

The Ascension of Our Lord

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Acts 1:1-11 In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach **2** until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. **3** After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. **4** On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. **5** For John baptized with[a] water, but in a few days you will be baptized with[b] the Holy Spirit."

6 Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

7 He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. **8** But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

9 After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

10 They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. **11** "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

"Ascension Acceleration"

Getting into the car meant an automatic cringe. Sometimes it was mom's turn. Dad did his share of teaching. But Leanne was eager to learn to drive for herself, so they were patient. That doesn't mean mom didn't occasionally stomp on the imaginary brake pedal on the passenger side when Leanne took her time slowing down for a stoplight or dad didn't grip the seat and clench his jaw when she got a little too close to the semi. But over time, with practice, they felt their daughter was really ready to take the wheel without any supervision. So when Leanne called out near the front door with car keys jangling, 'Mom, dad, I'm going to the mall. Can you come with me?' they both just looked at each other as they stayed right where they were. She called out again. No response. Finally she walked over to the kitchen and gave her parents that quizzical teenager look. 'What's up? Why aren't you coming?' 'Honey,' they replied, 'you're ready. You've practiced enough. You have your license. We've taught you the basics. We've been with as you've made mistakes and had some near misses. But now it's time. You can do this.' And with that, mom and dad walked back outside to do some yard work.

The ascension of Jesus is a turning point for disciples today just as it was in 33 A.D. Jesus has done everything necessary to complete his mission of saving humanity. Now he turns the keys over to his disciples. They carry on his work. They continue his legacy. The entire time disciples do the work of Jesus, they don't do it without Jesus. Not really. Even as he ascended into heaven to his rightful place of honor, Jesus is still there for disciples. And

Jesus can now fill disciples in more amazing ways than when he could walk with them and talk to them face to face. Jesus is there with his gifts, his promises, his power. To disciples then and now, Jesus is ready to turn over his work. You are called. You are equipped. You are not abandoned as you carry out his calling. Jesus ascension accelerates the work he does through his people.

It's always interesting how parents and children can have vastly different perspectives on the same events. Starting kindergarten. Losing that first tooth. Getting picked on by a bully. Struggling to get through Algebra. Graduation. Parents can get very emotional. They can question what they have done, whether they have taught and trained, shaped and molded their children to respond to those challenges. But it's very different to be the ones going through those situations. As the child growing and developing, those emotions can be very intense. A tricky situation can feel like the hardest thing in the whole world. Getting through it might seem impossible. Parents have a little bit of distance. They can offer advice based on their own experiences all those years ago. They can be supportive knowing these things might be a brief footnote when the memoirs get written.

So with the benefit of hindsight, we can see how Ascension was a blessing to those disciples. We can read all the way to the end of the Book of Acts and then to the end of the Bible and realize Jesus removing himself physically, personally from his followers was an important stage in their development. But we can also understand how confusing it was for the disciples. They didn't understand what was going on. They had no clue why Jesus would leave. It made no sense. It was impossible to see how this could be a positive development, how it could in any way be for their good.

To compare disciples to teenagers might not be a compliment. To the teenagers. These inner circle eleven had been with Jesus. They had traveled with him and listened to his teachings. They had witnessed first hand his miracles and interactions with opponents. They were taken for a gut-wrenching roller coaster ride through his betrayal and arrest, his flogging and crucifixion. They had been privileged to receive "many convincing proofs" of his physical, bodily resurrection. The phrase in the Bible is the same as when medical experts rule out every other possible diagnosis and settle with utmost certainty on one verdict. Over 40 days they had their faith reshaped, their expectations reformed by Jesus himself. 40 days in the Bible is typically the period of struggle that ends in a glorious climax.

Now they are ready. We don't know exactly what is going through their minds. But we get a glimpse with this key verse from Acts 1:6 **"Then they gathered around him and asked him, 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?'"** They still don't get it. After all Jesus had done for them, they still don't understand. We would expect Jesus to call timeout. Shake his head at them and launch into a lengthy retraining crash course. But he doesn't. He gives them a brief correction. He tells them they don't get it now, but they soon will. He gives them a job description and then he leaves.

The ascension is a challenge for disciples. They are reluctant to embrace the role Jesus gives to them. We can understand why. They don't have all the information. They don't know all the facts. They still have their out of whack expectations. Disciples today just as then treat

the activity to which Jesus calls disciples more like a shuttle launch than driving to Safeway. We want what we want when we want it before we are ready to entertain thoughts of carrying out the commissioning Jesus gives. Glory before guts.

