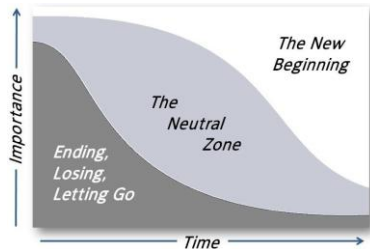




May 16, 2021 - “Ascension: Departure Fulfilled” - Acts 1:1-11

OPEN

I recently purchased William and Susan Bridges book, ***Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*** (Da Capo Lifelong Books, 4th ed, 2017). The challenge of change, they claim, is working through transition which has three phases: (1) letting go (2) neutral zone (3) new beginning.



“Because transition is a process by which people unplug from an old world and plug into a new world, we can say that transition begins with an ending and finishes with a beginning.” (5)

This is a great description of the transition experienced by Jesus’ first followers. They were moving from one “world” to another! The first disciples experienced much change and transition. But Jesus shepherded them in letting go...through the neutral zone...and into an amazing new beginning.

This is what we are discovering in our May series of sermons - ***Departure & Arrival***. We considered Jesus’ comfort for anxiety and His promise to depart – see John 14. Last week we looked at His comfort in the promise of the Holy Spirit – see John 16. Today we look at Jesus’ departure to heaven in Acts 1.

This past Thursday was the **Feast of the Ascension**. Next week we will examine the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. These events are tied together. As [N. T. Wright](#) put it, “Ascension doesn’t mean absence; it means sovereignty, exercised through the Spirit.”

Read Acts 1:1-3 There are three important facts to consider...

- **Communication** – What was the “former book” (vv.1-2)? Luke is the writer of both the Gospel and Acts. He recorded how the Holy Spirit was already at work in Jesus’ teaching ministry up to the point of the Ascension. The Ascension thus is the pivot point between Luke’s two volumes.

- **Certainty** – What were the “convincing proofs” (v.3a)? Jesus appeared to them in various post-Resurrection appearances, which were personal and physical. Luke’s record was for the purpose of certainty – see Luke 1:4. Jesus physically ascended to heaven – it is not just a mystical idea.
- **Chronology** – What is the significance of forty days (v.3b)? The Resurrection gave way to anticipation of the unleashing of the Kingdom of God. As a result, the Feast of the Ascension is traditionally celebrated on the sixth Thursday after Easter Sunday, or forty days following Easter.

Where did the Ascension take place?

Luke 24:50 states that it was in the “vicinity of Bethany” but more specifically, the Mount of Olives – see Acts 1:12. Until 384 AD, the location was venerated at a cave known as *Eleona* and a small church was built over it.

In the Byzantine period a chapel was built at a higher point on the mount. This was destroyed by Persians in the 7th Century and rebuilt by Crusaders in the 12th Century. In 1187 it was captured and converted to a mosque.



The present structure reflects the Crusader design and remains a place of worship in Israel requiring great delicacy, due to collision of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim traditions. But our concern is not archeological or historical or even cultural. What we need to know is the impact and implications of the Ascension of Jesus. What does His return to heaven offer to His followers?

DIG

Read Acts 1:4-11 There are three things the Ascension provides...

1. The rest of Christ – vv. 4-5

Jesus commanded His disciples not to leave Jerusalem (cf. Luke 24:49) but to wait (v.4). But this was not passive - they were active in prayer – eager and expectant (see v.14). What were they waiting for? Jesus promised of the baptism of the Holy Spirit (v.5). John the Baptist proclaimed that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire (see Matthew 3:11; Luke 3:16).

While waiting in Jerusalem the disciples were given an opportunity to seek a power source outside of themselves. God uses waiting to purify us of self-reliance. This means “entering the rest” we read about in **Hebrews 4**.

This means:

trust in Jesus’ redemptive work (vv.1-11)
obedience to God’s transforming Word (vv.12-13)
and coming to Jesus as our High Priest and Intercessor (vv.14-16).

