



Today

May/June 2019

refresh, refocus, renew

THE EARLY CHURCH:
THE PATH TO CHANGING
THE WORLD

ALSO: HE ASCENDED INTO HEAVEN

Friends:

What path are you on? The Bible is full of advice about the road to walk. Psalm 1:1 famously begins, “Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take. . . .” Jeremiah 21:8 warns, “This is what the LORD says: See, I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death.” And Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).



Before they were called Christians, people who believed in Jesus were known as followers of “the Way” (Acts 9:2; 24:14). One of the earliest Christian writings we have outside of the New Testament, called the *Didache* (The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles), begins, “There are two Ways, one of Life and one of Death, and there is a great difference between the two Ways.” You may be saved by grace, and yet the path you walk makes a great difference to you and those around you.

This June, Jul Medenblik will walk us through the story of the followers of the Way as found in the book of Acts, and how they literally walked (and sailed) the highways of the ancient world to introduce others to Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life.

But first, in May, Joel Vande Werken starts with an exploration of events surrounding the ascension of Christ into heaven. Jesus may be bodily in heaven now, but how does that affect our daily lives here on earth?

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God’s Word!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steven Koster". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

—Steven Koster

Today

May/June 2019

refresh, refocus, renew



**“He Ascended
into Heaven”**
Joel Vande Werken



**“The Early Church: The Path
to Changing the World”**
Jul Medenblik

Managing Editor: Jeff Bulthuis
Executive Editor: Steven Koster

TODAY (USPS 185-140),
Volume 69, Number 3,
published bimonthly by
ReFrame Media, a division
of Back to God Ministries
International, at 1700 28th
Street SE, Grand Rapids, MI
49508-1407. Periodicals
postage paid at Grand Rapids,
Michigan, and at additional
mailing offices.

Postmaster: Send address changes
to Today, 1700 28th Street SE,
Grand Rapids, MI 49508-1407.

Copyright © 2019, Back to
God Ministries International.
Printed in U.S.A.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture
quotations in this publication
are from The Holy Bible, New
International Version®, NIV®.
Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984,
2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by
permission. All rights reserved
worldwide.

Cover photo: Lightstock



ReFrame
Media

may

He Ascended into Heaven

Joel Vande Werken

Forty days after Easter, the church celebrates Jesus' ascension into heaven. Though the ascension is often overlooked today, the church has historically seen it as one of the most significant events in salvation history.

In this month's devotions let's explore how the Bible portrays Jesus' ascension and why it is important to us today. Along the way we will also see how Jesus prepared his disciples for his going away to reign in heaven.

Though Jesus is not now on earth "in his human nature," as the Heidelberg Catechism puts it, we can be assured that "in his divinity, majesty, grace, and Spirit he is never absent from us" (Q&A 47). This teaching is based on several passages in the Bible, God's Word to us, and we will be looking at those and many other passages this month that point to Jesus' rule in heaven today. So we confess joyfully, along with the church of all ages, "He ascended into heaven"!

Joel Vande Werken has been a pastor since 2007, serving churches in Sussex, New Jersey, and in Whitinsville, Massachusetts. He and his wife, Brandie, have four young children.

HE ASCENDED INTO HEAVEN

After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God. —Mark 16:19

“He ascended to heaven.” People who believe in Jesus Christ have been reciting these words for many centuries. We find these words in the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed, for example. Maybe you have heard of these creeds of the church. Based on the teachings of the Bible, they remind us of something that is both wonderfully simple and astoundingly great: Jesus has gone bodily to be in the very presence of God!

But what does this mean? What is the significance of this belief? The main thing is that Jesus, who rose from the dead after dying to pay for all our sin, now lives and rules with God the Father in heaven. And yet Jesus is also with us always—through the Spirit of God, who comes to live and work in our hearts. Jesus’ ascension made all of this possible.

