

40 Days Left on Earth

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[0 : 00] Let's join together in prayer. Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we come now to your word to think about it, to reflect on its glory and the glory of the person who it points our attention to.

And we ask that you will make us receptive to your voice, make us a listening and an obedient people, a repentant people turning away from everything that is evil and sinful in our hearts.

And turning towards that forgiveness and cleansing that you have invited us to in the cross of Jesus. For we ask in His name, Amen.

The last two chapters of John, they give his account of Jesus' resurrection. The appearances which there were between the empty tomb and his ascension to the Father's right hand.

And you'll notice, I'm sure many of you will notice that John's account is quite different from the other gospels, but there are no contradictions between them. If you want a full picture of all that there is to know about Jesus' resurrection, then put all the accounts together. And that's what God wants us to know.

[1 : 20] My question this morning is a very simple one. It's a one that has intrigued me for a long time. And it goes like this. Why was it that Jesus remained in the world for 40 days between the resurrection and the ascension?

Why was there that period? Why if Jesus had finished the work that God had given him to do by dying on the cross and by rising from the dead on the third day, why remain any longer in the world? Why not ascend to the Father right away?

After all, the work of atonement was finished. Our sin has been paid for. Jesus Himself said, it is finished. What then is there left to do?

But we have to regard the resurrection not simply as the end of something, but the beginning of something. The beginning of Jesus' life of exaltation, as some people call it, that began the moment that he came to life again on the third day, that he rose from the dead, eventually to ascend to the Father and to sit at his right hand where he lives, and we're told he makes intercession for us.

I fear that not enough, at least I speak for myself anyway, I confess that I don't think enough of Jesus' heavenly life. Now, when I think of Jesus, I think of what I read in the gospels, the parables, the miracles, the death of Jesus.

[2 : 59] I don't think enough of Jesus as he is today, triumphant, sitting at the Father's right hand, making intercession for us, with that live connection that there is between him and us as we meet together.

So here's my question then, why was it that Jesus remained on earth for these days? Why was there this period, this time period between Jesus' resurrection and his ascension?

Well, we're not specifically told. There's no one verse that says, here is the reason. But the context determines the reason. And I want to suggest that the gospels provided particularly these two passages that we read, they provide us with several reasons why he remained in the world, or why he appeared in the world for that period of time between his resurrection and his ascension.

And we must remember that when we talk about his appearance, the life that we read about after the resurrection is not the same as the life that we read about before the cross, where there were miracles, where Jesus went about from town to city to village to streets, he had conversations with loads of people.

That doesn't happen anymore. There are no more miracles. There are no more healings. There's no more walking on the water, no more feeding of the five thousand. There's something different. Besides, Jesus is selective in the occasions and the people that he appears to after the resurrection. There is only a small number of these appearances.

[4 : 55] I count five, but feel free to spend some time afterwards counting them. Good exercise, you might come up with a different number. There's a certain intrigue.

There's a certain obscurity about the number, and that's all there for a purpose, to keep us reading, to keep us trying to study the Bible, trying to figure out what is happening. No harm in that.

Well, here are some suggestions then. Here is what John tells us, and we're going to pull in some information from some of the rest of the gospels at the same time.

Number one is this. Jesus appeared between his resurrection and his ascension to expound the necessity of his death.

He expounded or explained the necessity of his death. Why it was necessary for him to die on the cross?

[6 : 04] You remember that great chapter in Luke 24, when the day that Jesus rose from the dead, there were two disciples making their way to Emmaus. They were forlorn.

They were dismayed. They were downcast, trying to make sense of what had happened in Jerusalem on that occasion.

Then Jesus joined them. At first, they didn't recognize him. He started speaking to them, started explaining to them from the Scriptures why it was necessary that Jesus rose from the dead, why he had to die, and why he rose from the dead.

That very evening, he appeared to his disciples. Again, in Luke chapter 24, we believe that it coincides with this chapter 20 of John, where he appears to his disciples.

One of the things that John doesn't tell us is that he again explained, he expounded from their Bible why it was necessary for him to die, drawing them back into the Old Testament, to the prophets, and the sacrifices, to the stories that prefigured the coming of Jesus and his death and his resurrection.

[7 : 22] The disciples were confused. They didn't know what to make of everything that had happened in Jerusalem these last three days. They couldn't believe that the one that they had come to trust as Messiah was being killed by a mob of angry Jewish leaders and Roman soldiers.

They couldn't get their heads around why he had allowed all of this to happen and why he had not mustered an army of angels to come and deliver him from the wrath of the Romans.

But all of that was for a reason, to fulfill God's plan that they should have known, of course, in the first place. It's easy for us to say they should have known it, but we are not there. We are not them. They were as weak as we are and we are as weak as they are. We would have been the same. We have no reason to, we have no room to judge the poor disciples. They were just trying to make sense of what they were seeing around them, and they couldn't.

