

Jesus Ascends

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Date: 15 September 2019

Preacher: Walt Alexander

[0 : 0 0] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee.! For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

Acts chapter 1. We're getting a new series this morning on this wonderful book, and I am pumped about diving into it.

So Acts 1, I'm going to read the first 14 verses. So look with me there. Verse 1.

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day when he was taken up. Verse 3, Verse 4, Verse 4.

And while staying with them, he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which he said, You heard from me, for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.

[1 : 3 6] Verse 6. And when they had come together, they asked him, Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel? He said to them, It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority, 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.

And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes and said, Men of Galilee, Why do you stand looking into heaven?

This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven. Verse 12.

And then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered, they went into the upper room where they were staying, Peter and John, and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon the zealot, and Judas the son of James.

All these, with one accord, were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women, and Mary, the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

[3 : 1 6] Brothers. This is the word of God. You know, one of my favorite podcasts, and I do love lots of podcasts, one of my favorite podcasts is called How I Built This. It tells the stories behind successful business owners, and kind of what were the ingredients that made them successful.

Now, I'm not one of those business guys. I'm obviously not a business guy, but I'm not one of those guys that's all about models, business models, and metrics, and things like that. But I do love the stories behind businesses, like what made Chipotle so successful instead of all the other hundreds of Mexican, even thousands of Mexican restaurant chains.

And how did Bojangles develop the world's greatest chicken biscuit and bring happiness to every small and large town in the South? How did Amazon? I mean, I remember when Amazon was just this simple online bookstore.

How did it become an online superstore that every or most Americans rely on every day, every week?

What's the story behind Melissa and Doug? All these other companies. It's just a fascinating podcast that I commend to you. But one of my favorites is the story of Five Guys. It's a story of this burger chain.

[4 : 41] You know, the owner and the founder, Jerry Morrell's mother, used to tell him, you can always make money if you know how to make a good burger. And so, in 1986, after failing in numerous businesses, Jerry opened a small burger joint in northern Virginia with his four sons.

That's the five guys. Right? They did many things wrong. They did not pick a good location. In fact, they purposefully set up shop off the beaten path, so to speak.

They didn't provide many menu options. If you still go there today, it's very simple. It's burgers, dogs, fries, and they do give you some peanuts while you wait. They didn't recruit independent investors.

In fact, all the investors were the family, which I think is so cool. The sons quit their job. They gave all the money that they had saved for college into this business fund.

Remember, he'd already failed numerous businesses. So they all went in together. But they did one thing right. They made a really good burger. And they believed the burger was enough and people would come.

[5 : 55] And if you build it, they will come. And apparently, it worked for them. Five Guys has more than 1,400 locations worldwide. It's one of the largest growing restaurant chains in America.

It's how they built it. And I love the book of Acts because in so many ways, it could be subtitled, How God Built This. How God Built the Church.

You know, if you know anything about the book of Acts, it begins with a very small beginnings. It's 12 ordinary men in the Middle East praying for help. We saw them listed out.

They had to vote one more in at the end of the chapter, which you can see if you read along. It had many bumps and bruises. I mean, threats, beatings. A couple was struck down for lying conflicts, shipwrecks, and a few run-ins with the law.

I mean, this story is fun to read. It starts with a bang, and it reads very exciting, but in general, it was a very slow-moving thing.

[6 : 58] A very slow-growing church. And yet, the book of Acts tells the back story of how God uses 12 ordinary men to carry his gospel from Jesus to the world.

Acts is how God built this through Jesus. Our theme for the book is going to be the Acts of Jesus from heaven on earth. The Acts of Jesus from heaven on earth.

So today will be the first of something like 25 messages on this book. So I don't know if that excites you or terrifies you, but either way, we're in it together.

Point one is Jesus is in heaven. Jesus is in heaven. Now, that's a pretty obvious statement, right?

So let's go a little bit of background. Who wrote the book of Acts? You know, church has said over the years, Luke did. This highly educated physician, as we talked about several weeks ago, who traveled with Paul.

[8 : 0 0] He wrote this book. And if you notice later on, which we will notice when we get there, the author switches somewhere in the book of Acts from telling things in the third person, like they did this, they did that, to switches to tell it in the first person, like we did that or we did that.

I think we have a quote for you that you can see up there on the screen from Acts 16. He says, So passing through Mysia, they went to Troas.

So you see that? They did. And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel.

And it continues on like that. I just tell you that to tell you that we know whoever wrote this book was a close companion and a traveling partner with the apostle Paul.

