



*To Know Christ . . .  
and to Make Him Known*

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### **Promises and Preparations** **Acts 1:1-26**

On the Christian calendar, this past Thursday, May 10, was Ascension Day—the day we remember Jesus' return to heaven forty days after His resurrection.

But why is that event important enough to mark it as a special day in the Christian Year?

A few years ago, my pastor friend Dr. Chris Alford wrote in his weekly email to his church in California that growing up in our Baptist tradition, “the Ascension of Christ was not particularly highlighted; it was a kind of peculiar footnote to the life and ministry of Christ.”

I have to agree—I seldom heard a sermon on the ascension of Christ as I was growing up. As a young minister, I did hear one older minister talk about a sermon he had preached on the ascension. And as far as my own preaching, through the years I've usually dealt with the ascension as part of the larger Easter story rather than focusing on it and its theological significance.

Chris went on to say:

But the Ascension of Christ is no footnote: It's a critical part of the salvation story and enormously important to our understanding and practice of the faith.

So what are we to make of Jesus' ascension into heaven?

The two ancient Christian confessions of faith known as the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed expressed “the rule of faith”—the central affirmations about who Jesus is and what He has done. They served and still serve as the lens through which the Scriptures must be interpreted and by which beliefs and behavior must be formed and judged. Both include the affirmation that after Jesus suffered and died, He rose from the dead and ascended to heaven where He sits at the Father's right hand, and that from there He will return to judge the living and the dead.

It's clear that the Scriptures teach us that Jesus ascended into heaven after His resurrection. And these early confessions affirm its significance by including it in what they express as being essential to the Christian faith.

#### *Accompanied by promises . . .*

Luke gives us more details about Jesus' ascension than the other Gospel writers in his two-volume account of Jesus and His followers (Luke and Acts). Matthew doesn't specifically mention it; he ends his account with Jesus' giving the Great Commission, and we naturally assume that the ascension is implied. The longer ending of the Gospel according to Mark (16:9-

20), which is not included in the earliest manuscripts we have, gives one sentence to it. In John's account, Jesus talks about ascending and going to the Father, but His actual ascension is not reported.

Luke, on the other hand, tells us in Luke 24 how Jesus appeared to His disciples, dispelling their doubts and demonstrating that He was truly resurrected and alive. He was the same Jesus they'd known before, only He had died and had been raised from the dead! As Charles Talbert puts it, "Jesus remained flesh and bones, though immortal and not limited by time and space."<sup>1</sup>

Jesus went on to remind them again from the Old Testament Scriptures how the Messiah must suffer and rise from the dead, and how "**repentance and remission of sins**" must "**be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem**" (Luke 24:46-47).<sup>2</sup> Then He told them that they were witnesses of these things, and that He was going to send them what his Father had promised—the Holy Spirit. But they were to stay in Jerusalem until they had been clothed with power from on high. That, of course, would happen at Pentecost.

Then Jesus **led them out as far as Bethany**, and as He was blessing them, **He was parted from them and carried up into heaven** (Luke 24:50-51).

In Acts, Luke tells how over a period of forty days following His resurrection, Jesus appeared multiple times to His followers and spoke to them about the kingdom of God. He commanded His disciples to stay in Jerusalem waiting **for the Promise of the Father** that Jesus had told them about—the baptism of the Holy Spirit that John the Baptist had declared that the Messiah would bring.

It's interesting that at this point the disciples somehow still thought that Jesus was about restoring Israel *as an earthly dominion*. They asked Him, "**Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?**" (Acts 1:6). After all, He had once said something to them about their sitting on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. Was this when they were going to do it?

Jesus' reply basically said that this was none of their business. They were concerned about receiving power. They would receive power when the Holy Spirit came on them, and then they would be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:7-8)!

And then, Luke tells us, **while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight**" (Acts 1:9). They kept looking **steadfastly toward heaven as He went up**. But two angels stood by them and told them:

**"Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven"** (Acts 1:10-11).

And so He had ascended.

But His ascension was accompanied by two promises. Jesus promised that He would send **the Promise of the Father**, the Holy Spirit to them. And the angels promised that He Himself would return with the clouds.

### ***Filled with significance . . .***

But why is Jesus' ascension significant?

Once He ascended to the Father, He sat down in the highest place of honor at the Father's right hand as the exalted Lord, given **the name that is above every name**, to which one day every knee will bow and every tongue confess **that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father** (Ephesians 1:15-23; Philippians 2:5-11).

