

The Ascension of Christ

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[0 : 00] We are going to turn now to the book of Acts and to chapter 1.

Acts chapter 1 and we may just read from the beginning. Acts chapter 1 and we may just read from the beginning.

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Acts chapter 1 and we may just read from the beginning. 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 witnesses to me in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.

[1 : 53] 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.

I want us to think for a wee while today on the passage we read in Luke 24, verses 50 and 51, and also and particularly Acts 1, 1 to 11, and to think about the ascension of Christ.

Now in terms of the calendar, the church calendar that is, the traditional calendar, this is actually the day of Pentecost.

So we're about ten days behind or so, but the point is, that's for another day. Here we have something that I would describe as a neglected doctrine in the Christian faith.

[3 : 16] Not that it is denied necessarily, but it is often overlooked, and it's passed by without much real thought on it. And even in the theologies, you know, the various systematic theologies, there's not much room given in many of them to study on the ascension.

And yet it is an important doctrine. It is a strategic doctrine. It is the transition from the beginning of Christ's exaltation at resurrection until he enters upon his session at the right hand of the Father.

So it is a doctrine that promotes hope in the believer. However, it is a doctrine that encourages us to act of faith and to generous service for Christ here in this world.

So what I want to do to begin with as we look at this account of the ascension of Christ, is to remind you, as it were, that the great commission was given by the Saviour, not in Jerusalem, not on the Mount of Olives, but away up in Galilee, overlooking Tiberias, near Capernaum.

And the Saviour gave that great commission. You have the record of it in Matthew 28, 18 following. And he prepared his disciples.

[4 : 56] He outlined their task. He assured them of power. And he assured them of his presence always, in all the days, and so on.

And then he led them back down to the south, back to Jerusalem, and out to Bethany, going east, and then on to the Mount of Olives, as we are told here in this passage in Acts.

And yet, if you think about it, only 40 days before this event, Jesus had been taken from the lower slopes of the Mount of Olives, from Gethsemane, and tried by different people, judged by different people, until ultimately Pilate passed the official sentence, and he was taken and crucified.

And it's good to remind ourselves that, and Luke records this, he presented himself alive, verse 3, after his suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them, that is, by his disciples, during 40 days, and so on.

And Paul tells us, interestingly, in 1 Corinthians 15, from verse 1, that Christ was seen by the apostles, and by 500 in one place.

[6 : 31] And it is generally recognized that that was most probably back up there, on the slope overlooking the Lake of Galilee, above Capernaum, where there is a natural amphitheater and plenty room.

He was seen there, as the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Now, you see, back down, and east of Jerusalem, on the Mount of Olives, the time has come to complete, as it were, the transition from earth to heaven.

And Luke furnishes us both in his, in the last passage, in Luke's Gospel, 24, which we read, and here, in the book of Acts, he furnishes us with information on this transition.

We simply want to draw on these passages, and to notice some things to help us, to encourage us, to enable us to hope in the Lord, and to be active in his service, knowing what he has accomplished, not only in his resurrection, but in his ascension, has direct influence upon our lives.

We have, as we were saying in prayer a moment ago, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens. He is in glory. He is ruling as a great king priest.

[8 : 09] He is ruling over all things, and he is there for us, to empower us by his spirit. And so, when we look at this account of the ascension of the risen Jesus, the first thing to notice is how Jesus resisted what we may call curious questions.

this question of the disciples is one that has occupied the church over the centuries, and it in a sense shows you the aptitude and the attitude that people have for mysteries.

Most folk who read, who are readers, like a good mystery. notwithstanding, Jesus said, this is a no-go area.

People, Christian people, have spent a lot of time and energy trying to speculate and resolve their speculations on when the kingdom will be restored.

You see, in the passage, verse 6, the disciples were eager to know about the restoration of Israel or the kingdom to Israel.

[9 : 26] Verse 6, Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel? That's their curious question. And to them, through the rabbinical teaching that they had absorbed, to them, when Messiah would at last arrive, he would set up his base on Jerusalem's holy mount and he would reign there over all the nations.

That's the way they thought. But, this is something that has persisted. It's not something that is relegated to history past.

