

Acts 1:1-11

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[0 : 00] I want to spend a couple of weeks with you, except for next week, I'll be doing a couple! of these talks, looking at who Jesus is, and specifically as we've talked about him in the! Book of Acts. That might sound strange if you know the Book of Acts, because we often think of it largely as the story of the new church, isn't it? The church growing. To the ends of the earth, the gospel, as Jesus says there. But sometimes people make the assumption wrongly that Jesus only makes a guest appearance once or twice in Acts. If you want to learn about Jesus, you go to the gospels, don't you? If you want to learn about the church, or about faith growing, or about how we came to believe, no, you go to Acts. But that would be wrong, I think. Yes, Acts does tell us about those things. But what I want us to see over the next couple of weeks is how central Jesus is to everything Luke wrote about how the Christian faith grew. And particularly today, I want us to look at what Luke, the physician, the doctor, and the historian who wrote this carefully researched account of Jesus' life in the Book of Luke, and the next part in Acts, what he thought the most important thing is we should know right at the beginning of this story of how the church came to grow in the way that it did. Because

I want us to see that Jesus' birth and death and resurrection wasn't firstly really about us. That might shock you, if only a little. In our kind of Western individual culture, we often think about us and personal salvation, and yes, a personal saving relationship with God is central to us being saved. But that's not all there is. And we lose sight of that.

And we place ourselves maybe too much at the centre of the story of Jesus saving a people. And you see, there are many mistakes we can make about who Jesus is and was. You know, many of the big controversies, the big heresies in the history of the church have happened because people have that wrong. Some people have said he wasn't really God. He just pretended to be. Or he wasn't always the Son of God. He was a man who was adopted as the Son of God.

Or that he wasn't really a man even. He just looked like one. Or, and you know, this is one of the reasons why the Bible is so clear about Jesus physically rising from the dead. The rumour that Jewish religious leaders, that they started, that he never rose from the dead.

But he's still dead. And his disciples just stole his body to make everybody think he was alive again. Or that he's a spirit now, a ghost, a memory who lives on in his followers or something like that. You see, in the last chapter of Luke's first book, the Gospel according to Luke, he tells us about many people who saw Jesus. And we read about that again here in this chapter of the second book, the first chapter. Luke really wants us to get that. And that Jesus rose bodily, that he even ate with them. And he's really at pains for us to understand exactly who Jesus is and who he is not. We need to be very careful to ask who Jesus really is and not who we think he is. And how we're influenced by the world with many ideas about who Jesus is.

[3 : 47] A good teacher or something only. He wanted Theophilus. He wrote this book too. And God, who inspired this book, wants us to know as much as Theophilus who Jesus is and what he has done. So that's why the next couple of weeks we're going to look closely at how he's presented in this book of Acts. And he's not just God become man as we saw in our series before Christmas, didn't we, working up to the birth of Jesus. He's not just the perfect sacrifice for us, the one who died in our place so that we can be made right with God. And he's certainly not just a good and a wise teacher. And unlike what it might feel like now that Jesus isn't physically with his disciples or indeed with us, he hasn't moved on having quote unquote done his bit.

He didn't just come to die for you so that now it's your turn and you have to now crack on and do your bit.

See, Luke wants us to see that it was all about Jesus, about him being exalted, about him being praised and glorified, and that who he is and what he says and does and is still doing is the most

important thing of all.

The first book, the Gospel of Luke, is about, and we read that in verse 1 here, didn't we, about what Jesus began to do and teach. The implication, isn't it, that Jesus is continuing to do and to teach things to us.

So who is this Jesus who is speaking to us every time we read or hear his word? That's the question that we want to be asking.

[5 : 41] Now you relate differently to people, don't you, when you know more about them. Your house shows a damp patch on the side and your new neighbour tells you, well, you should have that looked at.

You might think, well, yes, it always looks like that a bit in winter and then it dries out again in summer and then you ignore your neighbour, don't you? But then he tells you he's a master builder and a building inspector and he thinks that wall is going to crack next year.

And you're not going to ignore him then, are you? Or someone gives you medical advice, tells you to go to the doctor to have yourself checked out. And you think to yourself, well, I'll just go read up on the internet like that person probably did.

And then you learn that she's a professor of internal medicine. And you're going to go to the doctor then, aren't you? Luke wants us to understand who Jesus is so that we'll know how to listen to him well.

And two things that Luke wants us to see in this very short passage that we read today. Well, firstly, Jesus was taken up into heaven. And secondly, Jesus will return from heaven as he went up into heaven.

[6 : 56] Now, that might seem obvious, but let's unpack what that means. Firstly, Jesus was taken up into heaven. Verse 2 and verse 11 and verse 22 and even verse 9, which is lifted up for that matter.

So we get this over and over again, don't we, that Jesus was taken up. Over and over in this passage. He was taken up. Now, I'd skip over that because we know Jesus ascended into heaven. But there's more in that. Why is it in the passive voice? Why is it that Jesus was taken up? Who took him up into heaven? It has to be his father.

God the Father took him up into heaven. God sent Jesus into the world to die for our sin and to take our punishment on him.

But that was not the end of the plan, was it? God's promise of the Saviour doesn't end with us. And it isn't shock, horror, even primarily about us.

[8 : 02] What does it mean that the Father takes Jesus up into heaven? We've got to remember that this isn't the first time that Jesus was lifted up, is it? On the cross he was lifted up in shame and humiliation and pain.

But now with the ascension, God is taking Jesus up. He is lifting him up again into heaven. And he reverses what happened on the cross in some sense, isn't it?

It's the exact opposite. Jesus is lifted up in glory now and approval and love. We'll see a glimpse of that in another week when we see how Stephen sees Jesus at the right hand of God the Father.

