentiles too. Whoever will have him will receive him. They will have the forgiveness of sins, the clearing of their guilty conscience, peace with God, a right relationship with the living God.

And as they were looking heavenward, one thing Jesus going up, Jesus ascending, was telling them the work he came to do was finished.

And it is that work they were to proclaim, they were witnesses of that, and they were to proclaim that to others. And as we said a moment ago, we have to be careful that we keep that in mind.

We are not here just to gather, and I don't mean here as in the church, I mean here as in this world. We are not here in this world to be selfish and self-interested.

[14 : 24] If we are followers of Christ, he said himself, it is more blessed to give than to receive. So, everything we receive from the Lord by way of the ministry of the word and understanding of the scriptures, we receive in order to help others.

The more we give in that sense, the more we will have. It is a rule of the kingdom. And, you see, we saw how we remarked on it a moment ago, it is all too easy to become absorbed in what we called this morning, the secret things, in prophecy, in speculating on when the end might come.

And all that will happen is we will become do nothings, we will not be witnesses. We can spend our days, and one has read many a book on the subject of the kingdom of God, and the way that the world might end and so on.

But it doesn't enable us to get on with the work of telling others of how they might come to know the Lord for themselves. And you see, what the disciples saw there on the Mount of Olives, in its own way spoke to them.

The work is done, the saving work has been accomplished, Jesus did it, you're to tell people how to come to know him, how to be the saved of the Lord.

[16 : 06] And they were to stir themselves to get on with that work. And from that we can learn too, as we think about the ascension, it is a happening that stirs us to activity, you shall be witnesses to me.

The work is done, and we're to tell people how they come to know the Saviour and the living God for themselves.

The second thing we might consider about the ascension is that Christ, or Jesus, ascended upon high, into heaven to be near his people.

Now that sounds like a contradiction. I agree. He ascended up into heaven to be near his people.

But he himself said those very words in the upper room in Jerusalem on the night in which he was betrayed. I tell you, it is an advantage to you that I go away.

[17 : 25] John 16 from verse 7. It is an advantage to you. And the word is a strong word. John 16 verse 7. It is an advantage to you.

For if I do not go away, the Holy Spirit will not come. But I will send him. I will give you another helper.

and so on. He emphasized this again and again. And it is clear that in Jesus' mind's eye, it was a real advantage to the church that he returned to the glory of heaven.

Because the Holy Spirit would come in a new way, in a powerful way, in a way that would make Jesus real to his people. He shall take the things that are mine and show them to you.

In fact, Jesus goes further and he says, I will send the Holy Spirit, I will come to you. It is as close as that.

[18 : 35] To send the Holy Spirit into the hearts of believers is the same as in Jesus comes to us. And that helper, that comforter, will abide with you forever.

And that's why we actually read the bit in Acts chapter 2. Because they had to wait for that happening, that official coming of the Spirit.

You see, look at chapter 1 verse 5. verse 6. But you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.

Verse 8. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you. For what reason?

To be speculators? To be mourning over Jesus going to heaven? No. In order that you shall be witnesses to me. So, Jesus emphasizes actually that it was an advantage to his people that he returned to the glory of heaven.

[19 : 56] So, we can say, his ascension tells us he is near his people. As near as this, I will dwell in you.

I will come to you. I will come to you in the ministry and in the person of the Holy Spirit. And if you go back to Acts chapter 2, that's what it's all about.

The Holy Spirit came in power, verse 1 of chapter 2, when the day of Pentecost had fully come. They were all with one accord in one place.

And suddenly, there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting.

Then there appeared to them divided tongues as of fire, and one sat upon each of them, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.

[21 : 00] And of course, part of that phenomenon is that they began to speak in other tongues, literally, other languages, as the Spirit gave them utterance. What a way to learn foreign languages.

Christ ascended into heaven to be near his people.

And the ministry of the Spirit is a ministry that we need to make so much more of than we do. because his ministry is Christ centered.

He delights to take of the things of Jesus and make them known to us. He gives us an understanding. He traces out the lines for us when we study the Bible.

And so you see all those days of prayerful waiting in Jerusalem, in that upper room Jerusalem, waiting, that waiting and praying.

[22 : 12] They were not in vain. The Spirit came at the right time and filled them with grace and power, and they became effective witnesses.

ministers of the word would love to be in the position Peter was in when three thousand souls were added to the church in one sermon.

As a result of that one sermon we have there, and we read part of it in Acts 2 from verse 22. Three thousand souls were added to the church.