Over the next few weeks, let us reflect together on the meaning of the ascension. Why did Jesus return to heaven? How did he prepare his disciples—and us—for his heavenly reign? And how are we to live in light of our Savior’s role in heaven at God’s right hand?

The Christian faith calls us to remember a simple truth: Jesus ascended. But it also invites us to grow in our faith in the ascended Lord. In these coming weeks, may we learn to say with wonder and excitement, “He ascended!”

Ascended Lord, you are our Savior and King over all things. By your Spirit, speak to us and guide us, that we may worship and honor you. Give us power to serve you and to share with others all you have done. Amen.

LIVING THE STORY

The mystery from which true godliness springs is great: He appeared in the flesh . . . was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.
—1 Timothy 3:16

Sometimes the Christian faith is seen as a stale checklist of teachings. The church proclaims that Jesus died and rose again. And then he ascended into heaven. But what difference does that make for our lives?

The ascension of Jesus may seem like a teaching that makes no difference. Compared to his victory over death at the resurrection, Jesus' ascension can seem almost an afterthought.

But the ascension has always been a part of the Christian story. The apostle Paul, summarizing that story here, reminds us that the Lord who "appeared in the flesh" was also "taken up in glory." It is from this whole story—not just part of it—that "true godliness springs" and our lives are changed.

Paul's summary here offers much more than a checklist of beliefs. It describes the

wonder and mystery of the Savior whose story does not end in death, or even in rising from the dead, but continues in glory with the Father in heaven. And Jesus' going there makes it possible for us to go there too. With him, we can live in God's presence. And when he returns at the end of time, we will live with our Lord in the new heaven and new earth (Revelation 21-22)!

Jesus, who is "preached among the nations" as the Savior from sin, has ascended to reign in glory. May this give new vibrancy to our faith today.

Holy God, if the story of your love for us seems stale, give us a glimpse of Jesus' glory and fill us with the vibrancy of your Spirit. Amen.

FINDING THE RIGHT DIRECTION

The time approached for him to be taken up to heaven. . . .

—Luke 9:51

Looking back on Jesus' life, his first followers could see that he was always headed toward heaven.

Though Jesus did great things in his ministry here on earth—healing the sick, giving hope to the poor and needy—he remained focused on the heavenward direction of his work. This desire to keep on moving toward his Father—for our sake and for his kingdom—led Jesus resolutely toward Jerusalem, toward the suffering and death that would pay for our sins and give us new life in his kingdom.

Unfortunately, Jesus' followers do not always have his sense of direction. As individuals and as communities, we can be shortsighted. We respond to opposition with a desire to destroy. We refuse to dialogue with people whose politics differ from ours. We lash out at relatives and friends who up-

set us. We respond with fear, instead of love, to people who are different from us.

In our Bible reading for today, we are not told Jesus' words of rebuke to his disciples. But from his life we see that God's plan can use even seasons of struggle and opposition to point us heavenward. The cross, the tomb, and the ascension are all essential parts of Christ's story.

Are there areas of your life that need repentance today? What attitudes need to be rebuked? Reflect today on God's big-picture work that can lead us even through suffering and death to the hope of glory.

Lord, guide us to focus on your whole purpose of renewal instead of our own interests. Your kingdom come, we pray. Amen.

GOING UP

Who may ascend the mountain of the LORD?

—Psalm 24:3

What does it mean to get close to God? Ask that question today, and you will hear lots of answers about practicing religious rituals, being a good person, and “sensing the divine presence.”

At first, this psalm may seem to fit well in that framework: the one who may ascend to God and stand before him has “clean hands and a pure heart.” And most of us would like to say, “That’s me!” But obedience to God requires a lot more than good intentions.

There’s a trivia exercise that says if you think 99.9 percent accuracy is good enough, you could be headed for a disaster. A 0.1 percent failure rate could have a major impact on airline safety, for example, or on the electric power grid, or on our drinking water. Likewise, in our living for God, a really good effort is not good

enough. God looks for perfection (see Matthew 5:48).

