

The Ascension

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[0:00] Men of Israel, hear these words. Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst.

As you yourselves know, this Jesus delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.

God raised him up, losing the pangs of death because it was not possible for him to be held by it. For David says concerning him, I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand and I may not be shaken.

Therefore my heart was glad and my tongue rejoiced. My flesh also will dwell in hope. For you will not abandon my soul to Hades or let your Holy One see corruption.

You have made known to me the path of life. You will make me full of gladness with your presence.

Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David that he both died and was buried and his tomb is with us to this day.

[1:12] Being therefore a prophet and knowing that God has sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne. He foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption.

This Jesus God raised up and of that we are all witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit.

He has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand and I will make your enemies your footstool.

Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified. Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, Brothers, what shall we do?

And Peter said to them, Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

[2:26] For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off. Everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself. And with many other words, he bore witness and continued to exhort them saying, Save yourselves from this crooked generation.

So those who received his word were baptized and there were added that day about 3,000 souls. Well, last week we celebrated Easter, the cross on Friday, Good Friday.

Jesus' wonderful death-beating resurrection on Easter Sunday. And we're very familiar, aren't we, with those two events, and rightly so.

They're wonderful. But what happened next? Easter, then what? Well, we just said it in the Apostles' Creed.

On the third day, he rose again. He ascended into heaven. He is seated at the right hand of the Father. What happens next?

[3:37] The ascension comes next. But what actually happened, and what does it matter? Well, we're going to have a little story refresh, and then consider two implications.

If you've got a Bible handy, click to Acts chapter 1 with me. Luke writes Acts as his second volume after his gospel. And he quickly gives his reader reminders of what's been going on.

Verse 3, Jesus suffering the cross. Reminds his reader of the resurrection appearances. And he updates his reader, explaining Jesus spent 40 days teaching about the kingdom. Then, Luke records Jesus telling his disciples to wait in Jerusalem until they're clothed with power from on high. Have a look at chapter 1, verse 8.

Jesus says, But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.

[4:46] And then, before their eyes, Jesus is lifted up. Verse 9, just see if you can imagine it. Imagine being one of them when he had said these things.

As they were looking on, he was lifted up. And a cloud took him out of their sight. He ascends and is enveloped by a cloud.

It's like nothing they or we have ever seen. We just don't have a framework for this kind of thing, do we? He doesn't just vanish. No, this is Jesus physically, bodily, ascending before their very eyes.

So, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, 40 days of teaching, and then he ascends. The cross, the resurrection, the ascension. Maybe you'd like to get out your phone, find your diary.

Maybe you want to do this when you get home. Put May the 13th in your diary. Right at the top of it, ascension day. Marking 40 days of Jesus' teaching and then his ascension.

[6:00] On it, celebrate that Jesus was not just risen, but ascended. You can even email me on the day and tell me you're celebrating Jesus' glorious ascension.

But what's so good about it? Because we tend to treat it like a bit of an afterthought. What difference does it actually make?

Well, there are numerous implications. But this morning, we're just going to look at two. If you want more, you can ask me later. First one, the ascension means Jesus really is Lord of all.

And then second, we'll see the ascension means the gospel will go to the ends of the earth. The ascension means Jesus really is Lord of all. The ascension means the gospel will go to the ends of the earth.

To connect up the dots from Acts 1 that we've just had a little recap of to our passage, the 11 apostles, they wait in Jerusalem as they're instructed to by Jesus.

[7:04] And then in chapter 2, verse 1 to 13, the Spirit, the Holy Spirit is poured out from heaven. And Jesus' followers speak in all different languages. Understandably, that draws quite a crowd.

And people from all nations who are visiting Jerusalem, they wonder. Chapter 2, verse 8. How is it that we hear each of us in our own native languages?

Some of them marvel at what they're hearing. Some of them think the disciples are drunk. And then Peter stands up and preaches to the crowd. And he closes his sermon with these words from verse 32.

He says, Now Peter wants them and us to see the ascension means Jesus really is Lord of all. He makes the Lord of all, the Lord conclusion in verse 36 there. And he has shown it's true by quoting Psalm 16 back in verses 25 to 28.

[8:54] And Psalm 110 in verses 34 and 35. See, over and over, the Old Testament speaks of God's ultimate king. And those two psalms that Peter quotes, written by King David, together they tell that God's final king will be eternal and will sit at the right hand of God.

So if you see a figure that fits the description of God's king, but they die like David did, you can be sure that he wasn't God's eternal king.

But if you see a kingly figure, dead and alive again, raised up and then ascended before your very eyes, you can be sure he is God's anointed king.

