

50 Days of Wonder: He Ascended Into Heaven: 3

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[0 : 00] If you could find a Bible nearby and open to Acts chapter 1, very familiar passage, Acts chapter 1, page 909 in your Bibles.

During this fairly hot sermon, if you're a member of CTC and you start wondering, I'm going to give you 10 points at the end of the sermon. If you can find the place in the Gospels where Jesus says that unless you've been offended by the ascension, you haven't understood it.

It's in a long chapter. Jesus does two miracles and they try to make him king. There are some hints for you. Everyone else, if you're not part of CTC, let's come and focus on Acts chapter 1, shall we? Because today we come to the actual description, the event of Jesus' ascension into heaven. Forty days after he rose from the dead, in the last couple of weeks we've looked at during those 40 days, he appeared to his disciples, demonstrating the reality of his resurrection and teaching them from the Old Testament what it all meant.

This little passage, verses 6 to 11 that we're looking at today, has suffered greatly at the hands of preachers and theologians. It's usually used as a guilt-inducing stick to whack people to get us out there to do evangelism.

[1 : 29] But I think we need to see it's more about Jesus than it is about us, and it's more about who we are than what we're doing. Can I ask before I make my first point, is my microphone working?

Okay, good. There are two little scenes, and I've got two points. The first is that what happens in Jesus' ascension is a massive change for the servants of the king.

And the second point is that it's a massive change for the servant king. Two simple scenes, verses 6 to 8, let's look at the massive change the ascension makes to the servants of the king.

And the whole thing kicks off in verse 6 with a pretty good question, really, from the disciples. Verse 6, they say, when they come together, Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?

Now, it's a very good thing. It shows that they've been listening over the last 40 days, doesn't it? As Jesus has been talking to them extensively about the Old Testament. Is now the time, Jesus, they say to him, for the great restoration that's promised in the Old Testament.

[2 : 40] It's a legitimate and understandable question. And Jesus' answer to them is often misunderstood as saying no. But I think that's a misunderstanding.

They're right to ask about the restoration, but Jesus wants to shift them away from the when of the restoration to the how of the restoration.

The timing of the great restoration is way above their pay grade. But the how of the restoration has everything to do with who they are and what God has for the people of God.

In other words, Jesus is saying, put away your charts and your maps and your timelines. God's restoration is going to travel through his people to the ends of the earth. How God will do that is by creating a new community in which the Holy Spirit dwells.

The way that the kingdom is going to come, as it were, is through a servant people filled with the Spirit bearing witness to the Lord. And that means a change of identity for them and for us.

[3 : 45] Just look at Jesus' answer, verse 7. It's not for you to know the times or seasons the Father has fixed by his own authority, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you.

You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. This is like Jesus' mission statement or vision statement for the people of God.

And what's fascinating is that they're three promises. They're not commands. There are three promises that Jesus makes. Firstly, he says what God will do, he will pour out his Spirit on you.

And then what God will make us, you will be witnesses. He makes us into witnesses. And thirdly, the reason he does it is for Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Here are three promises that Jesus makes based on his own identity as the Son of God. The problem is we get all hung up on this word witnesses. I mean, we've seen witnessing done by Christians so badly, and we've done it so badly ourselves.

[4 : 56] We desire other people to come to know Jesus and to share Jesus with others, and we feel guilty when we don't do it. And it's created this monstrous market of thousands of books and conferences on best techniques for witnessing.

But what's going on here is so much deeper and more profound. A witness is not primarily what you do. It's about who you are. The best film on this was the 1985 classic with Harrison Ford, which I'm sure some of you have seen.

Some of you were not born then. A young boy accidentally witnesses a terrible crime, and his life is in danger because the bad guys find out, and Harrison Ford has to save the world all over again.

The point is this, that the boy did not choose to be a witness. It happened to him because of what he experienced. And the key to understanding these three phrases, these three promises that Jesus makes here, is they all come from the Old Testament book of Isaiah.

When Jesus says, you will be my witnesses, he's quoting from Isaiah 43. So those of you who are not hot enough yet, keep your hand in Acts 1 and turn back to Isaiah 43.

[6 : 10] Actually, it's a nice thing to turn in the Bible because you can cool yourself with the pages if you wish. This is not hot. The first sermon I ever preached, Isaiah 43, page 603.

The first sermon I ever preached, I was 18, forgive me. And it was in a retirement home, and they had a shed for the church.

This is in Australia, made out of corrugated iron. And it was 40 degrees outside. It was a Sunday afternoon, 3 o'clock. And it was full to overflowing.

