

# The Ascension

- Acts 1:1-11
- As we continue our study in the book of Acts this morning, I want to focus our attention of the ascension of Christ, but before we go to that, let me do two other things.
- First, let me come back to the point I made last week, that when we interpret Scripture, **the narrative is always to be controlled by the didactic.** (just as our own experiences are always to be interpreted by Scripture, not the other way around. Examples: we should choose leaders by casting lots; salvation means I was blinded by a light and heard the audible voice of Jesus; true fellowship means sharing all things in common and no one owns property). Look at context first, then other texts by same author, and finally the broader context of Scripture. In each of these examples, the broader context of Scripture will answer that. For example, how do we know that the “sharing all things in common” text in Acts 2 is not prescriptive but descriptive? That it does not prescribe how we are all to live, but it described how the first church took care of those who had needs? How do we know that this text is not about God telling us to never own property? Look at Acts 5. Ananias was not struck dead by the Spirit because he owned property, but because he lied about the gift he gave to the church. He led the apostles to believe that he was giving 100% of the proceeds to the church. But the fact is, he didn’t have to give ANY of the proceeds to the church. Look at verse 4. (and in the previous chapter, final verse: Barnabus sold a field “that belonged to him.”)
- Second, let’s talk for just a moment about the connection between our memory verse for today and the question the disciples asked Jesus in verse 6. They asked Him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” John Calvin wrote, “There are as many errors in this question as words.” Well, that’s true. They got the first word right, “Lord.” And Jesus HAD been talking to them about “the kingdom,” so those two words were OK. But it quickly went down hill from there. If they had just done one of these, “Lord? The Kingdom?” shrugs, everything would have been fine. But they didn’t. Instead, they used the word “restore,” which means they were thinking politically and geographically. Israel had once been a kingdom, and a powerful one. Now they were simply occupied territory under the boot of Rome. They used the word “Israel,” which means they were thinking parochially, nationally, not globally. And they used the phrase “at this time,” which means they were expecting Jesus to do something for them right now. Now, their mistake is understandable. Jesus had been talking with them for forty days about the kingdom of God. But they still didn’t have a biblical understanding of kingdom. How does Jesus answer? “It is not for you to know times or seasons.” That’s in God’s authority. “But you will receive power...” He says, hey you are interested in power and kingdoms and authority. Let me tell you about power. This power doesn’t need guns or armies or votes or special interest groups. This power works from the inside out, not the outside in. This power saves lives by changing hearts. He was giving them a new way to think about the kingdom of God.
- John Stott says, “The kingdom of God is His rule set up in the lives of His people by the Holy Spirit.” And we know from the Bible’s clear teaching that the kingdom of God is not parochial but global. That’s what Acts 1:8 says, and it serves as a table of contents for the rest of the book: Chapters 1-7 take place in Jerusalem. Chapters 8 mentions the scattering of the disciples to Judea and Samaria. Chapter 9 records the conversion of Saul which led to the expansion of the Gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth. We also know that the kingdom of God expands gradually. This book records 33 years of Gospel expansion and kingdom building. Here we are 1,950 years after the book of Acts ended, and the expansion continues. But it is not done. Acts 29 continues with us.
- The Ascension
- Let’s look at two points about this picture that is in Luke’s photo album in chapter one: the why, and the how. Why did Jesus ascend? And then, how does this make a difference in our lives?
- Why?