Though we are made to be near God, none of us has the truly clean hands and pure heart required to approach him. But God has provided One who can: Jesus, the “King of glory.” He has triumphed mightily over the forces of sin and death, and he has opened the way to heaven for us.

As we reflect on Jesus’ ascension, we see that Jesus has gone ahead of us so that we can be near God. Let us celebrate that finished work of Christ today!

Holy Spirit, lift up our eyes toward Jesus, who is praying mightily for us today at God’s right hand (Romans 8:34). Purify our hearts and help us to trust in him. Amen.

GOD'S WAY OF SPEAKING

After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. —Hebrews 1:3

We human beings long to hear the voice of God. Deep in our souls, we ache for assurance that God is real, and we want to hear from him. But often it can seem that hearing from God requires us to somehow climb into heaven.

Today the author of Hebrews calls our attention to the variety of ways in which God speaks—and none of these requires us to ascend to heaven ourselves. “Through the prophets at many times and in various ways” God has addressed his people. He has caused his Word to be written down. In the Bible we have the record of God’s interactions with sinful humanity, the stories of God’s people throughout history—and these help us to see the many features of God’s character.

Since Jesus came, we have even more information, for he

has come into the world as the very Word of God (John 1:1-4). Ultimately God’s communication to us can be summed up in one word: *Jesus*. By his life and death and resurrection—and especially his ascension—Jesus draws our attention to God in heaven.

Hearing the voice of God does not require some mysterious spiritual practice. All we have to do is focus on Jesus, who—like a great megaphone—has come so that we might hear God’s voice and see his love in action here on earth.

Lord Jesus, you speak with the very voice of God, showing his great love for us all. Open our ears and hearts today, and guide us to share your word of assurance with others. In your name we pray. Amen.

EXPECT EVEN MORE

"I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."
—John 20:17

Just a couple of weeks ago, we celebrated the resurrection of Jesus (April 21, Easter Sunday). For Christians, Christ's triumph over death and sin is the very best news. Jesus is risen! God's promises of forgiveness and new life for his people have been fulfilled.

But the resurrection means more than an empty tomb. Mary saw that morning that the tomb was empty—and that was something she didn't expect. It was a shock to find that Jesus' body was gone, and she thought it had been taken somewhere else. Had it been stolen? Or had someone just moved it? She wondered.

Jesus' response to Mary indicates that she found more at the empty tomb than she had even imagined. Through her tears, Mary saw Jesus—risen and alive again! But she didn't realize it was him until he

called her name. That's how it is for us too. He calls us, and we follow him and honor him as the One who has ascended to the Father.

As important as the empty tomb is to the Christian faith, we do not simply linger at the tomb and wonder what has happened there. We listen to Jesus calling our name, inviting us into a new adventure that leads us to even more—to become witnesses for the risen and ascended Lord.

You are invited to follow the risen Jesus. In what ways can you do that today?

Risen Lord, dry our tears of fear and uncertainty. Let us hear you calling our name. Open our eyes to see you as Lord. And lead us into full life with our heavenly Father. Amen.

THE GOD WHO WALKED WITH US

The man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day. . . .

—Genesis 3:8

As a father of young children, I am often struck by the joy and wonder they show at the simple gift of their relationship with me. If I have to leave for a trip, they watch at the window to wave goodbye till I am out of sight. When I return, the house echoes with their delight that I've come home.

At one time, daily interaction between God and his human creatures was a similarly natural thing. We were able to walk with God and hear his voice and enjoy his company.

But sin changed all that. Instead of listening to God with childlike wonder, Adam and Eve chose to question God's words and to doubt the sincerity of his relationship with them. They listened to the serpent, the devil, as he planted doubts in their minds. Then they disobeyed God, separating themselves from him. Now they could no

longer simply enjoy the company of God. And out of fear and guilt, they hid from him, knowing they had done wrong.