There were about 12 people there. I'm serious. And it could have been 50, 55 degrees inside. And every single one of them went to sleep.

Except the minister. And he was a great encouragement to me. Now, we're going back to Isaiah. Let me give you a bit of explanation.

[7 : 20] Isaiah 42, 43, 44, and 45. God calls a lawsuit against the nations. Actually, he calls it against the idols, the false gods, who promise salvation but don't deliver.

And each side can call witnesses. The idols and lies can call witnesses. And God calls witnesses. He calls his people as witnesses.

He says, you are my witnesses. The only problem is that his witnesses, his people, are blind and they are deaf. They've experienced the kindness and grace and glory of God, but they've turned their eyes and their ears away from it.

So let's pick up Isaiah 43. I'm going to read a few verses from verse 8. Bring out the people who are blind yet have eyes, who are deaf yet have ears.

They're his witnesses. All the nations gather together and the peoples assemble. Who among them can declare this and show us the former things? Let them bring their witnesses to prove them right and let them hear and say it is true.

[8 : 19] And God turns to his people. Verse 10. You are my witnesses, declares the Lord, and my servant, whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he.

Before me no God was formed, nor shall there be any after me. I am the Lord and besides me there is no saviour. I declared and saved and proclaimed when there was no strange God among you.

And you are my witnesses, declares the Lord, and I am God. Now how will God heal the deafness and the blindness in his people?

The very simple answer is that in the chapter before, he's going to send one man who will be the servant, who will open the ears of the deaf and open the eyes of the blind, which Jesus quotes. And secondly, in the next chapter, he sends his Holy Spirit, who will take people with opened eyes and give them open mouths, who will confess the Lord's name with a new heart and these new people God calls my witnesses.

[9 : 26] So if you go back to chapter 1 of the book of Acts, do you understand here is Jesus taking on his lips the word of the sovereign Lord, God of the universe.

He says, you, these 12 apostles, shall be my witnesses. He is creating a new people by the Holy Spirit who belong to him.

You're my witnesses. So you see, if you take a Christian and talk to them and listen to them, it shouldn't be too long before you find out what their attitudes are and what their hopes are that they're caught up somehow with Jesus.

It's just who we are. Every single one of us bears witness whether we like it or not. This is a confession.

I've taken up bird watching. Not seriously. My wife is a bird watcher. And when we were on holidays last, we drove up a mountain and we saw these people with 55 binoculars around their necks and 15 cameras and recording devices.

[10:31] And I thought, that bears witness to the fact that they're bird watchers. And I will never do that. But I'm appreciative. Here's the thing.

You just, you bear witness. You cannot help doing it because of who you are. And often it's in those really awkward and inconvenient moments. I mean, this week, I have Christian friends who have testified to the goodness of God and to the fact that Christ is Lord in the midst of the Vancouver school board difficulties, for the Trinity Western School in the midst of its troubles, and before the Parliament Select Committee on the new prostitution law.

The fact that they couldn't hide the fact that they were Christians. Now, of course, in Acts 1, Jesus is talking primarily to the apostles. They did witness his suffering and his death and his resurrection. We are witnesses to their witness. But when Jesus says, you shall be my witnesses, it's not his strategy to grow the church. He's giving us a new identity, a missional identity, which the apostles formed the core of that new people.

That's why he starts by promising, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. Because, you see, it's God who initiates. It's God who starts it.

[11:51] It's God who takes responsibility for the mission of the church. That's why it's going to be absolutely unstoppable. The mission of the church cannot fail.

Since the same Holy Spirit who rose Jesus from the dead, rests upon us. It's a massive change for us as the servants of God. I said this two weeks ago.

Some people think of the ascension like Jesus left the building. You know, we're sort of left to do the job on our own. That is, that's the opposite. This is still his mission. It's still his work.

And he sends the Spirit to form a new people of God. And we will be part of the restoration because of this promise. And because it's God's undertaking, it's unstoppable.

Do you know what the last word in the book of Acts is? It's the word unhindered. Unhindered. The gospel goes forward unhindered.

[12:53] After persecution, after execution, and the last chapter, Paul is in prison, preaching the gospel, under house arrest at least. The word of God continues to grow, and it will grow, unhindered.

I think Christians get troubled by the hostility to the Christian faith in our city and in our culture. But God is committed to making a people who will be a light to the nations.

Each of us missionaries in this city to be God's people where we belong. That's why he says to Jerusalem, and then he says all Judea and Samaria. Why does he say all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth?