Author Dann Spader posed a conundrum when he wrote, “*As a child I couldn’t wait to grow up and gain independence from my parents. But now as an adult I realize that my childhood dependence on my parents afforded me far more freedom and independence than I actually have now. How can that be?*” (***Walking As Jesus Walked***, Leaders Guide)

The Ascension of Jesus provides the presence of God in our lives in a far deeper dimension than His physical presence...and this leads to freedom!

2. The resource of Christ – vv. 6-8

Notice – verse 8 is the outline of the book of Acts. But if the witness of Christ is going to extend in these ways, believers must be filled with the life of Jesus Christ. And it is, in fact, His departure to heaven which ensures the arrival of the Comforter who in turn confirms and safeguards Christ in us! So...after forty days were the disciples still naive to God’s purposes? Consider their question found in verse 6.

In the words of Tennyson, “ours is not to reason why” or “when” – see verse 7. In all that God purposes to do, His divine authority takes the lead. Our anticipation or expectation cannot manipulate Him. We are to be at His disposal – not the other way around!

What is our part? Ours is to testify, empowered by the Holy Spirit (v.8). You see, the promised Spirit was not for the benefit of believers only. He empowers believers for service, witness, blessings to unbelievers – see Luke 24:45-49, John 15:26-27.

Robert E. Coleman writes, “*Jesus made this clear to His followers before returning to heaven. Though **credentialed** as His witnesses and **commissioned** to disciple the nations, they were instructed to tarry until endued with power from on High. Nothing less than a baptism of consuming fire would suffice for the task to which they were appointed.*” (***Ablaze For God***, Wesley Deuwel, Zondervan, 1989, 9)

3. The return of Christ – vv. 9-11

In His conversation with Nicodemus Jesus explained that He alone “ascends” to heaven (John 3:13) whereas in Acts 1:9 the term is “taken up” or “lifted up”. Jesus’ Ascension is unique and by divine design! No wonder the early disciples were riveted – but two angels challenged them to stop “looking into

the sky” (v.11). They were to get on with Jesus’ instructions. How? With hope and certainty in the promise of the return of Jesus, similar to His leaving.

In the current monument to the Ascension there is believed to be preserved a footprint of Christ. Now we may doubt those who cling to such things. But what are those blockages we have to believing in the reality that Jesus will one day return. Do we anticipate His return with apathy or active obedience?

REFLECT

Do you have a special mountain where you go to gain perspective? These can be meaningful places and experiences. But we also need to move forward too! What perspective do you need today?

Is the Ascension just “theological footnote”? No, the lesser celebrated event we call the Ascension has much to say to our hearts today – especially that we desperately need God. Do you wait upon Him, and lean upon the provision of the Holy Spirit?

Writing about gratitude, despite difficulty, Nancy Leigh DeMoss says, “I have learned along the way that anything that makes me need God...is a blessing.” (“The Choice”, ***Servant***, Issue108, Spring 2021, 5) Think about how the Ascension pointed the early disciples to their need for God – to wait for His power. How do you need to wait upon God?

To read more...

[Recovering the Forgotten Doctrine of Christ’s Ascension](#) by Patrick Schreiner

To reflect further...

Listen (and pray) the words of “[Before You I Kneel](#)” by Keith and Kristyn Getty

“Ascension” by Malcolm Guite

*We saw his light break through the cloud of glory
Whilst we were rooted still in time and place
As earth became a part of Heaven’s story
And heaven opened to his human face.
We saw him go and yet we were not parted
He took us with him to the heart of things
The heart that broke for all the broken-hearted
Is whole and Heaven-centred now, and sings,
Sings in the strength that rises out of weakness,
Sings through the clouds that veil him from our sight,
Whilst we our selves become his clouds of witness
And sing the waning darkness into light,
His light in us, and ours in him concealed,
Which all creation waits to see revealed.*