In Jesus' coming, however, our childlike relationship with God is restored (see Romans 8:15-17). In Christ we see God coming to walk alongside us again, and in the ascension we can see our heavenly fellowship restored anew.

Are you hiding from God in some way as he calls out to you today? Look to the ascended Jesus, and enjoy the delight of a restored relationship with him.

Almighty God, forgive us for questioning your love for us. Help us to hear you calling and to enjoy your presence as a gift. Heal and restore us, Lord. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE SAME MISSION AS ALWAYS

"Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?"

—Luke 2:49

Not long ago, a pastor friend retired after a long and fruitful ministry. And as he retired, he told people, "I am not going to stop serving the Lord; I'm just being reassigned!"

In a similar way, the ascension of Jesus was like a reassignment in his mission. It simply reflected where Jesus' focus had always been. Before he entered human history as Jesus the Savior, the eternal Son of God had always been in the Father's presence and doing the Father's will. During his time on earth, that priority did not change.

Though Jesus, as a young boy, spoke of the temple as his "Father's house," his focus was not on a building but on a life that would seek God's presence in all things.

Our service to the Father may take us places in this world

where God's work is not immediately obvious. But our longing for the Father's presence will always be a priority.

In many ways, Jesus' ascension reflected the same God-ward focus his earthly mission had always had. The ascension was less a radical break in Jesus' ministry and more of a re-assignment in his continuing mission.

When we live for the Father in this world, our longing for heaven will be a natural extension of our life on earth. Do others see that God-ward focus in you today?

Father, give me a desire to be near you today. Increase my longing for heaven, for your glory. And may others see this desire in the way I live here on earth. Amen.

A VISION OF THE ASCENDED SAVIOR

"What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before!"
—John 6:62

It may seem easy, at first, to follow Jesus when we hear his promise of forgiveness, salvation, and new life for us. We naturally latch onto Jesus' words of encouragement and reassurance.

But Jesus is not some sort of a divine cheerleader. He is the Savior who gave his life for our sake. In our Bible reading for today, Jesus has pointed out the victory he would win, explaining that salvation comes only through his "flesh and blood." But that is not a message that sits easily with us. We have a natural desire to try to save ourselves rather than to rely on the bread of life that Jesus gives "for the life of the world"—by laying down his own life, his own flesh and blood.

Jesus demands total surrender to his authority and to the gift of the salvation we cannot earn for ourselves. The ascen-

sion makes clear that Jesus has this authority. It shows that he is truly God, and it is from that place of authority that he sends the Spirit to all who believe.

As followers of Jesus, we listen not only to his words that are easy to hear; we listen also to his words that call for a challenging obedience. We put our trust for salvation not in ourselves but in Jesus' flesh and blood, given willingly by our heavenly Lord at great cost.

Jesus calls us to give of ourselves willingly for his sake. Can we accept that?

Father, help us to believe!
Holy Spirit, strengthen us
for obedient living!
Lord Jesus, speak your words
of authority to us, that we
may accept and follow
you. Amen.

WHEN JESUS COMES IN GLORY

"The Son of Man will . . . [come] in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels."
—Luke 9:26

Throughout his teaching ministry, Jesus continued to have a heavenward focus. Even as he looked ahead to his suffering and death, he told his followers of his future glory.

But Jesus' treatment at the hands of sinful people has implications for his followers too. As God's people, we can expect the powers of evil to attack and try to destroy us. Perhaps you have been on the receiving end of others' sinful behavior: abuse, neglect, harassment, persecution. Jesus assures us that he knows what it is to experience hurt, and he points our attention heavenward to the glory that God reveals in his children (see Romans 8:18).

Sometimes, though, the temptation to deny Jesus comes not from hardship but from prosperity. Perhaps you have tried to live a life of self-fulfillment. Maybe you have been chas-

ing pleasure or trying to soothe your loneliness in sinful ways. Perhaps having a relationship with Jesus embarrasses you or doesn't seem important enough in your social circles. Jesus' words remind us that true glory comes only from him.