That's why Jesus had to spend time with them to explain the necessity of his death. And then the second reason is this, to authenticate the reality and the nature of his resurrection.

[8 : 44] To authenticate the reality and the nature of his resurrection. On that first evening we read, that we read about in John chapter 20, as Jesus stood in front of his overjoyed disciples, confused and yet overjoyed.

It becomes clear that he's there for a reason. In fact, he does three things first. He showed them his hands and his feet.

And that was because it was absolutely necessary for the disciples to be sure that this man was actually Jesus. The marks that this man bore were unmistakable. There were holes in his hands. Healed holes, no doubt. There were holes in his feet. There was only one place where you could get these awful marks, these wounds. There was a mark in his side.

There were no doubt marks on his head where they are pressed. The crown of thorns upon him. He showed them that it truly was him. There was a need for authentication.

[9 : 59] Not only that this was someone risen from the dead, but that this was actually the very same Jesus that they loved and that they followed and that they believed in and that they had watched dying on the cross.

Now, it's obvious why this was important, because their task then was to go out as witnesses to the resurrection and to tell the world that Jesus was risen. How could they do that with confidence if they weren't quite sure themselves, if they hadn't seen 100% proof that Jesus, the same Jesus, was now risen from the dead?

There's a story, I'm not sure if it's true or not, about when David Livingstone died. I read this in a book that when they took his body back to be buried in London, that there was some doubt as to whether

it really was David Livingston or not.

And someone had the idea that they would look at his arm. And when they looked at the arm, they knew for certain that it was David Livingston.

You see, at one point, David Livingston had been mauled by a lion in Africa, and that lion had damaged his arm. And when they saw the damage on his arm, they knew for sure that this was David Livingston. Well, it's the same here. Jesus is showing by the marks on his hands and his feet the reality, the marvelous, wondrous, miraculous reality of his resurrection. Jesus is alive.

[11 : 54] And of course, that's what the gospel is all about, isn't it? It's the reason why I'm a Christian. I'm not just a Christian because I was brought up in a Christian home. Plenty of people were brought up in Christian homes. Don't turn out to be Christians at all.

They wander away from the gospel, sadly. But I guess each of us who follows Jesus today has had to think, well, why am I a Christian? Well, the first reason I'm a Christian is that Jesus is risen.

And I have proof in the Bible. I have proof that goes beyond reasonable doubt. Here are the eyewitnesses. These are men of integrity. There are several of them who knew Jesus and who now are seeing him after they watched him dying on a Roman cross.

They had watched his body being taken down and wrapped in linen and laid in a cave with a massive stone rolled on the front of it with soldiers guarding the tomb. What chances are there that he wasn't dead in the first place?

Beyond reasonable doubt, we can say Jesus is alive. We can say with certainty today. If I wasn't a Christian, I often think of this. If I wasn't a Christian, there's one person. There was one question I would be asking.

[13 : 20] Only one. And this is, who has the key to life and death? And as I look around me, as I look at all the religions and different systems and belief systems and philosophies of the world, we can only find one of them where there is the key to life and death.

And that is Jesus who died and rose again. And he promised, I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me though he were dead, yet shall he live.

And those who believe and believe in me shall never die. Not only did he rise himself, he promised that same resurrection to all those who believe and who trust in him.

But not only did he authenticate the reality of his resurrection, he also, fascinatingly, authenticates the nature of his resurrection.

I'm asking the question, what kind of body did Jesus have after he was raised from the dead? It was clearly not the same kind of body. There was something the same, something recognizable, and yet it was different.

[14 : 38] I'm not saying that he was a spirit. In fact, the very reason that he showed himself was to show that he wasn't a spirit. There was a real body.

And yet that body was never going to die again. So it was not a body that was subject to decay like your body and my body is.

It was an indestructible body. It's a fascinating question, isn't it? What kind of body? And what were the differences between the body that Jesus inhabited before the resurrection and afterwards?

Again, a subject for your own study. What I find fascinating is that he is still to this day one of us. He did not leave his humanity behind him when he left this earth. And here he is not only proving that he's risen from the dead, bodily and historically and actually, but that he is still one of us and will always be one of us, even to this day in heaven.

[15 : 48] And when he returns, he will return as one of us. I love the way he proves that. I love the way in which he says in John chapter 21, he's meeting with his disciples as they're coming off the boat, and he's cooked them some fish, and he's got bread as well.

And he says this, come on have breakfast. It's almost a passing by the way comment, isn't it? It's the kind of comment that you would make if you were having a barbecue on a sunny day like we're having right now.

Come on have breakfast. Until you remember that this is the Son of God. You remember how the Gospel of John opens with these profound statements, in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God.

The Word was toward God, and the Word was God. And then we read, the Word became flesh. Who can understand the profundity of this divine event in which God Himself actually condescended to become one of us in what we call the incarnation.