There's a large movement within Christian Zionism, Dispensationalism, some premillennialists who hold tenaciously to this, that Jesus will return and set up his camp in Jerusalem.

The temple will be rebuilt before that time arrives and he will rule over the nations from there. And that's a view that is held. But, you see, Jesus responds to the question of his disciples and his response is important to us.

in relation to his ascension. True, he doesn't dismiss it out of hand. He doesn't dismiss the idea of a restoration of the kingdom to Israel.

[10 : 58] But, what he does do is he establishes that the important thing for the people of God is to follow his teaching and to act upon it.

not to speculate, not to pontificate on the times and the seasons. You may recall not so long ago, just a few weeks ago there, on the national news, that there was an American group claiming that the world was going to end.

I forget now the precise name, but it's past. No one knows. The Savior said it more than once.

No one knows these things. No one knows the day or the end. That it will come, there's no doubt. So said our Savior again and again.

And this question about will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel is one of those curious questions. It's not going to get an answer, the answer we want.

[12 : 04] The apostles had an answer and they had to accept the answer. Now you see, Jesus doesn't dismiss the thing.

We've noted that. He doesn't dismiss the idea that there will be a return of the kingdom to Israel. But his whole emphasis was not on a this world kingdom, but on a spiritual kingdom into which the people would be gathered.

And it's quite clear from his teaching that the Jewish people, Israel, the nation, largely was cut off lost the privileges of the kingdom because of unbelief.

The kingdom, he said, remember, and the scribes and Pharisees were furious. The kingdom will be taken from you and given to a nation, to the goyim, the nations, bearing fruit of repentance.

repentance. That doesn't mean there would be no Jews saved. No, it doesn't mean that at all. But it means that the focus has shifted and shifted for a long time.

[13 : 21] But the very fact that Jesus doesn't say there'll be no restoration entitles us to hold the view as we do, and the apostle Paul certainly did, that the day would come when there would be a restoring of the kingdom to Israel, or rather, a return of the Jewish people en masse to the faith of their father Abraham, and they would receive the Lord Jesus Christ as their Messiah, as their Savior.

But the interesting thing here, you see, is that Jesus cuts off all curious questioning into what is simply not ours to know.

There are some things that are simply not ours to know. In Deuteronomy there's a verse, the secret things belong to the Lord. And the things that he has made known to us and to our children, and the focus has to be not on the hidden things.

the Gnostics in the New Testament, that's what they were about. The Illuminates and other lot, they were claiming specialist knowledge of the mysteries of God.

They were going beyond what was revealed. I said, come with us and we will show you we have something better. No, no. We have scripture in its entirety, doubtless we receive new light from the scriptures.

[15 : 01] We're talking about this at the prayer meeting on Thursday past. Isn't it wonderful how you read a passage? And suddenly I think it pops up and you say, I never noticed that before.

I've read this passage hundreds of times. I never saw it before. And I was saying to the folk, it's worse for me because I'm in the scriptures all the time, in the Greek and in the Hebrew and in the common trees too.

And suddenly when you're sitting with your own Bible in your mother town, having prayed for a blessing, the Lord brings something up to you, new light.

But it's new light on the good old faithful living scriptures. We see what we never saw before. And that's an ongoing and an enriching and an ennobling thing.

because they're revealed and God reveals and continues to reveal them. And in that sense we can leave the secret things.

[16 : 07] I know fine of course, Psalm 25 and verse 14 tells us, the secret of the Lord is with those who fear him. but that's a reference to his counsel, to his covenant dealings with his people.

And he brings out things that we don't easily see. But there are secret things that are out of bounds things. And this is one of them.

And Jesus tells his disciples that very thing. There are secret things in theology. And there's simply no great value in speculating on them.

People try to work out God's plan in eternity and the order of his operations in the eternal counsel. There's no real spiritual soul food benefit in all that.

things are locked up to us. Just the same as there's no way for us to imagine that for a moment we can know all there is to know about God.

[17 : 28] Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There is an area of incomprehensibility of that which is beyond us. But the wonderful message of the Bible is we can know him.

and we can know him more and more. But we don't whinge or we shouldn't whinge because we're not going to know him as he knows himself.

Do you see what I mean? No, there are no go areas we have to accept. Same with Providence. There's no answer to why this one is afflicted with this disability or this debilitating illness.