The ascension reminds us of the glory that Jesus has with the Father right now. May we remember the glory of the crucified and ascended Lord—and know that even when difficulty or the draw of prosperity seems to fill our experience, we can catch glimpses of God's coming kingdom.

Lord Jesus, you know our weakness and misery. Help us to glimpse your kingdom and the glory that you call us to share, and direct our vision toward you. In your name, Amen.

COMING ON THE CLOUDS

“At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.”
—Luke 21:27

Even in the days leading up to his suffering and death, Jesus focused steadily on his heavenly origin and his glorious future. In our reading for today he speaks again of his return at the end of time in power and glory!

Though Christians have sometimes puzzled over what Jesus meant by “signs in the sun, moon, and stars,” his overall message is clear: the Son of Man is Lord over all things. Just as death could not keep Jesus in its grip, neither can the anguish and perplexity of this world prevent God from fulfilling his good purposes for his people.

Jesus’ words contain a warning: final judgment will be a reality. The Jesus who walked this earth is also the ascended Lord who will return as Judge of all. All who ever lived will either find their redemption in Jesus or be shaken by God’s judgment.

Jesus’ words are actually a comfort for all who trust in him. We face plenty of “anguish and perplexity” in our world today. Weather patterns wreak havoc through storms, floods, and droughts. Nations threaten one another. Violence infects our cities—and even our homes. Jesus points us beyond the grim reality of death to future resurrection and glory.

Whatever you and your loved ones face today, may you “lift up your heads” toward Jesus, your ascended Lord.

Lord Jesus, let us remember today our need for you. Protect us from the threats of sin and death, and lift our eyes up to you for hope and salvation. Amen.

REMEMBERING JESUS' WORDS

Then they remembered his words.

—Luke 24:8

After Jesus' death on a cross, it must have been hard for his followers to recall his teachings about rising from the dead and being exalted in heaven's glory. After all, it would have seemed that his life was a failure. How could his vision for the kingdom of God be fulfilled?

As long as Jesus' followers only imagined a kingdom of human power, influence, and wealth, Jesus' death would have seemed like a crushing defeat. But all along, Jesus had been speaking of a much greater kingdom. "My kingdom is not of this world," he had said (John 18:36). But it wasn't till after his resurrection that his words about being raised from the dead made sense to his followers.

Like Jesus' first disciples, we often have a very narrow vision of God's kingdom. We imagine that Christ has come to give us human power, influence,

or wealth. We long for Jesus to make our dreams come true, to put our people in political office, and to keep us comfortable and happy. But it's not all about us. Jesus, through his death and resurrection, opens the way to a universal kingdom where God's will is done and his power is made complete.

In the days after his resurrection, Jesus taught his disciples more about this kingdom, preparing them to recognize him as the ascended Lord. Can we also remember Christ's words?

Holy Spirit, remind us of Jesus' words. Help us to hear the gracious invitation to enter the kingdom of God and to set aside the small dreams of our own kingdoms, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

ON HIS WAY TO THE FATHER

Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father.
—John 13:1

After the resurrection, Jesus' disciples remembered his words and actions on the night of his betrayal and arrest.

John's gospel records the details of that evening, beginning with Jesus' act of washing his disciples' feet. That night they gathered to celebrate the Passover feast, which looked back on God's deliverance of his people from Egypt (Exodus 12). And while the meal was in progress, Jesus modeled what that deliverance would look like through him as Savior.

Washing feet was a servant's job. It was menial and degrading, not something a teacher like Jesus should have to do. This was especially not an activity that the eternal Lord should have to stoop to do. Yet as he considered his return to the Father, Jesus made clear that heavenly majesty revealed itself in loving, helpful service.

The events of that evening—and especially Jesus' suffering and death the next day—would show clearly that a vision for heaven led the Son of God to identify with and raise up meek and lowly sinners.