Martin Luther said that every human being is a theologian of glory. That is in contrast to his crucial breakthrough that helped define the Reformation. The theology of the cross means we look at everything in life, everything we experience, everything God throws at us through the prism of the cross. What Jesus went through and what Jesus accomplished on the cross change the way we see everything. But that's not natural. Naturally, we see life as a pathway toward our own definition of success and power and glory.

It means looking at the latest shooting and trade wars and human crisis and thinking this is all too much. It means looking at my personal life and thinking I need to sort some things out and get my life on track before I can focus on any discipleship concerns. It means looking at my personal failings and individual weaknesses and realizing how unqualified I am. We are reluctant to be what Jesus calls us to be. We back away from the calling he gives us because we just don't see the space shuttle cockpit lights all ablaze for all systems go.

By demanding our definitions of success and comfort and glory before we are willing to carry out God's work, we essentially have elevated those factors over the actual work Jesus gives us to do. By backing away from the work when we don't get what we're after, we actually prevent the success we are after. God promises he will accomplish his goals for souls through the power of the Holy Spirit at work through his people. He doesn't promise us any other way.

There is no reluctance from Jesus. The patience on this side of Easter reflects the persistence in the pre-passion time period. Jesus was determined to ensure God's plan was completed despite the rejection of so many and even the confusion so often on display from disciples. Jesus took the time to give convincing proofs over 40 days. He instructed his followers in the implications of his resurrection. He taught them to make the connection between the promises God had made throughout the centuries and his fulfillment in their own lifetimes.

By his ascension, Jesus shows God's kingdom is truly restored to human hearts. God is ruling inside the souls of his people who have been conquered by grace. God is on the throne with his wisdom and power put to use for his citizens. It's just a different definition of glory.

In the children's book *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the Pevensie children learn to value Aslan. They find themselves overwhelmed by the power of the White Witch. They feel vulnerable, at her mercy. Things look bleak. They decide they have to take action. They need to become the heroes. But that is just part of the lesson. Yes, they must become warriors. Yes, they must struggle and rise to the challenge. But Aslan teaches that he will be the one to face their vulnerabilities and weaknesses. He is the one who fights the battle for them. He wins the victory. He just wants them to be participants. And with him fighting for them, they are confident in the success of their battle.

God's people get so caught up in what we don't have now that Jesus is ascended into heaven, we lose perspective on what he is actually doing for us. Jesus isn't gone. Not really. Jesus ascended to take his rightful place on heaven's throne. Jesus rules the universe for the good of his children. No matter how bad things get or how out of control they seem, Jesus won't let world events derail his plans.

And his ascension means Jesus is with you today. Every day. Jesus has given unqualified sinners the dignity of being his child. Jesus has called messed up people to carry out the privilege of serving in his kingdom. Jesus takes unnerved and apprehensive disciples and equips them with power through the working of the Holy Spirit.

Do you realize the lack of glory in our lives gives us opportunities to be witnesses? What does a witness do other than simply telling what they've seen and heard. The ascension of Jesus gives you perspective when things in our world appear to be falling apart. Even as we are disappointed by tragedies and natural disasters, we are drawn closer to the one who rules all things in heaven and earth. When our lives are a mess, we can witness to the amazing grace of a God who calls us in our messiness and loves us and forgives us. When we are stung by our failures and weaknesses, we highlight God's forgiveness and restoration to a hurting and confused world.

One celebrated speaker recently poked holes in the work-life balance discussion. He says: "If you think it's a sacrifice don't do it cause then all you're doing is you're going to have resentment later on, frustration later on and then you really not contributing. You're trading off, you're not giving." He makes this distinction. If it is your mission, then it won't feel like work. It won't seem like a burden. "If you can combine your mission with your family, combine your mission with some of your friends then you're going to accomplish a million times more." (Tony Robbins, interviewed by Joe Polish.)

By his ascension, Jesus gives his church a clear focus for our mission until he returns. We are his witnesses. We start in our own Jerusalem, in our own homes. We branch out to our Judea, our own communities. We stretch out to all Samaria, challenging ourselves to go outside our comfort zone to the people we don't naturally see as our mission field. But the ascension of Jesus means God's people can confidently and courageously live out Jesus' calling to be his witnesses. Jesus parks a brand new Mustang in your driveway and tosses you the keys. It's yours, he says. Go have fun. Jesus says you are ready. You are called and equipped to be his witness. From reluctant and apprehensive, the promises and power of Jesus transform us into fully invigorated whole life witnesses. His ascension is just the accelerator. Amen.