Paul had very few companions and friends closer than Luke. Luke teaches and preaches and travels with Paul. While in prison in Rome, Paul tells us many times, three times in the New Testament, that Luke alone was with him.

[9 : 0 9] So we know that whoever wrote this book must be a close companion. We know that Luke is a close companion. We know that the church has always claimed, even from the beginning, that Luke wrote this book along with the gospel of Luke.

It's a fascinating thing. And this is where I could veer off the plan a little bit. But, you know, our Bibles just didn't come together to us at one point.

When Jesus died, there were no New Testament books written. Think about that. But to sum it up very briefly, in the decades after his death, the gospels and these letters were written, and gradually these lists emerged that the church compiled of the books that were inspired by God.

And in the oldest of these lists, from 160 or 170 A.D., both the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts are on it, and both said to be written by Luke.

Now, it's a fascinating thing, but we can't spend a lot of time on that. But why did Luke write this book? And he tells us right at the beginning. Look down there in verse 1, you know.

[1 0 : 2 7] And if you notice, if you've read the gospel of Luke, the book of Acts begins in a very similar way. It begins talking about this wealthy man named Theophilus, who Luke is writing for, and wanting to give certainty on certain things.

But look down there in verse 1. He says, in the first book, the book of the gospel, Luke, O Theophilus, I dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up.

So Luke's saying, in the first book that I wrote to you, Theophilus, you already know, I wrote to you this book, and I told you all that Jesus began to do and teach. That's what the gospel of Luke is all about.

But what he's saying when he says that is that now I'm writing to you about all he continued to do. After he was taken up.

That's very interesting. Now, like many parts of Acts, this chapter, and these verses are really cool. They're amazing.

[1 1 : 3 4] Jesus ascends into heaven right there before their eyes. Look down at verse 9. You know, I'd rather not die with pneumonia.

It is the old man's friend. And if I could die anyway, I think it would be that way. I want to just float off. Maybe like Elijah. That's pretty sweet too. But I want to float out.

But Luke is telling us, very importantly, that Jesus ascends into heaven. He's not just telling us that because it's really cool or really amazing. Luke wants us to see that Jesus is in heaven for a very important reason.

Look with me. Three or four times in this chapter, he references that Jesus was taken up. We see that in verse 2. Until the day he was taken up. Verse 9, we see it again, which we just read, that he was lifted up.

We see down there in verse 11 as well, this Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven. We see it in verse 22, towards the end of the chapter, that beginning from the baptism of John to the day when he was taken up.

[12 : 50] So what's he trying to tell us? That Jesus has gone away. That Jesus is no longer around. That we're on our own. No, Luke tells us, Jesus is taken up, not to tell us that he's absent or that he's inactive, but to tell us the place from which he presently works.

Jesus ascends to heaven, sits above all rule and authority and power and dominion. And Luke tells us this because he's not distant up there. He's not distracted. He's not idle.

He's sitting up there so that he might be the one behind it all. In fact, this is where Luke, or I mean the gospel, sorry, the book of Acts just comes alive.

All these references to Lord that litter this book are references, not to God merely, but to Jesus Christ who is doing this work.

He's the one getting all this done. 80 years ago, almost to the day, Hollywood released one of the most well-known movies, one you all know and I trust.

[13 : 59] All have seen the Wizard of Oz. Right? We know little Dorothy. The story centers around Dorothy and her dog, Toto. And the tornado rips through this small town in Kansas and Dorothy and Toto swept away to the magical land of Oz.

And we all know that phrase. You know, Toto, we're not in Kansas anymore. They follow the yellow brick road, tempted to sing, you know, to reach the Emerald City to meet the Wizard of Oz.

Dun, dun, dun. You can even watch this with the dark side of the moon playing in the background, which I did in some darker days in my life. You know, they journey to the Wizard.

And along the way, they, you know, Dorothy and Toto, they meet a scarecrow who needs a brain. They meet a tin man who needs a heart. They meet a lion who needs courage.

He's a pitiful lion. So they journey to this Wizard because they think this Wizard would help. And they finally get to Oz. The Wizard said, well, you got to get the broom of the Wicked Witch of the West. And they make it back.

[15 : 06] They go get it. They come back. The Wizard, though, stalls on his promise. He said, I'll meet you tomorrow. This is where I just love Dorothy. She just comes alive in that moment.

Tomorrow is not going to work. She says, if you are really great and powerful, you would keep your promises. And the Wizard barks back really quickly. Do you criticize the great Oz?