Have you ever seen heaven break into your daily life as people shared the Lord's love? Jesus commissions his followers to make heaven's love visible to others, just as he has done for us. May we reflect the love of our ascended Lord each day by serving others.

Lord, in loving service you washed your disciples' feet—and died for them. Make us clean, and let us hear your challenge to serve others. Amen.

NOT YET

"Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later."
—John 13:36

Waiting is difficult. I have young children, and it's not uncommon for them to ask for something they can't have until they are older. "Not yet," I have to tell them.

The night before his death, Jesus said something like that to his disciples. They had followed him through many things, but they could not follow him to the grave or to his coming glory in the ascension—at least not yet.

Peter raised an objection, but he didn't understand what Jesus had to do. As Peter's actions show later (John 18:15-18, 25-27), our impatience can often lead us away from our Lord. But Jesus promises a strength that sustains us as we wait. He has loved us. He has given his life for us. The love of Jesus informs the way we live now, as we wait until the day when we will journey beyond

death to live with him in the glory of God's presence forever.

After the resurrection and ascension, Jesus' followers remembered his words. Jesus did not tell us how long it would be till he returns, but he *did* tell us how to wait. With love, we can share his grace with fellow sinners. We can give to help bring life and joy to people who are poor and marginalized. As an old song puts it, "They'll know we are Christians by our love."

The ascension shows us that we do not yet follow Jesus to glory, though we will someday. But it also reminds us to love one another as we wait.

Waiting is hard, Lord. Give us patience to wait faithfully. Strengthen us with your love as we wait, that the world will know we are your disciples. Amen.

GREATER THINGS

"They will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father."
—John 14:12

Most of us recognize that we live in a world full of trouble. Natural disasters, political divisions, terrorism, war, personal tragedies—all of these color our experience of life.

In a world full of challenges, it can be hard to grasp that Jesus' return to heaven is for our good. Like his disciples, we just want to be near God and to see him at work. And we can easily think that in his ascension the world's Savior has gone away and things will not get better—at least not until Jesus returns.

But Jesus offers his followers an incredible promise: the ascension changes everything. In earthly terms, Jesus' ministry seemed like a failure up to that point. He led a movement that resulted in his death. And when he ascended, he left only a handful of frightened followers. But in going to the Father, Jesus

could do so much more on the earth by sending his Spirit to work in and through his followers. They would receive his power to carry on his mission.

In returning to the Father, Jesus promises a new way for us to see God's power at work, even though we are weak (see 2 Corinthians 12:9). Salvation means more than having our sin forgiven and receiving eternal life; it means living in Christ's power today in the midst of the world's trouble.

Where do you see this living hope at work in the world today?

Lord Jesus, you promised your power to all who trust in you. May we see that power transforming our broken world today, to the glory of the Father. Amen.

A JOYFUL GOODBYE

"If you loved me, you would be glad that I am going to the Father. . . ."
—John 14:28

Goodbyes can be difficult. When family members visit from far away, my children are always disappointed to see them leave. "Why can't they stay longer?" the kids want to know.

Jesus' disciples were similarly troubled by the prospect of his going away. Who would now teach them about God's kingdom? Yet Jesus insists that his going away will be good for them.

Goodbyes come to us in various forms. We can experience the loss of a career. We can move away from friends or family. We can lose a loved one to death.

Jesus teaches that even in the face of such goodbyes, we can experience peace and hope. The "prince of this world," the devil, wants us to be defined by our losses. But the Father is greater than all things. And when we love Jesus, our lives

are directed toward the Father rather than our losses.

After Jesus' resurrection and ascension, the Spirit would remind the disciples of these words. And then Jesus' words about "going back to the Father" made sense. Not death, but glory, is the future of those who obey the Father's will.

Jesus' words point us to his destination—and to ours: full life in the presence of God. We may still experience sorrow in the face of loss. But we can rejoice as we see even death as a doorway to our heavenly Father.

