

Is Jesus on a Holiday?

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Date: 08 July 2007

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[0 : 00] God, our Heavenly Father, we pray that you would make us attentive to your word and aware and believing in the promise that your Son, the Lord Jesus, is present and ruling and reigning as we hear his word and his message.

Help us to do this for your glory. Amen. And please have a seat, friends. Jesus, where is Jesus today?

Where is Jesus right now? Why did Jesus leave us anyway? Why did he go? It was such a great gift to the world for him to come and join us.

Why did he go? When will Jesus return? Why is Jesus taking so long? What's happening? What has Jesus been doing for the last 2,000 years?

What has he been up to? Is he on a holiday? These questions have really bothered me and annoyed me at different stages of my Christian life.

[1 : 18] I think I had my birthday a few weeks ago of becoming a Christian. 20 years. I've walked with the Lord Jesus. And I've often wondered, what has he been doing?

Where is he? Have you ever sat in church as you are now? And we just said the Apostles' Creed. And you may have noticed, it says this.

It says, Jesus ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father, comma. From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

And I want to stand up in church at that point and say, stop. What happens in the comma? What happens between his ascension into heaven and his return to judge the living and the dead?

Because for me or for us, that is 2,000 years of modern history. And I want to know, what's he doing between that and that? The Apostles' Creed just blinks and keeps going.

[2 : 19] But I want to ask Jesus, where are you? Are you on a holiday? What are you doing? Is Jesus enjoying a long, long weekend with maybe a few rostered days off tacked on the end?

Is Jesus on long service leave? You know, maybe God the Father promised him, if you could get the Easter job done by a certain time, then you get long service leave.

It was a tough job. The eternal Son of God became a human being. He became the Son of God incarnate, a baby.

He grows up as one of us. He preaches, teaches, rejected, suffers, dies for the sins of the world, raised to new life, conquers death.

No question, the biggest event in history, the biggest job in history. Why wouldn't you want to have a little break afterwards? I'm sure the leadership and management gurus among us will know the important leadership theory of delegation.

[3 : 32] Maybe it's time for Jesus to take a break, delegate to the Holy Spirit to get the rest of the job done. Well, mate, what about those disciples? They were fairly kind of hopeless in the earthly ministry of Jesus.

So maybe it's time for the disciples, the apostles, to chip in and lend a hand now. Time for them to do some work. Jesus has done enough work. Is that right?

Is Jesus on a holiday now? Well, the best place to find out, I think, is Luke's work. And Luke did a two-volume work. Luke, he wrote Luke's gospel, and then he also wrote the sequel, the Acts of the Apostles.

And the two books go together. And, I mean, they really should go together in our Bibles. They should follow each other, but it's not how history's worked it out. But we'll know what Jesus is doing by actually looking at the transition between Luke's record of Jesus' earthly ministry and then what happens after that.

And so in the transition between the books in Acts 1, we'll get a clear sense of whether Jesus is on a holiday or not. Now, we know from Acts 1 and from Luke 1 that Luke was writing to a man called Theophilus.

[4 : 49] So in Acts 1, verse 1, he says, In my first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day he was taken up to heaven. And Theophilus may have been a Roman official.

It's a very Roman-sounding name. It may just be a generic title because Theophilus means theos, God, lover. So it may just be written to the sort of general kind of Roman inquirer or any Roman official who's wondering about Christianity.

Now, the Romans had a lot of reasons to ask the question, Who are these people? Who are these Christians? Luke had to write this gospel to answer that question.

The Christian movement had a massive impact on the Roman Empire. We know that within the first 30 years of the Christian movement since Easter, that this way, this body of this Jewish sect caused a shockwave within the Empire.

For example, in AD 64, there was a great fire in Rome and Nero was the emperor. And, you know, it's said that, you know, Nero fiddled while Rome burned.

[6 : 10] We're not really sure. Some people think he started the fire. We're not sure who started the fire. But Nero was the leader and he had to somehow not have his leadership undermined by the fact there's this fire out of control.

And he found a scapegoat. He said the Christians started it. And so the Christians must have been a significant force within 20, 30 years that Nero thought they'd be a suitable scapegoat.

Everyone must have known who they were. Everyone must have been suitably annoyed by this movement. A few years earlier in AD 59, Emperor Claudius was so sick of the fighting within the Jewish groups because of the teachings about Christ.

That is, Christians who were seen as a Jewish sect were preaching the gospel and causing such an uproar, especially among the Jews. Claudius was so sick of it that he expelled all the Jews from the city of Rome.