There's no real answer that satisfies us. It belongs to the Lord. It's enough for us to say this is his will. I will submit to it and get grace from him to cope with it.

But the real inside knowledge of it is simply inaccessible to us. And to return to the question will you at this time restore the kingdom?

[18 : 42] Will you at this seize it? It's simply not accessible. And what Jesus does is he focuses our attention on the duty of his people in this world in terms of activity.

You see what he says? You will receive power from on high to be my witnesses. Verse 8.

As to the chronology and the season, there are things that are out of our orbit, that are inaccessible.

But you, verse 8, shall receive power. You'll get what you need to do your work in this world, to be my witnesses, a testimony to my saving grace.

That's what's important. And we need, therefore, to focus on the anointing of the Holy Spirit upon the believing people of God.

[19 : 53] We come in, if we're in Christ today, we come in through the door of regeneration by the power of the Spirit of God. And we go on in that same power of the Spirit.

And we need what we might call a fresh anointing and empowering. It's an ongoing thing. In Ephesians 5 and verse 18, Paul says, Go on being filled with the Spirit.

Be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess, but go on being filled with the Spirit. Galatians 5, 16, Keep in step with the Spirit.

This is the way not to be cluttered with the desires of the flesh. Keep in step with the Spirit. If we live, he says, verse 25, Galatians 5, If we live in the Spirit, let us therefore walk in the Spirit.

This is what Jesus says we're to concern ourselves with. You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.

[21 : 06] Wait, verse 4, for the promise of the Father. You shall be baptized, verse 5, with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.

And we're living in that sense post-Pentecost. We're living in the age of the Spirit, in the age of the Spirit whose delight it is to glorify Christ and equip the people of God.

There's where our focus needs to lie. This is the way to be faithful witnesses in our words and our work for Jesus.

Jesus, he, therefore, puts an end to these curious questions. He resists them. He's not going to give way to them, but to shift their focus onto what is most important, the empowering work of the Spirit.

And the second thing in this very context is that Jesus blesses his church. I'm borrowing here from the passage in Luke 24, verses 50 and 51.

[22 : 21] Bear in mind here, first of all, that the apostles represented the whole church of God in the world at that time.

And in a sense, they are the foundations stones of the church for all time. Isn't that what Paul says in Ephesians 2, verse 20?

We are built upon the foundation of the apostles. Christ Jesus being the chief cornerstone.

That's why we are an apostolic church. That's why we belong to a holy apostolic church. That's why we belong to a holy apostolic catholic church.

The church universal. That's why we belong to it. Because we are built on apostolic doctrine. And therefore what we need to do at this point is to, as it were, go back to that passage in Luke and to, as it were, see that the great high priest of the apostolic confession is standing there with his hands up raised to bless them as he leaves them.

[23 : 44] With uplifted hands he's blessing his own. Blessing them with all spiritual blessings, as only he could. Blessing them by imparting to them his love and mercy and grace and fellowship.

And there isn't a blessing so rich as what Christ gives us. And he's there with hands up raised, blessing them as he goes. But it is also, and this is what Luke highlights here, it is an empowering blessing.

You shall receive power. I think we need to make more of this than we do. And we need to see, as it were, a practical consequence to us of his ascension.

He empowers us, he blesses us with the empowering work of the Spirit, so that we can be more effective witnesses for Christ himself.

One of the things that staggered the authorities, if you read in the early chapters of the book of Acts, one of the things that staggered the authorities, the Jewish authorities, was the boldness of the apostles.

[25 : 13] After the Spirit came upon them in power, they were bold. They were emboldened by the Spirit. They wouldn't shut up.

They couldn't shut them up. They couldn't make them stop talking about Jesus. When that one or this one was healed, a notable miracle took place.

They traced it back not to their own power or holiness, but to the exalted Jesus, to the one who had ascended up on high and gave gifts to men.

That's what they did. And you see, there's a practical inference to be drawn from this. If we are weak, if we lack confidence in the Lord, if we lack the confidence to declare our interest in Him, or to witness for Him, the power is He enables us.

I think one of the refreshing things about the CWI speakers there just on Wednesday last, was quite evidently, these two young women, Flora Lamb and Andrea Sidon, were emboldened in the Lord.

