

Why Jesus Went Away!

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[0 : 00] I'd like us now to turn back to the First Scripture reading we had in the Gospel by John, looking there in chapter 16 and verse number 7, the words of Jesus Christ.

Where we read, but I tell you the truth. It is for your good, or can be translated, it is to your advantage, that I am going away. It is for your good that I am going away, said Jesus.

And he was referring by these words to his ascension to heaven.

I wonder how many of us noticed that last Thursday, the 29th of May, was noted as ascension day. Traditionally in Scotland we have not taken much notice of this day, but many Christian folk throughout the world do hold this day as a day of particular significance.

[1 : 33] It is indeed celebrated as a holiday. Those familiar with what we call the Apostles Creed will be familiar with the words regarding Jesus Christ following, where it speaks about his resurrection, that on the third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sits on the right hand of God, the Father Almighty. From there he shall come to judge the living and the dead.

And so much of the New Testament is built around the foundation of the resurrection of Jesus, first the cross, then the resurrection, and then the ascension. The ascension of Jesus Christ is an essential feature of the Christian faith.

Our reading in Acts chapter 1 explains what happened when Jesus was ascended, when he went to heaven. And Jesus, by the words that I have taken for our text this morning, underlines the importance of this dramatic event, when he said, it is for your good or it is to your advantage that I am going away. And then he went on to explain what he meant by this.

So I want us for a little this morning to think about the benefits we have and the importance there is in the ascension of Jesus Christ, trusting that it will be an encouragement to us as well as instructive as to the nature of the event itself. Jesus meant it to be an encouragement. The disciples were very downhearted at the thought of him going away.

And he tried to persuade them that it was to their advantage. I hope we will find that as well. But the first thing I want to highlight is that the ascension of Jesus Christ, the going of Jesus from the earth, was a literal physical historical event. In other words, it is something that really did happen in time and space. Our reading in the Acts of the Apostles in chapter 1 tells us the very dramatic way in which the ascension of Jesus occurred. He took the disciples outside Jerusalem and after he had spoken to them, he was taken up before their very eyes and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them.

[5 : 21] Man 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. Sadly, there are many who deny the reality, the physicality of the event.

But Luke who wrote the book of the Acts tells us that he wrote the facts that were passed on to him by reliable eyewitnesses. That's what he says in the Gospel of Luke which is, as it were, volume 1 of his two-part history. He wrote these facts down for us having been told by these reliable witnesses. He tells us here that it was after Jesus had given many convincing proofs that he was alive and had spoken to his disciples and very many other people as well. After that he was then taken up before their very eyes and a cloud received him out of their sight. In our imaginings we think of heaven as up there, the Jewish people did the same. And that's how it's described for us. Jesus was taken up and a cloud received him out of their sight. Clouds are often used in Scripture as a means by which God's glory was, as it were, hidden because men cannot look upon the unclouded glory of God and live. It is too, too awesomely brilliant and pure and purer than any sinful

eyes can look upon. But here the cloud hides Jesus from their view and the angels who came to speak to the men of Galilee said that Jesus would come back again in the clouds from heaven. It was for their advantage that he was taken away. But we can ask in the second place in what way was it to their advantage that Jesus ascended to heaven and how does that affect us today? I think there are four distinct ways in which Jesus going affects us and from which we benefit. In the Old Testament times, the Old Testament dispensation as we usually call it, there were three great divisions in the Jewish establishment. There were prophets, there were priests and there were kings. And the Old Testament held out the promise that when the Messiah, that is the anointed, appointed, special person from God would come, that he would fulfil ideally the office of prophet and priest and king. And so we find that when

Jesus, the eternal Son of God, came into the world, he did become the perfect example of each of these categories. He came as the great prophet declaring for us God's truth. The beginning of John's Gospel is all about that. He was the great Word of God, the Word himself telling us what God wants us to know. It was a word of good news, of gospel, declaring the way of salvation for sinners like you and like me. And John goes on to unfold throughout his Gospel the meaning of Jesus coming as the great Word of God. And then he came also as the great High Priest. He came to offer up the perfect ideal sacrifice that would be for the salvation of every person who puts his trust or our trust in him, taking away not only their sin but taking away the guilt of that sin. John Edison, who was for many years a scripture union worker, was also a writer of hymns. And a verse in one of his hymns I think sums this up very beautifully where he says, at the cross of Jesus pardon is complete, love and justice mingle truth and mercy meet. So my sins condemn me, Jesus died instead, there is full forgiveness in the blood he shed. Jesus as the great High Priest offered up himself the perfect sacrifice as the scripture underlines for us once and for all. And Jesus is also the perfect King exalted above all others the great ruler of the world. We just need to look at Philippians chapter 2 to see how the scriptures describe the risen ascended Jesus. And the ascension in a sense is the start along with the resurrection of Jesus. It is the start of what we usually refer to as the exaltation of Jesus. Before that was his humiliation when he came into our broken world as one of us and he was subjected to such terrible things at the hands of people just like us when he was spat upon, crowned with thorns and crucified, dying in ignominy and shame. But he rose again and he ascended to heaven this same Jesus. All that went before his humiliation, his offering up of himself as a sacrifice, all that went beforehand was foundational to Jesus going back to heaven from where he directs his great ministry, the ministry of his church to bring the nations under his lordship. While Jesus was here on earth he was as it were confined to one place if he was in Galilee he wasn't in Jerusalem. If he was in Jerusalem he couldn't be anywhere else. But in heaven there are no such constraints. He exercises a universal ministry. And there is friends something extraordinarily wonderful in this heavenly ministry of Jesus. For we remember that he is the living Christ who ascended to heaven. The same Jesus, scriptures are a pain to underline this. It's the same Jesus who was born in Bethlehem, who died on the cross, who was raised to life again so that now in the dramatic phrase of the saintly Samuel Rutherford, the dust of the earth is on the throne of the majesty on high.