And we can read about this in a Roman historian called Suetonius. We can also read about it in Acts 18. But what we have a sense of in both Acts and in the histories of the period is that the Christian movement spread like wildfire.

[7 : 29] And no one really knew where they came from and what they were on about. There was like nothing that had ever been seen before in the empire. And so if you were Theophilus, if you were a Roman official, you would be asking, who are these people?

Who do they follow? And is it true? And they're the questions that Luke is trying to answer when he wrote Luke's gospel. He says in Luke 1, I'm putting together an orderly account.

I've checked my sources of all the eyewitnesses so that you may know the truth concerning that which you've heard. Another question Theophilus may have had was, are Christians loyal Roman citizens as well?

Who are they and are they good Romans? And these are the questions that Acts will answer. Theophilus would read Luke's gospel, you see, and he would say, that's great.

But it doesn't explain thousands of Christians. It doesn't explain thousands of churches that are springing up across the Mediterranean. How did we get from Jesus' death and resurrection to this movement which is causing shockwaves across the empire?

[8 : 39] And the answer will come in the book of Acts. And so it begins. My first book was only about, or was about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day he was taken up to heaven.

And there's already a hint there in verse 1 that there is more that Jesus was going to do and teach that Luke's gospel doesn't contain. It only contained that which he did from the beginning until the day he was taken up to heaven.

But the implication is that he would do more than that. In some English translations it captures the Greek better when it says, In my first book I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach.

And Acts is going to be the rest of what Jesus continues to do and teach. And in fact we can see some of this in verses 2 and 3. What did Jesus do after his resurrection?

He gave after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. The apostles in the book of Acts will play a very special role, especially in the early days.

[9 : 50] They are Jesus' chosen group who will start the church and get it going. Especially Peter and the apostle Paul who's yet to be converted.

That will happen later in Acts. Jesus is training this group to work with him in the spread of his kingdom. In the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus gives them, well, verse 3, He presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during 40 days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

In the book of Acts, the resurrection is going to be a critical part of the preaching of the gospel. And so Jesus wants his apostles to be totally sure that the resurrection is evidence, it's true, it's physical, it's real.

And that's going to be a core part of the message of Acts. And he talked to them about the kingdom of God. So that is, Jesus was preparing them for the kingdom of God to continue to come, to continue to grow and to continue to spread.

It would have been nice if Luke, at this point, had told us what Jesus had told the apostles. But I think what Luke wants us to do is to turn back to Luke's gospel, because Jesus has already taught about the kingdom of God.

[11 : 13] So what did Jesus teach the apostles in this secret training session? Well, he probably said things like Luke 13. What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it?

It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in a garden, and it grew and became a tree, and all the birds of the air made nests in its branches.

Friends, that's a description, really, of what happens in the book of Acts. That this one man, this one man's work, his death and resurrection, grows and spreads and becomes an unstoppable movement.

That's a description of the kingdom of God growing in the book of Acts. Or again in Luke 13, Jesus taught about the kingdom of God in this way. To what should I compare the kingdom of God?

It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened, until the yeast was spread throughout. And again, that's a description of the kingdom of God spreading in the book of Acts, that God's people will transform everywhere they go.

[12 : 21] Israel will hear the gospel and many will receive it, and then they'll go out and transform the whole Roman Empire. These are the kind of things that Jesus wanted his apostles to have in mind as they prepared for the next stage of God's salvation history for the next era.

Jesus was about to be lifted up to heaven, and he wanted the apostles to be gripped by the fact that Jesus was risen from the dead. He had truly beaten death, truly beaten the devil, truly suffered for our sins and was raised, and that his cause was like the unstoppable mustard seed that was going to grow and grow and grow.

If you're going to go on a holiday, you wouldn't be teaching the disciples about the kingdom of God. You wouldn't be training them for this next stage if you're about to go on a holiday.

Now, this talking about the kingdom of God triggers something in the apostles' mind, so they ask him, and they say in verse 6, Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel? Because he's promised them that they're going to receive the Holy Spirit, as John the Baptist said, the promise of the Father. And so they're asking now, is this going to be the end of the age?

[13 : 49] Is this going to be the time that everyone hoped for from the Old Testament? The whole Old Testament was about the kingdom of God, the reign of God, God blessing the nations through Israel, God undoing the effects of sin.

Maybe the disciples had in mind that promise of Ezekiel 37, that in Ezekiel 37 there's this promise of God that the broken halves of God's people, of Judah and Israel, would be reformed as one, and all God's people, all the Jews would return to Israel and God would reign and rule over them with his shepherd king in the line of David.