So Peter says, Jesus is the one. Ascended, Jesus is, verse 33, exalted at the right hand of God. Fulfilling David's Psalm 110 verse 1 prophecy, Jesus ascends to take his place at the right hand of God the Father. However, he is given the place of highest honour and is seated in heaven's control room, able to exercise rule over all with his enemies as a footstool.

[10:28] Now, if Jesus had died and stayed in the tomb, well, he would have been shown up as just another man who lived and died.

And we wouldn't be here bothering with church at all. So in his death and resurrection, he is proven to be God's eternal king, the Christ.

But if he takes a throne in Jerusalem, well, he's just king in Jerusalem, isn't he?

Sure, he can rule over the nation of Israel. But stretching his reach beyond that is quite difficult. Instead, ascended.

Ascended. Ascended and exalted at the right hand of God the Father. Jesus is not just king on a localised throne in Jerusalem, but king on an eternal, global, universal king.

[11:37] And it's from here he can rule, not just Israel, not just the nation, but the whole universe. And Peter, he recognises that.

He understands what the ascension means. And so he declares, verse 36, Jesus is Lord and Christ.

In a sentence, Peter humbles world leaders who think they're in charge. Just imagine being in a first century city or nation ruled by Rome.

Imagine then declaring, Caesar's not Lord, Jesus is. It's bold, isn't it? But Peter is convinced, and so are these early believers, the ascension of Jesus means he really is the boss.

And so recognising that reality, their allegiance to him is set. They won't bow to Caesar. They won't bow to anyone else.

[12:54] They bow only to Jesus the Lord. And all through the book of Acts, we see that play out, it costing some of them their lives. But they preach clearly, and they hold firmly to one unified message.

Jesus, he is Lord. And the reality of the ascension gives them that confidence, and can give us that kind of certainty and confidence too.

You see, if the resurrection on Easter Sunday is good news because the tomb is empty, the ascension is good news because heaven's throne is occupied.

The ascension shows us that we worship and honour the true king who is seated on his throne in heaven, ruling over all things. The ascension declares, Jesus is Lord.

So if we fear losing our boss's approval because we want to stand with Jesus, or if we worry what our neighbours will think of us when we live under Jesus' rules, or if we're nervous of speaking of Jesus because of cancel culture, the truth that Jesus is Lord is both our battle cry and our confidence.

[14:26] It is Jesus who really rules. Not our bosses or neighbours or the prevailing culture. They all sit under Jesus' feet. I'm not suggesting that you shout, Jesus is Lord, not you, at your boss next time they make unreasonable demands of you.

But whatever we face, we can entrust ourselves to Jesus the Lord, to his faithful and loving rule. And we can be sure that we will come to no ultimate harm as we stand with him. If we're trusting Jesus, our futures are secure because he has ascended to the right hand of the Father to rule as Lord.

few. Here's how Tim Chester reflects on Jesus as Lord in his book on the Ascension. When you went to bed last night, Jesus was at work subduing his enemies.

While you slept, he was continuing to rule over the world. He was still at it when you woke up this morning. And even now, as you read this book or listen to this sermon, that is the outrageous claim of the Ascension.

[15:50] It is outrageous because his rule is not recognized in his world. Open a newspaper and it's not full of how Jesus is reigning. Yet the story of the Ascension is the story of Jesus as King of the whole world.

It may be an unseen reality, but the Ascension reveals its truth. Jesus is Lord.

And so to join in believing that and declaring it, to be on his side is to be on the right side of history. Now some of us will hear that Jesus is Lord and we'll hear that and respond with joy and thankfulness and we'll recognize that it is very, very good news.

I guess others of us will be intrigued by that claim and I'm sure others of us will scoff at it. If you're intrigued or tempted to scoff, can I encourage you to do what Andy suggested last Sunday and consider the evidence again?

If we're going to discount the claim that Jesus is Lord, I think we need to have an explanation for two things. Firstly, how do we explain the empty tomb?

[17:10] What happened to Jesus' body? The evidence points to resurrection, so what's your alternative? And secondly, how do we explain the explosion of the early church?

What turned Peter and the other early Christians from fearful followers to passionate proclaimers of the gospel? Jesus really rose, that's why the tomb was empty.

And he really ascended. So the throne is occupied and he is Lord. The early church knew it and so they confidently proclaimed it.

See, whether we believe it or not doesn't alter the truth of it, the ascension means Jesus really is Lord of all. Secondly then, the ascension means the gospel will go to the ends of the earth.

The gospel will go to the ends of the earth. At first, that might seem counterintuitive. Isn't Jesus leaving worse for the spread of the gospel?

[18:22] Surely if you want people to know he's the king, the best thing would be to have him seated on a throne people can actually see and actually visit, that one tourist can queue up for.