And you see, at a practical level for ourselves, we need to make more of the ministry of the Spirit. Jesus says, it's an advantage to you that I go away, because when I go away I will come to you, I will give you another comforter, another paracletos, he will help you, he will take what is mine and make it known to you.

And oh that it might be true for us that we know much of the ministry of the Spirit of God working faith in us, working in us that we will be witnesses for Jesus in this our day, ready to give a reason for the hope that is in us.

[23 : 41] I've sometimes gone on public transport and I've gone a whole journey and I've not managed to speak to anybody about the Saviour.

it's not that I haven't met them, the opportunity hasn't come up and at the end of it I've thought the problem there is you weren't prepared, you weren't looking for the opportunity, there are some of you here who know what I'm saying, if we're not prepared, if we're not looking for the opportunity, we'll not have it.

We need to be prayerful and ready to give a reason for the hope that is within us. Christ is in the believer as the very hope of glory.

So Jesus tells us then, it is an advantage to you that I go away, because when I go away I'll be nearer to you than ever. I'll be dwelling in you by the Spirit.

We need, I say, to make far more of that than we do. The ministry, to repeat myself, is a Christ-centered ministry, the ministry of the Spirit.

[24 : 57] And it is that Spirit who gives us the enabling to talk to others about Jesus. They may laugh, they may be skeptical, but the point is we're to do it.

We're to be ready to give an answer and a reason for the hope that is within us. We're to encourage ourselves that Jesus has equipped us in this way and has in a real sense come to us and his ascension reminds us of that.

The last thing, Christ's ascension reminds us he's coming again. We read there in verse 11, this same Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven will so come in like manner as you saw him go into heaven.

This same Jesus. The language behind this, the Greek is very solidly emphasizing this point.

It's the same Jesus, it's not a phantom, a ghostly, no, no. It is Jesus in the body, in the resurrection body, and he will come.

[26 : 30] He said himself, of course, at the end of Matthew's gospel, you remember, in his teaching in chapter 24, and so on, that he will come on the clouds with great glory, and all the holy angels, and every man and every eye shall see him.

He will come, and everyone will see him. I said before, it doesn't matter that we can't really get our heads round that.

The fact of the matter is, it will happen, and every eye will see him. Nobody will miss him, and he will be, of course, to his people, a sight for longing eyes.

And it will call forth our loudest praise, worthy is a lamb who was slain to receive glory and honor and power.

He will come, I will come again, and receive you to myself. Of course, you know, there's two sides to this.

[27 : 55] It is judgment, and it is judgment at the judgment seat of Christ. But for those who long for and will live his appearing, it will be a glorious day, will be a day in which they will receive the reward of his grace, the crown of life, the apostle calls it.

And there's that great contrast pictured in scripture, where the Lord's people, yes, raised from the dead, and those who are alive when he returns, changed in the twinkling of an eye, they will receive him with gladness great, and with loud hosannas.

But others will be calling upon the rocks and the mountains to fall upon them and hide them from the wrath of the Lamb. And we need to be impressed with the reality of that, the reality of judgment to come, so that we are urged to help people, to hide in him before they want to hide in the rocks that will afford them no security.

It's an awful thing, and I've used the word in the strict sense, it is an awful thing to meet him when he returns.

and not be found in him, not be found believing in him. Because when he returns, there will be no hiding place from him, not even in his living arms.

[29 : 50] God and that's why the Bible emphasizes again and again, now is the acceptable time, now is the day of salvation, now is the time to seek him and to flee to him and to come to him in faith, and to say, Lord Jesus, I believe, deliver me from my unbelief, make me to know what it is to repent, to turn to you and to receive your death as a death for me.

Now is the day of opportunity, now is the day to receive him, to rest upon him.

Behold, he says in the book of Revelation, I am coming, I am coming quickly, be ye ready, for you know not the day or the hour when the Son of Man will come.

And if we take seriously the ascension, we'll take seriously the reality of his return. He will come.

See what the messenger say, this same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw him go.

[31 : 23] And so it is important to us to receive the word about him and to be looking forward to his coming again, to be lifting up our eyes and longing for his return.

and it is as we receive him and believe on him and rest on him by faith in our hearts that we will actually be looking forward to his coming and praying daily for his coming and daily seeking to make him known to family and friends and neighbours and so on.

And one thing we can say then as we leave it, the ascension surely reminds us of his return and urges us to be ready for that return.

The last words practically in scripture in revelation say, come Lord Jesus.

And to that we say, Amen.