Holy Spirit, remind us of Jesus' words. Help us in the face of loss to see our destiny with the Father, and to rejoice in the ruling power of Jesus. Amen.

FOR OUR GOOD

"Very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away."
—John 16:7

When we first hear these words of Jesus, we may wonder how his going away could be for our good. He often taught, in fact, that following him can bring trouble and hardship. How can that be good?

This question may seem especially relevant today. Many Christians around the world face persecution and even death for following Jesus. And in places where persecution is not so obvious, following Jesus still means sacrifice. As Peter once said to Jesus, "We have left everything to follow you!" (Matthew 19:27).

But when Jesus ascended to heaven, he was no longer physically present with his followers. How could that be a good thing? Looking back, his first disciples would remember Jesus' words on the night before his death, when he addressed this concern. He

said that his ascension would open the way for the Holy Spirit to come to them. Jesus' followers would no longer need him to be physically present on earth, with all the limits that his humanity imposed.

The subtitle of a recent book explains, "The Spirit inside you is better than Jesus beside you." Because Jesus has returned to the Father, we feel God's presence even more powerfully as the Spirit comes to live in us.

This is sometimes hard to believe when we face the hardships of life. But it is God's promise, for our good. Do you believe this?

Lord Jesus, fill us with your Spirit and help us to know your presence within us. Guide us to live for the Father's glory. Amen.

THEN THEY UNDERSTOOD

“Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?”
—Luke 24:26

After he rose from the dead, Jesus began to prepare his followers for his departure. What was the significance of his life and ministry? What did his resurrection mean?

As he showed the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, it's helpful to start with the facts. Jesus is a prophet, powerful in word and deed. But like his disciples, who had hoped for a political savior, we often hope that Jesus will do *something for us*. We want Christ to make us successful, relieve our loneliness, free us from an uncomfortable situation at work, and more.

Jesus *is* a powerful prophet, but—as the ascension shows—he is infinitely more. As he walked alongside two confused followers on the road, Jesus opened the story of the Scriptures to them. The Bible tells the epic story of our rescue from sin by God's power. We

deserve death and eternal condemnation, but God has saved us through the work of Jesus.

Many people today have the basic facts about Jesus, but we are still learning to put together the larger story. As we follow Jesus in this world, we need more than just earthly comfort. We need to understand God's plan to rescue sinners—to rescue us and others. We also need to understand his love for the world (see John 3:16).

May our hearts burn within us as we seek to understand the glory of Jesus for our living each day.

Holy Spirit, show us the glory of the ascended Jesus. Open the Scriptures to us so that we understand his saving work. In his saving name we pray. Amen.

POWER FROM ON HIGH

“Stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”
—Luke 24:49

Have you ever felt the fear of following Jesus? After all, the story of the resurrection and ascension seems impossibly crazy. How can a first-century Jew be the center of human history?

I appreciate that Jesus' first followers were honest about their doubts and fears. The resurrection and glory of their Lord was not something they understood at first. They had to be convinced that what they saw had really happened. At first glance, it wouldn't seem like they would be the best candidates to continue the work Jesus had begun.

But God chooses to use fearful, doubting followers to do great things. “You are witnesses of these things,” Jesus says to them. He commissions them to share the story of the Scriptures and especially the message of repentance and forgiveness. And to assure

them that they will be able to carry out this immense task, Jesus says they will be “clothed with power from on high.”

Christ's church still contains weak, doubting people. Perhaps you know the disappointment of living with failed relationships, a prodigal child, or a criminal background. As the ascended Lord, Jesus does not simply promise to walk alongside us in these trials; he fills us with “power from on high” to share his message of repentance and forgiveness.

What an amazing promise!

Lord Jesus, you know our weaknesses, doubts, and failures. Help us grasp the message of repentance and forgiveness. Clothe us with power from on high so that we may serve you faithfully. In your name, Amen.

AS THE FATHER SENT JESUS

"As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."