And so they're kind of asking, are all these end-time prophecies going to happen now? Is this the end of the world? Is God going to wrap everything up and vindicate his people Israel?

Is this the day of the Lord? It's a good question. They know their Bibles. And Jesus says to them, it is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.

So he's not quite saying no, but he's saying God does have the plan to fulfill all those promises, but it's by his authority. He knows when it will come about.

[15 : 08] But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

You see, the apostles have eyewitnessed his death and resurrection. They have the proofs he's raised. They have the teaching. The only thing they lack is power.

And that will come when they receive the Holy Spirit from the Lord Jesus on the day of Pentecost. So we can see very clearly from verse 8 that the Lord Jesus, just before his ascension, has a very clear agenda for the world.

He has a very clear plan for the whole world, for his gospel to be proclaimed to the ends of the earth. He is not planning a holiday, but he has a plan.

And the plan is going to start in Jerusalem and then go to the surrounding areas of Judea and then to the northern neighbours of Samaria and then to the ends of the earth. Because Jesus will ascend, that plan is unstoppable.

[16:25] And that plan is in fact the shape of the book of Acts. So the book of Acts actually starts in Jerusalem and then the apostles preach in the areas around. And then they in effect get expelled by persecution and go to Samaria.

And then they go to Rome. They go to the ends of the earth. So the book starts in Jerusalem, ends in Rome. So verse 8 is in fact the structure of the book of Acts. And it's a witness to the fact, to the reader, that Jesus is not on a holiday, but he is risen and he's continuing to work with and through his apostles by the power of the Spirit.

And not only is verse 8 the geography of the book of Acts, it's also the theology of the book of Acts. Because those places are theologically significant. Because what they're doing is starting with God's old covenant people and then going to Samaria, who were part of God's people in the Old Testament.

They were the northern neighbours who split off. And they in effect dropped out of the Old Testament. They were destroyed. And so first Israel, God's people is reunified, just like the Ezekiel 37 promise.

And then they'll go to the ends of the earth with the preaching of God's shepherd king. And so in effect, the promises of the Old Testament will be fulfilled in the preaching of this kingdom in the book of Acts under the rule and the active reign of the Lord Jesus, who is not on a holiday.

[17:59] Jesus is telling them we are beginning a new age. And the unique characteristic of this new age is this. It will be the age of evangelism.

It will be the age of the sharing of the message of the Lord Jesus. This new era will be the evangelistic age. What has Jesus been doing for 2,000 years?

Well, he's been spreading his gospel through the whole world. Just as it began in Acts in Jerusalem and ended in Rome, the gospel continues to spread by the power and the hand of the active Lord Jesus, who has never rested from doing that and will never stop.

That's why the church is unstoppable. How many people have predicted the end of the church or the death of the church? But it never happens because the Lord Jesus is not on a holiday and he has promised that his gospel must go to the ends of the earth.

And just as he's given them this commission, as they were watching, verse 9, he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes appeared.

[19:17] So two angels appear and they basically say, get going. Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come back the same way you saw him go into heaven.

The point is, I think, Jesus is ascending to his father. Just as in the time of the Exodus, God's presence came in a cloud on the mountain of Sinai and God's presence came in a cloud on the tabernacle and in a cloud on the temple, Jesus ascends into the cloud of the presence of the father. Some people foolishly mock this and kind of say, oh, the ascension's kind of dumb because as if Jesus would go up and go into the solar system and then out of the galaxy.

That's not what Luke's saying. I think Luke is smarter than that. What he's saying is the imagery is that Jesus is being enveloped by the presence of his father and he's going to take his place at the right hand of God the father.

Unafraid, unconsumed, the son of God returns to the throne room of God. I think the point is because Jesus' gospel must go to the ends of the earth.

[20:34] Jesus must rise, as it were, above the earth to work throughout the earth. If he stayed in Jerusalem, it would only be kind of a localized mission but his mission, his glory, must be proclaimed to the ends of the earth.

So he ascends to the position of power in the universe so that working through his instruments, the apostles, and his followers, his message can spread.

The evangelistic age has begun. We live in the age of evangelism. The time is now for us, God's people, to be a light to the nations.

In the book of Acts, it will begin with the message of the apostles, their eyewitness to the gospel, but by the end of Acts, you just have all Christians spreading the message of the gospel of Jesus' death and resurrection, of his victory over sin and of his lordship as king.

Have you ever wondered, friends, how the gospel got here today? How did the gospel get to Doncaster? Because frankly, we are a long way from Jerusalem.