This is the Jesus Luke wants us to see now. Not someone who's just done his bit and it's over, but the Son of God, God himself, publicly being put in authority over all things.

Everyone. Everywhere. That was the plan. At the beginning of Luke he writes to Theophilus about the things that have been fulfilled amongst us. That's what he writes about.

[9 : 12] Here in Acts he writes about what Jesus has begun to teach and do. And is continuing. Jesus being taken up into heaven means he is right now the Lord over all of creation.

Over all people everywhere. That's why Jesus now sends his disciples out. After they receive the Holy Spirit to be, as he says, doesn't he, in verse 8, to be his witnesses in Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

Because in God's plan, now that Jesus is publicly lifted up in glory over all of creation, now the good news goes out to all of creation, to all the world and not just the Jewish people.

Jesus being taken up into heaven isn't just a kind of neat tidying up of the loose ends. It's not like a long running TV series where you've got to find a neat way of getting one of the main actors out of the way now so the rest of the cast can carry on with the story.

It's not a plot device. No, not at all. Not one little bit. It is the plan of God being fulfilled. You know what?

[10:28] I think here's part of the problem. If we just stop with Jesus having died for our sins, us being saved, and we don't very much remember that he wasn't just raised from the dead but taken up into heaven.

We in some way actually run the risk of doing the same thing that people have done right from the very beginning when it went wrong in the Garden of Eden.

We make it about us. In the Garden of Eden, that's how the serpents have used to eat, isn't it? If you eat from that tree which God said you couldn't, you would be like God.

You wouldn't need God. And it was an appealing thought to her, but a very, very wrong appealing thought. So the first thing that Luke wants to do in Acts is reorient our expectations.

Even as Jesus isn't physically on the scene, and now he sends his disciples out and he entrusts this kingdom to them, and to us his followers, that doesn't mean that he now exits, stays right, never to be heard of again.

[11:30] He is the vindicated ruler of all, the glorified king of kings, and the exalted saviour. That is what God is doing by taking him up into heaven.

It's not just a neat plot device. But the second thing he wants us to see, isn't it, is that Jesus will return from heaven as he went up into heaven.

That's the second thing God wants us to see, that that wasn't the end of the story. Because he's not just the Jesus who was lifted up.

He's the very same Jesus who will return as he was lifted up. This is the Jesus who definitely did die, but did not stay dead, and has conquered death.

And this is the same Jesus as in that second passage that you've got on your sheets there, Peter's sermon of Pentecost, when he says in verse 36, The one whom God has made Lord and Christ is the rightful ruler of all creation.

[12:34] He's God's anointed saviour. And this is important to remember too, isn't it? Because as much as we can make a mistake of stopping after Jesus was resurrected, and not go to Jesus being the one who ascended into heaven, if we only stop there as well, we run another risk, can't we?

We can be so transfixed by that, as the disciples were watching Jesus ascend into heaven, in some sense, that we forget that we do have to get on with what Jesus has told us to do.

And we don't live our lives, or do evangelism, or whatever it is that we do, in a certain way, because Jesus is now only reigning in heaven, and it's up to us to now kind of continue in a certain way.

We live our lives, we do evangelism, we are God, Jesus' witnesses to the ends of the earth, even in Ealing on a rainy Thursday afternoon in the year of our Lord, 2020, because he is coming back, as he went up into heaven.

Just a quick aside, many people have claimed in history that there is Jesus who has come back. There is even a TV series on Netflix now called The Messiah, where a CIA agent is investigating whether a man who claims to be the Messiah is a con artist and a charlatan, or the real deal.

[14:03] They didn't have to bother, it could have been a very quick, short film. Because the question is, has anybody seen him return publicly, visible, from heaven to earth?

And Luke is very clear in this passage that Jesus was seen, taken up into heaven, and he will be seen when he returns. And the Bible is very clear that Jesus will return from heaven as he went up, and everyone will know when he returns.

Here's why this matters. Because, like I said at the beginning, if we don't fully understand who Jesus is, what he said, and especially what he's continuing to do and will do, we'll have our own misconceptions about him.

And that can be paralyzing. Here's why this matters for us now. At some level, this statement is a warning that Jesus is returning. If you've not put your faith in Jesus, that day will be a terrible day. Philippians 2 tells us that every knee will bow before him, and every tongue will confess that he is Lord, because it will be undeniable.

[15:18] But it will be too late then. If I did you here today, consider this. You might conveniently deny Jesus' reign because he is in heaven.

Not here, far away. But Acts reminds us that this won't be the case forever. Perhaps you are considering Jesus.

Perhaps you are even transfixed by him. But you've not committed to following him. Then, like the angels warning these disciples to get on with what Jesus has told him, this passage is a warning.

Don't put it off. But secondly, and most importantly, this passage is a promise, isn't it? And we've seen through Jesus' death and resurrection and his ascension, that God firmly and definitely keeps his promises.

Not one promise will be left unkempt. And this promise that Jesus will return is a firm basis for us, to engage in mission like Jesus has told his disciples.

[16 : 32] To live lives worthy of the price that Jesus has given for us, to save us. It is a promise that sustains us in hard times. Acts was written for a church that had started to experience the persecution and oppression.

But the church has always experienced sins to some extent. We need to remember this promise as much as they did, as we see more and more the church being oppressed and persecuted, even on our doorstep, finding it difficult more and more.

And I'm not even talking about places in the world where Christians literally lose their lives or their faith. We relate differently to people when we know more about them, isn't it?

And we need to, we want to relate to this Jesus. Verse 11, this Jesus will return. Not any other idea of Jesus.

The one who will return. This exalted Jesus. This Jesus was taken up into heaven and will return as he came.

[17 : 43] That Jesus. Amen.