But I think that's to forget how people responded to Jesus when he was around. People saw him perform miracles, watched him heal the sick, heard him teach.

But it wasn't enough for them to be convinced he was the promised king there and then. So why would a Jesus world tour actually help? Instead, notice what Jesus does from his ascended position at the Father's side.

Acts 2, verse 33. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing.

From the right hand of the Father, Jesus pours out the Holy Spirit, fulfilling the promise God spoke through the prophet Joel that Peter previously quoted in chapter 2, verse 17.

[19:40] Let me read Joel's prophecy. In the last days, it shall be, declares the Lord, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh and your sons and daughters will prophesy.

And at the beginning of Acts 2, the coming of the Holy Spirit and the mass of different languages proclaiming the good news about God to the nations in Jerusalem, it is the work of the ascended Christ pouring out the Spirit, just as Joel prophesied in the Old Testament and just as Jesus promised in Acts 1, verse 8.

Those events, they're a foretaste of what will happen as empowered by the Spirit, Jesus' followers take the message to the ends of the earth. I don't know how helpful you'll find this diagram.

I find it useful to visualize how it plays out. Jesus ascends and reigns as Lord whilst the disciples wait. Then the Holy Spirit is poured out from heaven by the Father and the Son.

And the disciples receive the Spirit and are empowered to preach the gospel to all the earth. And we see the impact of it straight away as usually weak-kneed Peter stands up and boldly preaches this sermon to the crowds, calling them to recognize Jesus is Lord.

[21:12] Notice the response he gets in chapter 2, verse 37. When they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter, What shall we do?

Peter calls them to repent and verse 41, There and then, 3,000 believe. And you can trace that pattern all through the book of Acts.

In Jerusalem, Peter preaches and many believe. Then the apostles, they're spread out and empowered by the Holy Spirit, they preach from city to city and then nation to nation that Jesus is Lord and thousands upon thousands upon thousands of people respond in faith.

And then you can trace the spread of the gospel worldwide beyond Acts chapter 28 and through history and to the four corners of the earth and to us.

And the ascension is the catalyst for it all. The ascension is the catalyst for the spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth.

[22:29] You see, until the ascension, Jesus' work and ministry, they're focused in on Jerusalem. But at the ascension, his ministry takes on a global focus and breaks new ground.

You see, as God so often does, he uses small and weak-looking means to bring about his purposes. So rather than King Jesus on a throne in one place for people to see, God's purpose and

plan is to opt for millions and millions of small, weak-looking, spirit-empowered signposts that point to Jesus.

People like you, people like me, people like Peter, people like Paul. and so when it comes to our mission as a church to make disciples of Jesus, as we seek to continue the work that began in Acts, the ascension should give us great confidence.

The gospel will go to the ends of the earth. Jesus' mission to all nations will be fulfilled. It is happening and we get to join in. The ascension gives us confidence but it also gives us clarity about the content of our message.

All through Acts, the big message preached is so often, Jesus is Lord. Of course, there's more to say, and the disciples, they do say more about the cross and the resurrection, the forgiveness of sins, but above all, their message, our message, of good news to the world, isn't simply focused on the benefits of being a Christian.

[24:15] Much more, it's to be focused on the objective reality that Jesus is Lord. If you're listening and not convinced, that's okay.

But please do take these things to heart. Jesus really is Lord. That message has spread just as he said it would, such that you are hearing it now.

And as the king, seated on the throne, when he does rule and he has promised to return to judge, we need to weigh that prospect and examine the claims.

Because if Jesus really is Lord, he is not just one option among many different worldviews. And to believe in him is not just a matter of opinion.

It is an acknowledgement of the objective truth of his rule. I guess it's possible you're sitting here, listening and thinking something of what the people in the passage, Peter was preaching to, thought.

[25:24] Again, Acts 2, verse 37. When they heard this, that the news that Jesus is Lord, when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, brothers, what shall we do?

And Peter said to them, repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins. Maybe today you recognize for the first time, Jesus is Lord.

And if that's you, the right response is to repent. To turn from living with yourself or whoever else as Lord of your life and turn instead to live for Jesus.

Recognize he's Lord, receive the forgiveness of sins and the spirit. If that's you, I'm very happy to chat to you afterwards. For many of us, though, who do acknowledge Jesus is Lord, it is our joy and privilege to join in with the apostles and believers through the ages.

Empowered by the spirit, we get to take up the baton of worldwide gospel witness. We get to declare Jesus is Lord to anyone and everyone.

[26:47] The ascension means the gospel will go to the ends of the earth. And by the spirit, we get to play our part.

Let's pray together. To paraphrase Acts 2, verse 36. Our father, please let all the world know for certain that Jesus is Lord and Christ.

Amen.