[15 : 18] The same hands with the nail prints are there and all that is represented by them is made available for us because Jesus ever lives to work for salvation for those who trust him.

And in the second place, as Christ has taken his place in heaven, we read that he sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high in the book of Hebrews chapter 1 and verse 3 and again in chapter 8 and verse 1. And Hebrews is a great book which takes its meaning from the ascension of Christ. And there we read that Jesus has still got a priestly ministry.

He is our everlasting high priest interested in us and he is our everlasting advocate with the Father so that when we who are Christians fall into sin and confess that sin, he is our great high priest intercedes for us and we are cleansed and forgiven. Charles Wesley, the great hymn writer, put it so well in a verse of one of his hymns where he said, Lo the heavens its Lord receives, yet he loves the earth he leaves, so returning to his throne still he calls mankind his own. Still for us he intercedes, his prevailing death he pleads.

Near himself prepares our place, he the first fruits of our race. And that leads nicely into another point about the resurrection of Christ. And it is just as we have noticed in Wesley's hymn there, Jesus himself said he has gone away to prepare a place for those who follow him. And I think there is something particularly beautiful in contemplating this activity of Jesus. He is preparing a heavenly

home for you and for me if we are trusting in him. And he will come again and take us to the place he has prepared for us at his appointed time. And then of course another great benefit of the resurrection of Jesus is that he has sent to us the Holy Spirit. It is to your advantage he said that I go away unless I go away the counselor that is the Holy Spirit will not come to you. Jesus has sent us the Holy Spirit. He sent the Holy Spirit to equip and to empower his people for the great work that he had for them to do, to be his witnesses first of all in their immediate environment and then spreading out to the ends of the earth. And the momentous event of what was the pouring out of the Holy Spirit without measure, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, that great third person of the triune God, it took place just ten days after the resurrection, the ascension rather of Jesus. So next Sunday will be Pentecost

Sunday and many Christians will celebrate that day when the Holy Spirit came in grace and in mighty power to launch forth the people of God into their worldwide ministry. And on that first Christian Pentecost when the Spirit came Peter proclaimed about Jesus that he is exalted to the right hand of God. He has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear, what we read about in Acts chapter 2 from verse 32. It's that Spirit whom Paul the Apostle sometimes calls the Spirit of Jesus who directs and who upholds the great Church of Christ in its witness in the world.

[21 : 09] See what Jesus himself said again, unless I go away, the counsellor, the Holy Spirit will not come to you. But if I go I will send him to you and when he comes he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment. In regard to sin because men do not believe in me, in regard to righteousness because I am going to the Father where you can see me no longer and in regard to judgment because the Prince of this world now stands condemned. It's to your advantage he said and that means that we now have the Holy Spirit. We've noted the reality of the ascension and the advantages of the ascension but we must finally notice that the ascension has also a forward-looking aspect as well. At the end of the Gospel of Matthew we have Jesus' great commission as we call it, his great commission to his church where he said that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me, therefore go and make disciples of all nations. That's not just a command but there's an anticipation there that the nations will be brought under the banner of

Jesus Christ. And this is a task in which the church that is you as the people of God of your Christians, the task that we're still engaged in, the church is a missionary church seeking to bring the nations under the Lordship of Christ. And there's a very solemn aspect to all of this. The living Lord who ascended to the throne of the Majesty on high is not only the saviour of all who trust in him but he is the judge before whom all people will one day stand. Again in the words of the Apostles Creed when Jesus comes to judge the living and the dead. We live in a world in which there are so many injustices, such open and crass sin that seems to go unpunished. We might imagine that God overlooks so much or else is impotent and can't impose his will. But that's not so. God has his day with a capital D. He has his day when a scripture puts it very graphically in the book of Revelation, a day when the books will be opened. And that gives us a quite awesome picture of the last final day of judgment. On that day all wrongs will be put to right. All sin will be forever destroyed as will Satan. But God's people will be forever with their Lord in heaven safe in that place where Jesus has gone to prepare for us. All of this will surely take place because the living Lord Jesus has ascended to the seat of power and of glory in heaven.

And the Bible tells us that he has sent the Holy Spirit as the great guarantee, that's what he is called, the great guarantee that all this will take place. And he will keep every promise that he has made. And that means that if you have trusted in Jesus for your salvation your home in glory is secure. It's prepared for you and you will go to it. But friends it also means, and I want you to take this on board as something very serious, it also means that if on that day you will be found not having a saving trust in Jesus Christ, you will have to go not to a home in glory but to that dreadful place of everlasting separation from God and from goodness. Something that is too awful to be dismissed. God has no desire that you should go there. That is why he sent Jesus into the world in the first place so that those who trust in him might be saved and have a hope in heaven. Now is the day of salvation. Let me ask you, will you seek the Lord? Those who do seek him will find him. And when you find him you'll say to yourself, why did I not come to him before?

May God bless you. Let us pray. Our dear Lord we thank you for your word and pray that you would help us to appreciate it but especially to appreciate the Lord of the word, even Jesus himself, help

us always to know and to love and to follow him for his name's sake. Amen.