

Acts 1:6-26

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Date: 20 October 2024

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[0 : 00] Which we started in the book of Acts last week. Let's bow our heads in prayer. We come today to the part where Jesus ascends.

Where he goes on up. He ascends from earth to heaven. Last week we looked at the first six verses of the Acts of the Apostle. And they're completely dominated by the resurrection of Jesus.

In one way, the whole of the book of Acts is working out the implications of the resurrection of Jesus. In lots of ways, that's what the Christian life is like. In fact, the life and death and resurrection of Jesus are incomplete without the ascension.

And we celebrate Easter. We give it a whole weekend. But very often the ascension just drops off the radar and gets forgotten about. One of the joys of living in this part of London in the next couple of weeks is Diwali.

It's coming, isn't it? Your pets, I'm sure, love Diwali. The fireworks. The celebration of light. And where we live, we can hear the fireworks.

[1 : 39] But actually, as you look out, you can go into the attic. And you can see the top half, the top quarter. The top tenth of the fireworks. From the skylight in the attic.

And what you see is you hear the sound. The rocket goes up. And as it rises to the sky, it reaches the pinnacle and then the explosion. It explodes.

And you can see the pyrotechnics and all the lights flying out, flowing out from that. And I think the resurrection is a little bit like the rocket going up.

And the ascension of the Lord Jesus is the explosion. It is the explosion where all his blessing and all his goodness and all his grace and his greatness suddenly become available for the whole world.

And the ascension, it is key. It is really key. So I want to divide the passage in two.

[2 : 41] I want us first of all to look at what the ascension means. And then I kind of want to deal with the second half quickly of the chapter. The ascension of Jesus means three things. The first is this, that Jesus is accessible to all of us everywhere.

And for 40 days after Jesus rose from the dead, he has appeared. He's appeared to individuals, to small groups, to churches.

He even appeared to one group of 500 at one time. The problem is this. Verse 8, can you see what Jesus said? He said to his apostles that you are going to go out and you are going to be witnesses to the ends of the earth.

But how can Jesus support the mission to the ends of the earth if he can only appear to one person at a time or a few people at a time? How can he support the mission to the ends of the earth if his presence is located in a little part of the Middle East?

And the answer is this, he first has to ascend into heaven. Verse 9, when he said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up. And a cloud took him out of their sight.

[3 : 57] And while they were gazing into heaven, that's the first reference. While they were gazing into heaven, behold, two men stood by him in white robes.

And they said, Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? Second reference. And they said and continued, Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven?

This Jesus, who was taken away up from you into heaven, third reference, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven. It's deliberately repeated and emphasised.

Four times. I can't remember, I can't think of any other place where Luke beats the drum four times. Heaven, heaven, heaven, heaven. Heaven, heaven. You want you to understand that Jesus has gone to heaven.

And we need to get rid of that really spatial, really silly spatial idea of heaven. As though heaven is a kind of place. A thousand metres up in the air, above the surface of the earth.

[5 : 06] We need to get rid of that idea. From the very first verse of the Bible, the Bible takes a very sophisticated view of heaven.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Heaven is something that God has created for him to dwell in. And heaven and earth interlock and intersect.

Genesis 3, sin comes into our world and the two are not so connected anymore. There's a difference between the relationship between the heavens and the earth.

There's a separation. Here's the thing that I want you to grasp this morning. Heaven is not just up there. That if I could just get the right kind of jet propulsion, I could make it to where God is.

Or if I could get onto a spiritual elevator, like Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator, and I could press H, it would somehow zip me up and the doors would open and I would meet with God and all the saints.

[6 : 10] There is still a parallel. There is still an interlockingness about heaven and earth in our world now. We do not live in a two-decker universe.

And although they are still separated, heaven and earth, heaven still permeates and still invades the earth. I want you to think about it like a Venetian blind.

Do you know those Venetian blinds with the slots? And so the light shines through? Heaven is a little bit like that. At the end of the Bible, we're told when Christ comes again, heaven will come down and earth and heaven will become one.

It's not a physical place. Going to heaven does not make Jesus a spiritual space traveler, zooming to another situation. Heaven is to be in the presence and the dwelling of God.

And here's the point. On the day that Jesus ascended into God's presence, the relationship between heaven and earth changed. For the first time, there is a human being, clothed in flesh, being raised from the dead.

[7 : 28] And he goes to the place of God so that all the glory and all the forgiveness and all the goodness of the Lord Jesus becomes available and acceptable to all of us.

It is wonderful. And so the mission of the church is not this grim work of obedience, you must, you must. The work of mission demands the living, joyful presence of Jesus with us.

And the only way that that is going to happen is for him to be with God. The only way that that will happen is for him to ascend from earth to heaven and pour out his Holy Spirit upon us.