[17 : 03] So the beginning of John is, in the beginning was the Word, and now the end of John is come and have breakfast. The man who's saying this is God, and yet he's one of us.

He's in human nature. That's the nature of his resurrection. And it's the preciousness of that truth that the writer to the Hebrews lays hold of when he says that we have a great high priest who is touched with a feeling of our infirmity.

Someone who can identify with us in our struggles, in our disappointments, in our sadness.

Someone who can always say, I know what it's like to be in this world.

We can come to him in faith, in the access that he has given to us who follow him today. The nature of his resurrection is hugely important.

Third reason is this, to reiterate their calling. The second thing that Jesus says when he appears to his disciples, when they're meeting together in that locked room for fear of the Jewish authorities, the second thing he does is he says, as the Father has sent me, even so, I am sending you.

[18 : 37] And then later on in the next chapter in the Lake of Galilee, Jesus finds the same disciples out in the boat on the Lake of Galilee. What does that remind you of?

It reminds you of, doesn't it, one of the very first occasions when the disciples met with Jesus.

Remember that day in Luke chapter 5, when way back three years ago, Jesus had come to his disciples and they had spent all night and hadn't caught anything. Here it is again, exactly the same situation, except this time Jesus isn't in the boat, he's on the shore.

But the disciples recognize, they reminisce, they clock what's happening. And exactly the same thing happens again, at Jesus' word, when they let down the nets, they catch this enormous shoal of fish, so much so that they hardly could bring the number of fish onto the land.

So Jesus is taking them all the way back to their first calling as disciples. Perhaps they had lost sight of that calling, perhaps in all of the confusion, in all of their disappointment, their trauma, in watching Jesus dying on the cross, that they may have lost sight of that original promise, that I will make you fishers of men, but Jesus was never going to lose sight of it. It was as real then as it was way back at the beginning.

Jesus was going to send them out as witnesses to his resurrection. But he does something else, doesn't he? He empowers their calling.

[20 : 17] He reiterates their calling and he empowers their calling. He breathes on them and he says, receive the Holy Spirit. Verse 22 of chapter 20.

Receive the Holy Spirit. What was happening there? Well, I can only put that passage together with Acts chapter 2, the Day of Pentecost, and suggest that this was a prophetic statement in which Jesus was alluding to that day shortly afterwards, when all the disciples would be together in one place and when the Holy Spirit was going to come upon them and so empower them to be able to preach the gospel.

And that's exactly what happened in Acts chapter 2, when Peter filled with the Holy Spirit, began to speak about the death and resurrection of Jesus. Three thousand people were convicted that they needed God. They needed this Jesus for themselves and they were converted.

They came to faith in Jesus. How do you explain that phenomenon? There is only one explanation and that is this was the power of God.

The Holy Spirit came upon the church on that day and filled them and accompanied their preaching and their witness. He does the same today. He accompanies God's people, you and me, as we go about our daily business, as we preach, as we let our light shine, we have to believe that the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, he empowers us in our witness to Him. Perhaps not always in quite the same quantity as on the Day of Pentecost, nonetheless we have to believe that God is with us and if God is for us, then who can be against us?

[22 : 19] And then again, again to do with our calling, he characterizes their missional calling again in verse 23, if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them. If you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.

Now what does this mean? It may suggest at first reading that somehow Jesus was giving them the authority to go up to somebody and say to that person, well, your sins are forgiven or not.

But that's not the way to understand it at all. First way of understanding this is that their mission was the forgiveness of sins. The same as the church's mission is in every generation, whether it's right there at the beginning or whether it's now 2,000 years later.

We are in the business of the forgiveness of sins, not that we are able to forgive anyone's sins. We aren't, only God can forgive sin. And yet when we bear witness to Jesus, when we preach about Jesus, when we talk about Jesus, when we introduce people to Jesus, as we share the gospel, that's what it's all about, because that's what Jesus came to do. That's why He died on the cross, so that our sin could be taken away, so that we could be set free from its guilt, from its liability, so that we could be given everlasting life.

So what then does He mean by, if you forgive? Well, they were to go out and they were to preach Jesus. And the response was to be one or the other. Some people would accept Jesus.

[24 : 07] And to the person who accepted Jesus, the disciples could with 100% confidence say, your sin is forgiven. Not because I'm forgiving your sin, I can't. But God in Jesus forgives your sin.

I can say the same thing to you today. I don't have any authority by myself, but I can say with all the authority in the Bible, that if you believe and trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior, your sin is forgiven.

Because God has cleansed you from your sin, but it works both ways. Because the other response is refusing Jesus. What does Jesus say, if you withhold forgiveness?

It's not because they had the authority to withhold forgiveness. It is because in so far as some refuse to believe, then there was no forgiveness for them. That's what the gospel is.