It's not geography. He's talking about the healing of the north-south divide in Israel to create a united people of God. That old north-south rift will be healed by the Holy Spirit.

And the new people of God, restored in unity, only then can they reach out to the ends of the earth. Men and women, boys and girls, every tribe, tongue, nation. Since God, it has to happen, since God has promised to give to his son, the ends of the earth as his possession.

[14:01] That's the change for us as the servant people of God. Second point is briefer. It's a massive change for the servant king.

Verses 9 to 11. And the actual ascension of Jesus is described with great restraint here. We're given very few details. Verse 9. When he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

It may surprise you to know that there are theologians who call themselves Christian today who mock this whole idea. They call it crude, pre-scientific, primitive mumbo-jumbo.

As though Jesus somehow teleported to another place in the cosmos, you know, a couple of thousand feet above earth or, you know, zipping around the planets. But did you notice, Jesus does not ascend into the heavens, plural, the sky.

He ascends into heaven, singular, the place of God's presence, which is closer than you and I could imagine. The cloud is a perfect symbol of God's presence.

[15 : 13] The same cloud that came down on Mount Sinai when God met with his people and spoke to them with an audible voice. The same cloud that came down on the Mount of Transfiguration when God spoke with an audible voice.

It's the biblical symbol of his awesome presence. But ascending is a spatial term to describe a relational reality.

If Prince William ever becomes monarch of England, he will ascend the throne, which will change his relationship with every Englishman and everyone in the colonies.

And we talk about people climbing the ladder or rising through the ranks or getting on top of things. On that day, Jesus didn't become the first spaceman. You know, some churches in their stained glass windows, when they portray the ascension, you may have seen it.

There are feet dangling from the top. The Son of God, our servant King, took his human body into the presence of God. The same body that had been crucified, transformed through resurrection from the dead.

[16 : 21] Recognisable flesh and bones body. He moves into the place and presence of God. The way you're going to describe that is not going sideways or going down. The only way you're going to describe that is going up.

I think C.S. Lewis spent a lot of time thinking about the relationship between heavenly realities and our reality. And I think the Narnia stories arose partly from this, where one world intersects with another world and you can move between them under the will of Aslan.

It's not a perfect picture, of course, because heaven intersects with our world in an infinite number of ways that we can't see and can't even imagine. And in the Bible, when angels appear, it's not that they come from a great distance.

It's like they just, the veil is pulled back and they step from behind the curtain. But on this day, when Jesus ascended into heaven, we've been prepared for this earlier in the Bible by being told what it would be like on the day he does it.

So are you ready to cool down again? Keep your hand in Acts and let's flick back to Daniel, the reading that was read for us, Daniel 7. It's on page 745.

[17 : 35] Is anyone asleep? Does anyone want to be? Now, this is a chapter with lots of symbols in it, but it is amazing.

This is the Old Testament prophecy of the day of the Ascension. And verse 13, I'll start. Daniel sees in night visions, behold, with the clouds of heaven, there came one like a son of man, a human. He came to the Ancient of Days, who is none other than God himself, and was presented before him. And to this son of man, God gave dominion and glory and a kingdom that all people's nations should serve him.

And his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall never be destroyed. The day that Jesus ascended into heaven from heaven's side was a day of wild joy, rejoicing, and a transfer, if you like, of authority into Jesus' hands.

And if you just skip down to verse 18, the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever, forever, and ever.

[18 : 45] So whatever Jesus does, he does it for us. What a day that must have been. I mean, what a welcome that must have been. And I think this is part of why it's a bit offensive and challenging, that God placed the man Jesus Christ on his right side, and he calls all the earth, it doesn't matter what background you come from, to submit to Jesus, to repent, and to trust in him.

And it's so helpful, I think, back in chapter 1 of Acts, that the same two angels who appeared at the resurrection turn up again at the ascension. In verse 11, verse 10, while they were gazing into heaven, as he went, two men stood by them in white robes and said, Man of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven?

This Jesus who has taken up from you into heaven will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven. Very important, isn't it? They said, This, this Jesus, this one, this man who did not abandon his body in the tomb, but rose again.

He has gone into heaven. God's given him all dominion and authority, and it's exactly this same Jesus who will return to judge the living and the dead. Now, it is warm this morning, and I've kind of concluded the teaching part, but this has vast implications for us.

And I think we'll only have time just for three of them. I'm just looking to see if you're still alive. The first and most obvious implication has to do with mission.

[20 : 24] You might think at first glance that ascending into heaven is a bad strategy for our mission. You know, we lose Jesus' physical body as the key piece of resurrection evidence, right?