- Jesus led them disciples out of Jerusalem and on the 40<sup>th</sup> day after His resurrection, He ascended into heaven. Luke 24:51 says, “While He blessed them, He parted from them and was carried up into heaven.” Acts 1:9 says, “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.” In each case, it is clear that the disciples saw Jesus ascend. He went up. He left the plane of earth and entered another plane. Was He the first space traveler? Are we to think of the first Russian cosmonaut, Yuri Gagarin, who in 1961 traveled in space and made the comment, “I didn’t see God anywhere.” Dr. Criswell, then pastor of First Baptist of Dallas said, “Well, if he had stepped out of that spacesuit, he would have seen God!” No, heaven is not some geographical place up there in the sky somewhere that we just haven’t been able to get to with our rockets yet, but one day we will. Heaven is simply the next sphere, as Norm Wakefield said, it is right here, right behind the veil.
- The first reason Jesus ascended and made sure that it was a public event, at least for the disciples, was so that they would know He was gone for good. He could have just vanished, like some church members, and then gone secretly to the Father. You remember after His resurrection, He would suddenly appear, by the seashore, or behind locked doors, or on the road to Emmaus, and then He would sometimes vanish from their sight. But this time was different. He doesn’t want them to go looking for Him all over Jerusalem. Or wait at Mt. Olivet for Him to return. No, this was it. They were not to wait around for another appearance of Jesus. Instead, they were to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit. So, He told them He was leaving, He blessed them, and He was then taken up, while they watched until a cloud hid them. You notice the difference between the reaction of the disciples here and their reaction at the Mt. of Transfiguration? There Peter said, “Wow, Lord, it’s a good thing to be here with you, and Moses and Elijah. I’m to build three tents for you and these men.” That was a silly thing to say then, and it would have been even sillier for the disciples to decide they would just build a camp right there, where Jesus ascended, and never leave the spot again. No, they knew He had left, and they knew He had given them a job to do, and it had nothing to do with sitting on a hillside, gazing into heaven.
- The second reason Jesus ascended into heaven was to complete His mission and assume His rightful position. Mark 16:19, “So then the Lord Jesus, after He had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God.” Where He had been before. John 6:62, “Then what if you see the Son of Man ascending to where He was before?” The only difference is that now Jesus has a human body. Jesus ascended because this was the capstone of His completed work. Remember the Gospel as it was put into poetry by Paul in 1 Timothy 3:16: “He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.”
- The third reason, as we saw last week, was that Jesus had to ascend so the Spirit could descend. John 16:7-8, “Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send Him to you. And when He comes, He will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment.”
- The fourth reason Jesus ascended is so that He could plead our case to the Father. Hebrews 7:25, “Consequently, He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through Him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.” And 1 John 2:1, “But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous.” Oh, what a promise!
- That’s the why. What about the how? How should the ascension both encourage and motivate us as followers of Jesus, in addition to what we have already talked about? Let’s look again at what the angels said to the disciples in Acts 1:11.
- First, it encourages us that Jesus will come again. This is the next great event on God’s calendar. You know how you write some big event on your calendar on the kitchen? “Go to the beach!” “Grandma’s coming!” I bet Chrissy has a date circled on her June calendar. Well, think of the four huge events that the book of Acts points to, all in the first chapter. First big event: Ascension: Jesus ascended into heaven and sat down at the right hand of the Father. Second: Pentecost: The Holy Spirit came down and the church was born. Third: Mission: the church goes out to witness, in the

power of the Spirit, and in ever-growing concentric circles (Jerusalem, all Judea, Samaria, uttermost parts). Fourth: Parousia: Jesus' sudden, personal, visible, bodily return! The Greek word used many times in the NT, parousia, simply means "coming." Matt. 24:44, "Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect." I Thessalonians 4:16, "For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God." The biggest difference between His ascension and His return? The former was private. Only a handful saw it, and they rejoiced over it. The latter will be public. The whole world will see. And it will only be joyful for some. Revelation 1:7, "Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of Him. Even so. Amen."

- Second, it motivates us to get on with the task at hand. We are not to be star-gazers, "why are you looking up into heaven," but witnesses, "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." It is not for us to know times and seasons of Jesus' return: it is enough for us to know that He WILL return. We are in the Mission stage right now. The ascension and Pentecost are behind us. The parousia is ahead of us. John Stott wrote, "We need to hear the implied message of the angels: 'You have seen Him go. You will see Him come. But between that going and coming there must be another. The Spirit must come, and you must go—into the world for Christ.'"