Good news that Jesus has come to seek and to save those who were lost. The last reason I want to suggest this morning, why Jesus remained in the world for a while between His resurrection and His ascension is to characterize the disciples' pastoral calling.

[25 : 35] There were two men that Jesus had to home in on who required special attention, special individual attention. And it's interesting, isn't it, that during this space of time between Jesus' resurrection and there's something deeply pastoral about the way that Jesus deals with people, isn't there?

There's something wonderfully personal going back to these very few first moments in John chapter 20, where He talks to Mary and where He brings the comfort of His resurrected life to a broken woman.

Do you notice the way in which He does that, the immensely gentle way in which that was to characterize the pastoral ministry that the disciples were to undertake as they went out into the world?

He does the same with Thomas. You remember that first occasion, Thomas wasn't there. We are not told why he wasn't there. But you remember what happens after Jesus appears to the disciples?

The rest of the disciples, they go after Thomas and they say to Him, we've seen the Lord. And Thomas is doubting Thomas, of course, unless I put my hands in the holes and unless I see with my own eyes, alright?

[27 : 02] But that was enough for Him to be with them the next time that Jesus appeared to them the next week. And Jesus shows Himself to Thomas on that occasion.

And Thomas, when he sees Jesus, he says, my Lord and my God. You see, Jesus has drawn Him back. Jesus has restored His soul and made Him to walk in the paths of righteousness.

That's what God does, pastorally, for His people. And of course, the other of these disciples was Peter, who, as you know, the night that Jesus was betrayed and taken away, had publicly denied any knowledge of Him. He panicked. He freaked out.

And in these moments of utter terror, he chose the path in which he thought his own life was going to be saved rather than telling the truth about Jesus. But then he wept bitterly when he realized the betrayal, or rather the denial, I should say, because it was Judas that betrayed him. He denied him. There's a difference.

As he denied the very Jesus that he had come to love and follow. And I find it interesting, don't you, that that first occasion, the first day of the week, Jesus says nothing to Peter as far as we know.

The next week, Jesus appears again. Presumably, Peter is there. Jesus again says nothing to Peter.

[28 : 41] He chooses his moment. No doubt Peter is feeling absolutely awful. No doubt he's gutted. And he doesn't perhaps, he's just not even sure if he's still in the same relationship with Jesus as he was.

This is immensely important for us, isn't it? Because there are times when by our actions, we deny Jesus. Something we say, something we do, time of backsliding, when we allow all the wrong things to influence us.

Before you know it, you're far away from where you should be. What do you do? The question is, what do you do? Not what do you do, but what Jesus has done for you?

And the grace of God that has brought you to know Him in the first place is the same grace of God that will sustain you in your Christian life and that will draw you back to a right relationship with Him. He will not let you go. He wasn't prepared to let Peter go, and he will not let any of his children go.

[30 : 09] And so he comes to Peter with this all-searching question. I guess you and I would have said, well, should he not have said, well, what were you thinking about when you denied me in the first place?

Or, you know, what, don't you realize the seriousness of what you've done? Well, of course he did. The question now was, did he love Jesus? And that was the all-defining issue.

It's the all-defining issue for us as well. Wherever we are, whoever we are, Jesus asks, do you love me?

And when Peter responds, yes, Lord, you know that I love you, he assigns him the very same pastoral task as Jesus has displayed to him.

Feed my sheep. Something of the gentleness of Jesus is so precious in these words, isn't it?

[31 : 15] It's the way we're to deal with others. What is it that Paul says in Galatians, if you see somebody backsliding, those of you who are spiritual, those of you who can see what's happening, go to that person. You have a responsibility to that person.

Not to point the finger at them or to lord over them or to take the moral high ground, but you were to go after them. As failing weak sinners ourselves in love in order to win back those who have strayed.

That's our ministry. That's the gospel that we love and the gospel that is so precious to us. The gospel that always points us back to the heart of Jesus who came into the world to draw people like ourselves to him.

So then, I've counted six reasons why Jesus stayed in the world or remained in the world between his resurrection and his ascension.

You may want to count more. You may want to add to that. If you find something in the gospels that can add to that, then feel free to do so. But I hope that these six reasons not only answer the question, but that nourish our own understanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus so that we will worship him and serve him all the more faithfully in this world.

[32 : 51] Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we thank you so much for sending Jesus into the world. We thank you that he is alive and he gave himself for us and rose from the dead triumphant over the grave.

We thank you for the promise that there is in his resurrection, a promise of everlasting life, a resurrection one day that will take place when we, from the graves, who know when that will be, will hear the voice of the Son of God and rise and go forever to be with him.

Our Father in heaven, we pray that we will always be directed and that we will point our minds and our hearts to that day so that we will live as your people all the more faithfully and obediently here in this world in Jesus' name. Amen.