But it's only good news because it's necessary. See if you can follow me here. Mission comes out of the new relationship that the ascended Jesus has with the world.

Even after he was raised from the dead, Jesus was limited to one particular place. His mission could never reach the ends of the earth. But in ascending to heaven, Jesus moves into a place that's not part of our creation, but intersects with every part of our creation.

And when he sends his Holy Spirit on us, it means that Jesus Christ is now present and can be present to every creature, every person, every culture, every country, every generation.

See? So the day Jesus ascends into heaven means it's the end of that period of space and time when he chose to restrict himself and now he opens the kingdom of heaven to all people everywhere.

[21 : 39] From now on, we don't need to go to Jerusalem to know Jesus, to meet him, to walk with him. When you turn to Christ and confess him as your Lord, he becomes present to you and you become present to him and you are a witness now of his saving grace.

And I think this is a great relief to us, frankly. Over the last 25 years, in many Christian circles, the incarnation has become the model of mission.

The idea is we identify with people because Jesus identified with us. We are the body of Christ. We embody his mission. But the problem is that you end up being a replacement for Jesus.

As though he's gone to heaven and left you to take his place. But Jesus does not need a replacement body. He has his body in heaven at the Father's side.

Our mission, brothers and sisters, is not to continue the incarnation. Jesus continues his incarnation. It's to witness to the incarnation, to the suffering, death, resurrection and rule of Jesus as it's revealed in the scriptures.

[22 : 48] We keep falling into the same trap of putting ourselves at the centre of everything. It's like the language around the kingdom. We don't grow the kingdom. Jesus does.

What grows is the word of God as we declare it to one another. So it has big implications for mission. It has implications for worship. But we don't have time to look at that today.

It has implications for suffering. See, when the angels, just think about this, when the angels say, it is this Jesus who ascended, it means all the experience of the human Jesus is not just in heaven, but it is now part of God himself, part of the Godhead.

Absolutely vital for those of us who are seeking to be steadfast in suffering. Jesus learned obedience in difficulty. Or as the book of Hebrews said, he was made perfect in suffering.

And when he ascended into heaven, he carries his obedience, he carries his perfect life, the whole experience of being human, of suffering and enduring right through death, he takes it to the right hand of the Father.

[24 : 01] God doesn't understand our sufferings from outside our experience, but in some mysterious way, he understands them from the inside.

Jesus has gone through heavens into heaven itself and it says he sympathizes with our weakness. Very strong word. It's not just that he understands and cares. It's literally he shares the experience with us.

He suffers with us. He feels our weaknesses. This has such deep encouragement for us. Since we have such a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help help in time of need because he sympathizes, he experiences it with us.

And finally, it has implications for what it means to be human for true humanity. Since Jesus has ascended to the Father's side, the restoration of true humanity comes through him.

In Jesus, we see perfect, glorified humanity, pristine humanity. He now lives beyond the limitations of corruption and mortality, but he retains his perfect humanity and now true humanity dwells in the presence of the living God, only in and through Christ.

[25 : 41] So your future and my future is caught up with Jesus. Our destiny is not just to have a resurrection and be raised back to this life, but it's to be raised in transformed body and to move forward into that existence to fulfill what we're created for.

And when the Spirit comes, he binds us in union with Jesus Christ, and that union, it's deeper than our family, our race, our gender, everything else we have.

We become more human as we grow more like Jesus Christ. He's the one who stood in our place on the cross. He's the one who stood, who lay in the grave for us.

He now stands in heaven for us. And I think what that means for us today, living in Vancouver, is that we feel a little bit alien because we don't have dual citizenship.

It's not we belong to Christ in heaven and we belong here as well. Our true citizenship is in Christ. Our lives are hid with Christ in God. And of course that will show itself in how we spend our money and how we spend our time and what we do with our homes and hospitality and calendar.

[26 : 54] And since the path to the ascension for Jesus lies through the cross, it means that the restoration of humanity and of this world and our restoration comes through the cross as well.

It comes day by day as you and I take up the cross and follow Jesus in the footsteps of our Savior. Do you want to know what a restored humanity looks like?

It bears scars. It has the shape of the cross in it. It's cruciform in shape. It's a life willing to sacrifice, to submit, to self-denial and to serve.

And when we come next week we'll look at the day of Pentecost and we'll find that the one first thing that Jesus does from heaven after he pours out his spirit is that he offers forgiveness to his enemies.

Let's kneel and pray. Let's kneel and pray.