It's why we cannot expect any more resurrection appearances of Jesus. During the 40 days that he was risen from the dead, Jesus appeared to all sorts of people in all sorts of places.

But now the cloud comes down. And again, that should stir memories and déjà vu for us because do you remember in the book of Exodus when God rescues his people out of Egypt, he brought them to the mountain and he says the presence of God came down on the mountain and the cloud came down.

[8 : 50] And God called Moses up on the mountain and for 40 days, 40 days, Moses is there meeting face to face with God. The cloud of God comes down and Jesus goes up.

And all his grace and all his forgiveness is now available to us all everywhere. And that's the first thing the ascension means, that Jesus is accessible to us this morning.

The second thing the ascension means is that Jesus is now God's king. The ascension is Jesus' enthronement, his coronation, that's how we use the word today.

On the 6th of May, 2023, King Charles was crowned. King Charles III ascended the throne of England.

What does that mean? That he physically climbed up the steps? It doesn't mean that. It means that he took power. It means that he was installed, that King Charles was publicly recognized as sovereign.

[10 : 03] We say in the Apostles' Creed, don't we? The third day, Jesus rose again from the dead, he ascended into heaven, and he sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.

And so do you remember in Luke's gospel, in chapter 20, the Sadducees, they want to make rubbish of the resurrection. And at the end of that discussion, Jesus says, actually go and read your Psalms. Go and read Psalm 110, which says, God says to his sons, sit at my right hand until I put all my enemies under your feet.

It's really important. The resurrection is not just Jesus, not just God the Father giving Jesus another chance at life. It is the beginning of the restoration of everything.

It is the start of a new age. And in the end, in the ascension, it's not just that Jesus becomes accessible to us, but he takes up his rule at the right hand of the throne of God.

If you've got your Bible, just flick over to Acts chapter 2. It's 10 days later, after Pentecost, and the Holy Spirit is falling upon the apostles.

[11 : 18] Peter is preaching, and he's proclaiming the significance of what's happened. Look down at verse 32 of Acts chapter 2. 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, and then he quotes Psalm 110, the Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool. Here's the conclusion to the sermon.

Let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made him, that is Jesus, both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.

Nobody else has been raised from the dead. Yes, there have been a number of people who have been resuscitated back into this life, but they've all died again.

But nobody else has been raised from the dead and has ascended and sits in the glory of his majesty. And as Jesus ascends, there is a massive change because now for the first time, a human being ascends into heaven and sits at God's right hand.

[12 : 41] When Jesus came into our world that first Christmas, he became what he eternally was not. He took on human flesh.

And now he goes to be with God. He remains both fully God and fully man. Jesus Christ, I take it, that's why a couple of later chapters later, as Simon is being stoned to death, he looks up to heaven and heaven is opened and he sees the glory of God and Jesus is standing at the right hand of the Father.

And I think Jesus is standing at that point because this is the first Christian who dies for his faith.

And Jesus wants to take him by the hand and lead him into heaven and welcome him.

This is the Christian faith. This is what Jesus meant when he said, all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. The ascension means that Jesus is not just accessible but that he rules.

To quote Rabbi Duncan, the dust of the earth now sits on the throne of the universe. And thirdly, the ascension means that Jesus is appointed judge of all.

[14 : 00] If you look down at verse 11 of chapter 1. The angels say, Man 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. In other words, it's telling you and I that the return of the Lord Jesus, when he comes again, it will be visible and it will be public.

But the coming one comes because he is the judge of the living and the dead. Keep your finger in Acts chapter 1 and turn to Acts chapter 10 for a moment and I'd like to show you how this works itself out.

Acts chapter 10. It's the apostle Peter and he is speaking to a house that is absolutely crammed full with people and he is explaining to them the wonder of who Jesus is.

And if in Acts chapter 10 verse 38, can you see it? We're told that Jesus went about doing good and healing people. And he speaks about his crucifixion on a tree in verse 39 and in verse 40 that God raised him up and verse 41 we ate and drank with him.

[15 : 12] Now here's the question. Peter, what is the core of the message? What is the one thing that Jesus told the apostles to teach us and to tell us about?

What's the one most important thing that Jesus has commanded you to say? Verse 42 of Acts 10 and he commanded us. He told us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead.

What did Jesus say is at the heart of the message? Because he is ascended, he is the judge of the living and the dead right now.

And I don't know if you think that's good news or not. We don't like to talk about judgment do we? But it is good news because of who it is that is our judge.

I don't want to be judged by someone that doesn't know me very well. I don't want to be judged by someone who only looks on the outside but actually I don't want to be judged either by someone who looks on the inside.

[16:27] I don't want to be judged by you and I don't even want to judge myself. But the one who left heaven to come and seek and save me when I was lost.

The one who came not for the righteous but for sinners. The one who died on the cross bearing sins for my forgiveness. He's the one I want to be judged by.