You should consider yourself lucky that I give you audience tomorrow. All the while, during this intense scene, Toto trots, walks over, and pulls back this curtain that is on the left.

The guy from Oz, it reveals this old man working the controls, talking to the microphone. The Wizard immediately barks back, pay no attention to the man behind the curtain. Come back tomorrow.

Go! Before I lose my temper, the great and powerful Oz has spoken. But Dorothy refuses to leave, right? She realizes this is all a hoax and a sham.

[16 : 13] Well, the book of Acts is trying to peel back the curtain. It's like the Lord saying, pay attention to the man behind the curtain.

It's Jesus Christ. The very man who said, I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it, will not let it go awry.

God is helping us to see the building of the church differently. It's not the acts of the apostles. It's the acts of the Lord Jesus from heaven on earth.

But God's also wanting us, and I think we'll see this in and through this whole book, that God's wanting us to see our own lives differently. Our lives are not the result of our decisions or failures or opportunities or deliberations as if we could suddenly misstep and find ourselves far from the will of God.

There's a man behind the curtain. Our lives are purposefully directed by Jesus so that we might passionately play our particular part in the advance of his mission.

[17 : 28] Second, we are on earth. We are on earth. Jesus is in heaven, and we're on earth. The kingdom of God has come, but we are on earth.

And Luke begins this gospel, begins this book telling us about what Jesus began to do and teach, but he begins by telling us what he was doing in between his resurrection and the day he was taken up.

Look down there in verse 3. It says he presented himself alive. That just means he was letting people know that he was alive. He was raised from the dead. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15 that he appeared to 500 people, and so he was alive after his suffering, appearing to them for 40 days and speaking about the kingdom.

And so Jesus was speaking about something that he's always spoken about, which is about the kingdom of God. When Jesus began his ministry, the opening of each gospel, he proclaimed that the kingdom of God is at hand, and so Jesus was teaching it.

And the kingdom of God is just simply God's saving rule. And so when Jesus came and preached the gospel, the kingdom came on earth.

[18 : 42] He brought salvation. He delivered people from death to life through the good news. He delivered people from the kingdom of darkness, as Daniel told us, into the kingdom of God's Son.

And yet he always promised that his kingdom would one day come in full. So naturally, as Jesus is proclaiming about this kingdom, as he's saying, the kingdom of God is now, I don't know, about to take off, the disciples begin to wonder, when is all this going to take place?

If you look down at verse 7, they come, or 6, they come back to Jesus. They say, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel? So what they're asking is, is this the time when you'll take up an earthly throne?

Is this the time where you'll finally save and protect Israel? Even as we talked about, or even as Joy read earlier, is this the time when you'll lead us into Jerusalem and the kids will play in the streets?

Is this the time you'll make all things right? Is this the time you'll set captives free and establish justice in the land? And in so many ways, their question is understandable.

[19 : 54] It's what God promised throughout the Old Testament. But they fail to fully understand what's happening. Jesus is going to heaven and he's leaving them on earth for a reason.

All along, as you know, Jesus refuses earthly power and position. He refuses a sword. I love that moment in the Garden of Gethsemane when Peter, just full of courage, takes that sword and goes at the guards.

Jesus says, I mean, could I not call down legions of angels to defend me? Put away your sword. Peter, he refuses to build a kingdom of this world.

He ducks out before the crowds. He refuses to go to Rome or Jerusalem to rule. He says, my kingdom is not of this world. My kingdom is about forgiveness and freedom and healing and salvation from death to life.

So Jesus says, it's not for you to know the times are seasoned. Right there in verse 7, that the Father has fixed by his own authority. In many ways, this is a stinging rebuke.

[21 : 09] Jesus is saying, don't look for earthly power. Don't chase earthly authority. That time will come.

Remember why you're on earth. The kingdom of God has come, but we're on earth to proclaim the good news. Now you think, like, what does all this mean for us?

I think, there's several, oh there's a lot of things we could say, but there's several things I'd like to say.

One is, don't live too much for this life. Don't live too much for this life. In so many ways, as he's talking about power, he's saying to us, be careful with our politics.

I saw someone just the other day remake, my hope is built on nothing less to say, my hope is built on nothing more than politics and culture war. I dare not trust in gospel truth, but wholly lean on voting booths, on party politics I stand, even though it's sinking sand, even though it's sinking sand.

[22 : 33] And I think, in so many ways, the book of Acts and this chapter is trying to get our attention. Politics can be a wonderfully noble calling, but if we as a church long for earthly power, we will lose.