Think about that for a minute. Luke went to great lengths to make it clear that the Jesus who ascended into heaven to sit at the Father's right hand as the exalted Lord is the same Jesus who became incarnate when He was born of the virgin Mary, who lived and ministered in a specific time and place, who suffered and died and rose again, the same Messiah the prophets spoke of in the Old Testament, and the same Lord who will return to judge the living and the dead. He was born truly and fully God and truly and fully human. He lived, ministered, suffered, died and rose again as the God-Man. When He ascended, He did so as the divine-human Lord Jesus Christ and Son of God, so that even at the Father's right hand He is truly God, truly Man.

From the Father's right hand He reigns as Lord. At the Father's right hand He intercedes for us (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25 and 9:24). And from the Father's right hand He will return in glory to raise the dead, judge the world in righteousness, and redeem the creation in new heavens and a new earth!

### *Accompanied by preparations . . .*

Now it would be easy to think that the story and ministry of Jesus ended with His ascension, or was at least put on hold until His return.

But remember that He told His disciples that they were to be witnesses to Him, empowered by the Holy Spirit they would soon receive to join Him on His mission as they carried the news of His kingdom—His rule and reign—to the ends of the earth (1:8)! And as followers of Jesus today, that mission is passed on to us!

But for them to join Him on His mission, Jesus had to prepare them.

The first thing He did was to tell them to *wait on Him* (1:4-5). The Old Testament is full of calls to and promises about waiting on the Lord (Isaiah 40:28-31).

Here Jesus called on His followers to wait for the Father's promise—the Holy Spirit. They would wait for ten days. When the Spirit finally came, His presence made all the difference in their witness to Jesus!

Someone has said that we must practice *creative waiting*. Creative waiting is *not* doing nothing, but actively trusting God, waiting for His direction and action—an essential part of being on mission with Christ!

The second thing Jesus did to prepare His disciples was to *correct their vision* (1:6-11). Remember that they were interested in the kingdom being restored to Israel, and their being set up over the twelve tribes. Jesus refocused their vision, telling them they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came on them, empowering them to be His witnesses to the world. Jesus corrected their vision of what God was doing!

Corrective lenses are a wonderful invention! Without glasses I can't see clearly beyond a few feet. How much more is that true when it comes to God's purpose and work! Without His correcting our vision, we'll miss what He's doing and how He wants us to be a part of it! We have to submit our vision to the risen Lord Jesus, so He can correct it and focus it on His plans and purpose.

The risen Jesus made those first two preparations just before He ascended. Then God guided the group of about 120 believers who were gathered in the upper room in two other preparations.

God's third preparation was to lead them to *united prayer* (1:12-14). Luke describes them as continuing **with one accord in prayer and supplication** (1:14). This went on for ten days after Jesus

ascended. While they waited, they prayed! Just as in Luke's Gospel Jesus prepared for all the significant decisions or events in His life and ministry through prayer, so He was preparing His followers through prayer.

All the great movements of God in history (revivals, renewals and awakenings, the Reformation) have been preceded by a time of united prayer among God's people.

This kind of united prayer is vital to God's kingdom purpose! He has chosen and ordained to accomplish a large portion of His purpose through the prayers of His people. When there is a burning desire and determination to unite in prayer, seeking God's purpose and promises, God is preparing His people for how He plans to move.

Finally, God led them to *select appropriate leadership*, replacing Judas as an apostle (1:15-26). That was important because the Twelve Apostles served as the authoritative witnesses to the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and were thus the guarantors of the true tradition or teaching about Jesus.

Throughout history God has raised up leaders for each stage of His work in history—Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Ulrich Zwingli for the Reformation; Jonathan Edwards, George Whitfield, and John and Charles Wesley for the Great Awakening; William Carey, Andrew Fuller, and Lottie Moon for missions.

Indeed, from time to time, God raises up leaders, sometimes local, sometimes national or world, to lead God's people in what He is doing or is about to do. Through the centuries, that leadership has taken the form of what was needed for the situation or moment. While sometimes different than those who may have gone before, God's choice is always consistent with what Scripture teaches about spiritual leaders.

Jesus promised the Holy Spirit, the angels promised His return, and the Lord prepared His disciples to be on mission with Him in the world.

He still works the same way. While we wait on God and look for the return of our risen, ascended, and exalted Lord, He clarifies our vision, unites us in prayer, and raises up the appropriate leadership and structure for His mission.

Will you yield to what He wants to do in your life, and will we as a church yield to what He wants to do in and through us? Will we trust His promises as He prepares us to be on mission with Him in the world?

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<sup>1</sup> Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel*, rev. ed. (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 257.

<sup>2</sup> Scripture taken from the New King James Version.