And that is what Peter says in the next verse. He says to him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. And that is why the ascension is like the top of that firework exploding.

The forgiveness of God the saving grace of Jesus Christ. Yes he is judge. Yes he is Lord. Yes he is ours.

Salvation comes through him. Well let's get back to chapter one and finish it off. I don't know how you respond to the Bible readings.

[17:36] I hope you don't just think they're the filler in the service. I hope you're asking the question when I read Acts chapter one. Why does Luke spend all this space on finding a replacement for Judas?

If you've got any sensitivities so far you will know that there's been pyrotechnics, there's been resurrection from the dead, there's been an ascension into heaven. You've got the promise of the Holy Spirit.

In chapter two verse one the Holy Spirit comes. but in between that you've got verses 12 to 26. Let me ask you this question in a different way.

What would the difference be? What would happen if we just skipped it today? Would it make any difference? I'm not talking about taking scissors out and cutting it out.

I mean why don't we just get on with the good stuff? Why bore! us with these details? Administrative details? Why don't we just get to where the Holy Spirit comes down?

[18:42] Why is it that Luke is really careful in his writing? He gives two verses to the ascension. He gives four verses to the coming of the Holy Spirit.

He gives 14 verses to the choosing of another apostle. Why? I think the answer is something like this. that what we're being taught here is that when Jesus ascended into heaven he gave the world two gifts not one.

Two gifts not one. And we are used in the Christian church talking about the gift of the Holy Spirit when he ascended in heaven and that is true wonderfully true and we'll deal with that next week but there is a prior gift a first gift the coming of the Holy Spirit that's the second gift but the first gift is this where is the church that is the gift it is an apostolic church that has been ordered and has been given by Jesus in a particular form here is the creation of a new Israel a new people of God it's why there need to be 12 apostles and I'd encourage you this afternoon to take this passage and read it again there's some gory bits to it but there are two main themes that Luke wants us to hold in mind as we look at it the first theme is this that the church belongs to

Jesus it is Jesus church I remember last week in the very first verse that in the gospel of Luke Luke says I dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach and now in the start of Acts he says I'm dealing with what Jesus continues to do and teach after his resurrection and in verse two he refers to the fact that he chose 12 disciples I'm sure you know that there's a difference isn't there between disciple and apostle disciple is a word that refers to all who follow Jesus there are 120 of them gathered in Jerusalem in verse 15 but there is a little group within the disciples that Jesus deliberately chose for a special responsibility in ministry in the gospels Jesus spends a whole night in prayer before he chooses them because you cannot self appoint yourself as an apostle you can't choose to be an apostle

Jesus chooses you and it's important that their names are listed in Luke 6 but the fellowship is broken isn't it Judas betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver and in his despair he did not come back to Christ he came in suicide!

[21:43] and we're given some of the lurid details in verses 18 and 19 I don't want to pause too long on this but don't you think that Judas is a remarkable picture of sin Judas had Jesus the son of God face to face in person he saw him raise people from the dead he saw him walk on water he saw his miracles he heard his teaching but Judas would rather have 30 pieces of silver so that he could have a field with it instead of the son of God it's a great picture isn't it of how our hearts my

heart and your heart continually want the good things that God gives us but don't want God himself and the tragedy is he was willing to betray God for his own selfish purposes and when we do that everything in our life turns to dust in our hands and our life is taken away from us on all the fields that we buy all the things that we accumulate end up becoming our cemeteries and being buried with us if

Jesus had chosen the first twelve who is going to choose the replacement here's the first test to see if the risen ascended Jesus is present and so what do they do down in the last verses of the chapter they find two guys who meet the qualifications and in verse 24 they pray and who do they pray to they pray in verse 24 to the Lord Lord they say you know the hearts of all men show us which one of these two you've chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship and then they roll the dice odds it's Matthias evens it's the other one and Matthias gets the job and you might think that rolling the dice after a short prayer meeting might give us a much better chance with church leaders than we've had historically and you may well be right but unfortunately this is a one off and the way that we choose elders in this church when we have an election it's not odds for

Ollie Mallet tails for Paul Felix and then a best of three best of five that doesn't happen anymore and this is the last time there's a rolling of dice in scripture in the next chapter the Holy Spirit comes they never do it is Jesus who is choosing the 12th apostle it is Jesus church it belongs to him and if you are reading the text sensitively it is very surprising that it is Peter that's leading this group how can Peter be the one leading them to replace Judas yes Judas betrayed Jesus but Peter betrayed Jesus three times the point is this it is Jesus church it is not the church of Peter and membership in the church comes about by belonging to Jesus it does not come about by having a spiritual life together you don't become a member of the church because you've got spiritual achievements or spiritual sensitivities or a great track record we all belong to this church because of the forgiveness of our sins through