The only power that can change America comes from above. That's what he's saying. There will never be a savior on Capitol Hill. So be careful.

I mean, that cycle, the presidential campaign cycle has begun. Be careful with your passions. People will not fall over.

They won't notice what we talk about. They'll notice what we're passionate about. Be careful with your possessions. All that is in this life is passing away, so be careful lest you live your best and only life now.

But I'd also say don't live too much for the next life. So don't live too much for this life, but also don't live too much for the next. Now before you throw a tomato, let me define that a little bit.

[23 : 37] Don't just wait on Jesus' return. I love this little anecdote that is included in verse 10 and 11. Look down there with me. He says, so Jesus goes up and they do what we would probably do in that moment.

We'd stand there going, holy cow, what in the world just happened? And so they were gazing as he went. And behold, two men stood by them in white robes, another fantastic thing, you know, miracle type thing, and said, men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven?

This Jesus who was taken up into heaven will come in the same way as you saw him go. I think what they're trying to say is don't just wait. Like, why are you standing there?

It'll be obvious in the way he comes again. Every couple years someone comes along and says, the end is coming, get ready, quit your job.

Harold Camping was the one who probably did it most famously, most recently, going into Times Square, telling everybody to quit everything, run to the bunker, pray to Jesus, but the New Testament never talks like that.

[24 : 54] The New Testament never says withdraw from the world. Never says protect yourself. Never says huddle up with your holy friends.

And sure, it says live a quiet life, but most of all it says live your life for Christ now. In so many ways I think this changes the target for parenting.

You know, the goal of parenting is not to keep everything 68 degrees, which 68 would be nice for this room because it's about 61. The goal of parenting is not to make sure no one skins a knee or fails miserably or stays up too late.

The goal of parenting is not to build so many memories that you form this tight-knit huddle that the kids are afraid to move out of. The goal of parenting is to keep them in the huddle for a little while, then to break so they can hit somebody.

That's what you do in football. You huddle before you hit. And the goal of parenting, therefore, is not safety, security, or long life.

[26 : 05] The goal of parenting is to send them out to make a dent for the kingdom. I think the Lord would say, don't hover.

Don't protect. You know, most of the time, your kids don't need you to be mama bear. They need to feel their failure and their mistakes.

But you know, this changes the target for life. You know, in so many ways, it changes the target for life and holiness. We live in an R-rated world, and the goal of life is not to avoid as much R-ratedness as possible until we get to heaven.

We live in an R-rated world, and the goal of life is to go into it, into the deepest darkness, and drag people out for Christ.

I remember one podcast, another one I love, told a story about a girl that just had a heart for strippers and began going in the afternoon serving food, serving dinner, serving meals to them and preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[27 : 10] I can't imagine a darker place. The kingdom of God has come, and it changes life now. That's what he's trying to say. You're on a mission. That's what Jesus is saying to the disciples, but also what Jesus is saying to us.

It's what you're for. It's what you were created for. You're created to live for something greater than good grades or money or family or success or failure or any of those things.

You're made to live for Jesus Christ. You're made to live and love and serve him. You know, it's no cliché to say that our country is deeply divided, perhaps as much as any time in our history.

And yet, several days ago, as Tim, I mean, as Sam prayed, we remembered 9-11. Now, a number of you were not even a twinkle in your mother's eye on 9-11.

But on that day, when those planes crashed into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, the fields of Pennsylvania, our country was deeply united. All of us were broken with grief, confusion, anger.

[28 : 29] All of us realized we were at war. Jesus is calling the disciples to have that same realization.

Armed with the truth of his death, resurrection, and ascension to the right hand of the Father, Jesus is saying, this is no time to huddle up, no time to chase your best life. Now, this is a time of war.

This is time to remember the mission and not get lulled to sleep. We're to live this life with a wartime mentality. I don't know if you remember, you probably remember the pictures of Rosie the Riveter from World War II.

And there's this woman, kind of like Uncle Sam, that was calling men to sign up for the army. And the woman, Rosie the Riveter was up there saying, we need you, women.

The men are on the battlefield and we need you in the factory. But it was a remarkable time in our country because it wasn't just the men or women of working age. It was a whole family, the whole nation. Men were on the battlefield.

[29 : 31] Women were in the factory. Families were buying bonds and rationing gas, coffee, sugar, clothing, and so much more. Families were joyfully foregoing excess and comfort to live with a wartime mentality.