[26 : 32] And they talked so naturally about the things they said to Jewish people and others too. And it was quite clear, they were confident in the Lord, the Lord strengthening, his empowering.

And to my mind, they kept the chase, they got straight to the gritty, somebody smiling, it was there. There was no sort of speculative stuff on God, on the God of the Jews, the God of the Christians.

It was straight in with the point. Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus is the Saviour who came for the Jew first, always the Jew first.

And He came and His death is about the remission of sins, His death is about the way of peace, His death is about deliverance from guilt and a guilty conscience, and so on.

And so many of the people that were visiting Him at that Mind Body Spirit festival, where they had their stand, were, for all that they were into, all the pseudo-religions, were feeling guilty in their consciences, and then ill at ease in their spirits.

[27 : 48] And these young folk could speak with boldness and courage. And I submit to you that God, the message here, this is the blessing that Jesus gives us, and we're to avail ourselves of it.

We're to make it our own by faith. Faith needs to lay hold, not only of Christ Himself, but His benefits, not only His saving benefits, but the benefits we gain to be witnesses for Him.

And we are to note that this is what they experienced, great boldness, when the Spirit did come upon them according to the promise.

And we are living beyond that coming of the Spirit. the power is available to us. Faith is to receive. But there's one thing I want to mention here before I leave this.

I mentioned that the Savior was there blessing them with upheld hands, and surely it's an encouragement to us that what they saw was Jesus' nail-pierced hands, uplifted upon them in benediction, in blessing.

[29 : 16] The last thing, if you like, they saw there was that very thing. His uplifted hands, behold it is I, he said in the upper room.

And here he is on the Mount of Olives making his way from them. And they're seeing his nail-pierced hands, upraised in blessing.

It is through the crucified and risen Savior we obtain the blessing. And it's still that way. What was done there has abiding significance for us.

It is to be laid hold. And then lastly, and just briefly, Jesus disappeared from their sight.

You see, all this that we've looked at was part and parcel of what was taking place in the transition of Jesus from the state of exaltation in being raised from the dead to him going up into the glory at his father's right hand.

[30 : 36] And we're told that suddenly as Jesus continued to bless them with upraised hands, a cloud appeared in the otherwise cloudless sky and lifted him in and received him from their sight.

And this was done as a mist in the divine purpose. it is the ought of the divine decree.

Ought not the Christ, ought not Messiah to suffer and die and rise again before he enters his glory.

You see, there's the ought. There's a must, there's a necessity, divine necessity here. It's all happening according to the divine purpose.

And this exaltation, his ascension up into heaven, was the culmination of what took place in these forty days.

[31 : 47] He is now ascending upon high. And here is an infallible proof to his disciples that heaven is receiving him, the work is done, and he can ascend into the presence of his father and the glory that was his before the worlds were made.

And he is ascending as the Messiah of God, as the Son of the living God. We were singing in these Psalms, and we'll come back to it in Psalm 24, about God has gone up with shouts.

The great and glorious work of Christ is being approved by the heavenly beings. He is ascending upon high with shouts and the blast of the trumpet and so on.

I mentioned Ephesians 4 a moment or two ago, quoting from Psalm 68, verse 18. Christ ascended upon high, taking captive a host of captives.

He has earned his people and he will receive them and he will give them gifts to fit them to gather others to himself.

[33 : 17] And here is an encouragement to us to live in the light of his ascension. It is an ennobling thing, it is an empowering thing to us.

He tells us you will receive power. Don't worry about the secret things. Lay hold of the things that are there to help you be a better Christian, a bold Christian, a witnessing Christian, and one who is looking forward and hastening the return of the Christ.

You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be witnesses to me in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

But you see, the final word is men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? There's work to be done.

This same Jesus who was taken up will come in like manner. We can look forward and hasten to his coming, but meanwhile we get on with the word.

[34 : 38] We pray, we plead, we witness. That's our business here. in the light of an ascended and a seated, a ruling saviour who will return again in the appointed time.

Well, may he bless us and may we find that he is encouraging us to lay hold upon the power that is ours in Christ through faith and the ministry of the Spirit of God.

Amen.