[21 : 43] We are a long way from the book of Acts. The risen Lord Jesus gave the spirit and the gospel was preached throughout Jerusalem and to Rome and the gospel eventually transformed Rome and all of Europe was evangelized over a thousand years.

That included England and at the time of the Reformation and the English Reformation, the gospel was held on to. And by the time you get to the 18th century, a country was discovered in the middle of nowhere called Australia and the English decided to make it a dumping ground for their convicts and the risen Lord Jesus put it on the heart of some evangelical Anglicans, some chaplains, to be on board the first fleet.

And so there was a man called Richard Johnson and he came to Australia with the purpose of bringing the gospel here because the risen Lord Jesus had put that on his heart, had put that conviction on his heart.

And he was part of the, this movement that was going on with the Great Awakening with Wilberforce and those great men. And you'll know John Newton, the writer of Amazing Grace, that great hymn.

He also wrote a kind of hymn or poem for Australia and he wrote it for Richard Johnson, the first chaplain who came here to preach the gospel. And part of it, he says this, Many in quest of gold or empty fame would compass earth or venture near the poles.

[23 : 24] But how much nobler is your reward and aim to spread his praise and win immortal souls? And so the unstoppable Lord Jesus has always kept his gospel being preached, even on the heart of this man, Richard Johnson, who brought the gospel to Australia, of course, with many, many others who came here.

The Lord Jesus wants the gospel to be preached to the ends of the earth. He wants it to be preached in Doncaster. He wants it to be preached to our indigenous people. He wants us to take the gospel back to the nations that don't have it anymore.

We are gathered here today, friends, because Jesus is not on a holiday. We are gathered here today because Jesus is alive and because he's active and he's reigning and ruling and he's using us to spread his gospel.

If you read the book of Acts, it's got these great little hints and it says things like, And the word of the Lord strengthened and grew. These little summary notes. The word of the Lord was strengthened.

And what it's really saying is that the risen Lord Jesus spread his word. So as we read the book of Acts, we want to read it looking for the Lord Jesus, looking for his reign, looking for where he's acting to glorify his name.

[24 : 49] Because, friends, I think we have an obligation. Every generation of the church must look to the book of Acts and compare itself. Every generation needs to look to the book of Acts and look at this first generation of the church and say, Is our message the same?

Is our vigor the same? Is our spiritual power the same? Is our intensity for reaching the ends of the earth the same? Do we long to see the gospel spread as the early church did in the book of Acts? It would be so easy to read the book of Acts and simply just cherry pick the bits that we like and leave behind the rest. But we can't do that.

We need to line ourselves up with the whole book, with every other generation of the church and say, Are we working with the Lord Jesus to continue his reign?

And as we do that, we need to remember Acts will be about Jesus, about him being preached as Lord, about him sending his spirit to empower people to preach him as Lord.

[25 : 59] Friends, are you convinced that Jesus is alive today? Are you ever tempted to think, He's not really interested in me or He's not really interested in what I'm doing? He's not interested in my witness?

Are you convinced that He is alive and that His reign is unstoppable, that He will work to see that His gospel goes to the ends of the earth, to the ends of your street, to the other cubicles in your workplace, to the other people at your school?

Friends, let us beg of the Lord Jesus to send His spirit to us to empower our witness, to tell of His goodness, to tell of His death and resurrection, to tell of His gift of forgiveness.

All of us have a role to play and we can play that role with confidence knowing that the risen Lord Jesus is right behind us whenever we seek to tell someone, I'm a Christian or I go to church or can I pray for you?

Can I give you a Bible? Can I give you a Christian book? Can I invite you to an event? Can I invite you to Introducing God or to our church trivia night? Whenever you seek to stand up for Him, He is with you, risen, reigning, ruling, not on a holiday but working with power to spread His gospel.

[27 : 24] Let's pray, friends, that He would do this in our lives, that we would not be complacent but confident in His reign in our lives and in our part of the world.

Let's pray for that. Our Lord Jesus, we praise You for Your agenda for the world given to Your apostles which we have received and continue on as one unbroken chain.

Lord Jesus, we pray that You would give us a strong sense of Your commitment to the world, of Your plan and agenda for it. We pray that we would be part of Your evangelistic age of the sharing and witnessing to the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Lord Jesus, give us courage and commitment to do this. As we read the book of Acts, may we as a church compare ourselves against it.

May we line ourselves up against it and be invigorated by Your active reign. Lord Jesus, glorify Your name and most of all, glorify Your Father by working through us in the power of Your Spirit.

[28 : 38] Amen. Amen.