Jesus Christ and some of us came to church this morning feeling an utter failure maybe you came here feeling such a sense of failure that you shouldn't be here well this is exactly where you ought to be and some of us maybe came here today actually thinking we're a bit of a success and we forget that we're a failure and this is exactly the place that you ought to be because this church is made up of moral and spiritual failures as a church we know that the only place we can go for freedom and restoration and forgiveness is to the risen and ascended Lord Jesus and so you see the only difference between Peter and Judas is that Peter turned back to the Lord Jesus and received the forgiveness that he offered while Judas refused to the most basic sense of this dependence on

Jesus is shown in prayer prayer this is a bit of an aside but while I was on sabbatical I went to lots of gather to pray I think the fact that it's not such a priority for us shows that we're far more confident in our own spiritual abilities than Jesus is we are very shy in London and maybe the church here we're failing in this area and we need to ask for his forgiveness and seek his face because this church like every true church is Christ church and it belongs to him and without him we can do nothing it's not mine it's not yours it's his secondly and finally it's Jesus church and it's an apostolic church church it's really easy to miss this and there are twelve apostles this is the restoration of the true

[27 : 47] Israel and the way that Jesus has constructed his church is that we are built on the foundation of the apostles this has all sorts of implications it means this that this church is not a democracy the church of Jesus Christ is not one vote one voice we are the body of Jesus Christ we are the bride of Jesus Christ we are the building of God and if you choose a democratic model for your church the church will be choose a democratic model for your church the church will become a model of its people's desires or the desires of its culture the democratic church gives the illusion that the church well is about me and my needs and my agenda but it is not it is Christ church I don't know whether you know but democracy voting has a very bad track record in the

Bible think of the world in Noah's day think of the Tower of Babel think of the golden calf think of the choice of Barabbas we don't elect Jesus Jesus is Lord the church is not ours it is his and he has chosen to form it and he has chosen to create it on the foundation of the apostles why what makes them so unique verse 21 the and one of the one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out amongst!

us beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he is taken up for us one of these must become a witness of the resurrection they're not just witnesses of the resurrection what qualified them to be an apostle apart from being chosen by Jesus they'd seen his miracles heard him teach

they'd been on mission with him they'd been taught by him and trained by him because the resurrection by itself doesn't prove anything but if it is this Jesus who is resurrected it makes a very big difference it is the same Jesus who told the prodigal son parable it is the same Jesus that went to Zacchaeus house it is the same and if he rises from the dead it is something and that is the way that Jesus set up his church that we rest on the foundation of their testimony and I think that's why in verses 15 to 7 Peter is so confident in the way that he interprets the Old Testament where did he get this idea from where did he get the idea that the Bible must be fulfilled where did he get the idea that Jesus is spoken about in the Psalms it wasn't the Holy Spirit at Pentecost it wasn't some special insight that he got it directly from Jesus in Luke 24 it has so many implications for us let me draw just a couple as I close you can spend lunch talking about the others here's one implication it means that if we're going to be Christ church we must! the apostles speak with power and authority which governs us today sometimes you hear and people say Jesus taught a really simple message of love and universal brotherhood and the apostles came along and they muddied the waters and they corrupted things what does Jesus ever say about homosexuality they say the apostles came and they changed the message they hardened the message let me say this politely it is utter nonsense because this is the church of the risen and ascended Jesus Christ and he chose apostles as the authentic guarantee of his message and our love for Jesus is measured by our trust in him and the practice of the apostolic testimony That's one significant implication the second is this it means that true apostolic succession is not being able to trace whoever laid hands on you back to the apostle [32 : 21] Peter it means that you believe and teach what the apostles believe and taught the Roman Catholic teaching of we trace our ordination right back to the apostle Peter that's not what it's about it's about do you follow the teaching of the apostles sometimes people say this I take the bible too seriously to take it literally it's a really cute slogan but actually it's really deceptive the bible is not just a collection of random facts it's poetry and prophecy and preaching and parables and what people mean when they say that kind of thing is we ought not to take the apostles claim as factual or serious do you know what happens when we adopt that it means that you and I become the people who decide what's in and what's out it's like the husband and wife or the husband who says

I'm not going to take what my wife says literally she asked for time but she didn't really mean that I'll give her money and you begin to make Jesus in your own image because there's nothing that Jesus can say or the apostles can say which you will allow to contradict you and all you hear from the Bible is what you want to hear I think the reason why Luke spent so much time on this section of the choosing the apostles is that if the church is to remain faithful to Jesus Christ we have to continue to build on the foundation of the apostles you move off that foundation and you cease to be the church of Jesus Christ the risen and the ascended Jesus wonderfully and gloriously continues to be accessible to us and he loves his church and he cares for his church more than we could ever possibly imagine and he is the one who guarantees our mission and he is the one who has given us the apostles as the foundation of his church and so let's bow and pray to him to of his Thank you.