And that's what Jesus is calling the disciples for right here. He's calling them to live for the mission. The stakes are high. There's a God in heaven who is holy and perfect and righteous in every way.

And there are people, there are lots of people who have strayed from him and fallen into sin and are dead in their trespasses and sin. And there's only one name under heaven by which they must be saved.

And this is what he's trying to lay into the disciples' hands to carry this message. There's only one name by which they must be saved and that's the name of the Lord Jesus Christ because there's only one mediator between God and man, Christ Jesus, the Lord.

So he says, take the gospel to the nations. Point three, live on mission but first wait for the Spirit.

[30 : 47] Live on mission but first wait for the Spirit. I like this, you know, I love this. Jesus says, go to war. Then he says, wait. Don't rush out.

Make sure you arm yourself. And so he tells the disciples to wait and pray. Look in verse four. He says, while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem but to wait for the promise.

Verse 12, they go up to this upper room. You remember all the guys are there. In verse 13, they gather up. In verse 14, look at me. He says, all these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer together with the women.

and Mary, the mother of Jesus and his brothers. They wait. I mean, the roll call in, or whatever that is, the roll call in verse 13 is the Lord telling us they were all there and they were all waiting.

They devoted themselves to prayer. One of the things we're going to see as we travel through this book is this major emphasis upon prayer in the book. And especially the prayerful waiting on the Spirit.

[32 : 05] When the disciples cry out for more of the Spirit in boldness in chapter 4, they pray and wait. When they preach the good news in Samaria in chapter 8, they lay hands on the Samaritans and pray for them to be filled with the Spirit.

When the church of Antioch sends out Barnabas and Paul, they fast and pray and wait in Acts 13. And so they're waiting on the Spirit. They're waiting on the baptism of the Spirit.

They're waiting on power from on high. What Luke 24 says, there's no gift that Jesus talks about more than the gift of the Spirit. Many times he says, John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Spirit.

He says in John, it's better for me to depart and go to the Father because I'll send the Comforter to you. He'll lead you into truth. He'll give you peace. And when Jesus talks about the Spirit, he's just bursting with anticipation and eagerness.

Look at verse 8. He says, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you'll be my witnesses in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.

[33 : 21] What he's saying to them is, my gospel's not going to advance with earthly power. My gospel will advance with power. The only power that can raise a dead man.

The power from above. So as we continue through Acts, we're going to see the Spirit a lot. And I want to just encourage you to have this same prayerfulness, this same eagerness, in this same posture of waiting.

The Spirit is a gift. He's a person. There's nothing to be afraid of. He comes to fill your life with joy, peace, energy, strength, righteousness, and self-control, and many other things.

So let us be a people that wait and pray. And strikingly, in the New Testament, God doesn't give His Spirit to all in equal measure.

Consistently, God gives His Spirit to those that are praying and waiting. Yeah, I think J. Rodman Williams says it really well when He says, such a precious gift as the Holy Spirit will not be given indiscriminately to seekers and non-seekers alike, but to those who earnestly desire it.

[34 : 55] God is not reluctant or a grudging giver who must be badgered into giving His favors. Hence, the persistence in prayer that is called for is not to overcome His unwillingness, but rather to demonstrate the wholeheartedness of those asking and thus to prepare the way for the extraordinary gift to be received.

God wants us to pray and wait. Next week, we'll be diving into chapter 2 and we'll see a whole lot more of what this praying and waiting leads to.

I think what's interesting in conclusion is that the disciples got it. Once the Spirit fell, these men, they said, turned the world upside down.

They didn't proclaim the gospel in a corner. They witnessed for Christ in Jerusalem, all Judea and Samaria, all the way to Rome, all the way to you and me. If you think about this, humanly speaking, all you know about God and Jesus Christ comes from 12 ordinary, faithful, Middle Eastern men who preached.

And all your neighbors are going to know about Christ. It's going to come from another ordinary person like you and me who preach.

[36 : 21] And that's amazing. And that's the way the gospel advances. Let us pray. Father in heaven, we thank you for this morning. Thank you for these few minutes to consider your word and consider what you're doing.

Lord, we pray that you would help us. I pray that this book would be a blessing to our church. I pray that it would come alive, fill us with awe and wonder and amazement.

Lord, I do pray that it would fill us with great longings for you and desire for you and longings for your spirit. I pray that it would mark us with a prayerfulness and a hunger and an eagerness in every way and in every person in this room.

Lord, we beg of you and ask of you to come and help us. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. You've been listening to a message given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee.

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