—John 20:21

These words of Jesus to his first followers are remarkable. They had seen many amazing things the Father had done through Jesus: healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, bringing the good news of God's kingdom.

Now Jesus was saying that just as the Father had sent him, he was sending his followers. What does this mean?

First, all who follow Jesus are called to participate in God's mission to the world. Jesus speaks with almighty authority here. We cannot simply live as observers of what God is doing; we have a mission to call sinners to repentance and to bring God's love to the marginalized. Jesus' words about withholding forgiveness do not give us a license to be vindictive. Instead, we must show that the good news of God's kingdom is central to our salvation.

Second, as ascended Lord, Jesus will provide the strength needed to carry out this task. Christ's presence removes our fear and brings peace; the Holy Spirit's power turns Jesus' followers into bold participants in God's work. This gives believers the courage to address sin and all kinds of challenging problems with the loving grace and truth of Jesus himself.

As the Father sent Jesus, so the followers of the ascended Lord are sent into the world. May we go today with Spirit-led confidence.

Holy Spirit, strengthen me where I am weak and fearful. May others experience the bold love of Jesus through me, confronting sin, showing forgiveness, and sharing God's love and wisdom. Amen.

THE CHALLENGE OF DOUBT

"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

—John 20:29

As he prepared his followers to live faithfully after his return to heaven, Jesus addressed the challenge of doubt and unbelief. Thomas was a realist. He knew that resurrections were not everyday events, and he feared that his fellow followers of Christ might have gotten it wrong. He wanted evidence. He demanded proof.

It's easy to criticize Thomas for his doubts, but the truth is that many of us live with similar hesitations. After all, Jesus is no longer on earth for us to see and touch. We cannot have the same experience as the first disciples who walked with him after his resurrection. So we need Jesus to prepare us for the challenges of skepticism and doubt in our own lives.

What does Jesus say to struggling followers? "Stop doubting and believe." We may not have the opportunity to feel the

wounds of the cross with our own hands. But we have the testimony of lives changed by the Lord's power. We can seek out the fellowship of other believers in the church and be encouraged by their words. And we can watch for the glory of Christ to appear around us, joining in with Thomas's beautiful confession: "My Lord and my God!"

May the ascended Christ prepare you today to meet the challenge of doubt with the blessing of faith.

Lord Jesus, it is sometimes hard to believe. We live in an age of doubts and lies, and our human minds constantly demand proof. But we believe; save us from unbelief! Fill us with faith, we pray. Amen.

PREPARED TO DIE

Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God.
—John 21:19

Are you prepared to die someday?

Before Jesus' betrayal and arrest, Peter had proclaimed his willingness to lay down his life for Jesus. But within a few hours Peter denied that he ever knew Jesus (see John 13:37; 18:15-18, 25-27). Christ addresses this as he prepares his disciples for the ministry he knows they will need to do after his return to the Father.

We may not be called to die for our faith in Christ, as Peter and many others throughout church history have been. But even a natural death requires courage to proclaim something about our faith in God. The process of dying, in many cases, forces us to see our limits to manage and control life. Declining health obliges us to depend on others. And although our humanity grates against being led where we

may not want to go, we can proclaim by faith that God remains in control even though we are not.

"Do you love me?" Jesus' question to Peter gently restores this disciple who had denied him three times. But it also equips Peter for the future he would face as a follower of the ascended Lord. Jesus entrusts the task of witness to all who know their weaknesses and failures and who testify that their strength lies in him.

May the strength of Christ be our testimony today and also in the hour of death.

Lord, restore us, for we are weak. Our lives often deny the power of your resurrection life in us. Strengthen us to live faithfully, and may even our death bring you glory. Amen.

MAKING DISCIPLES AS WE GO

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples. . . ." —Matthew 28:18

Before Jesus ascended, he explained the mission that awaited his followers after he returned to his heavenly Father.

"Go and make disciples," Jesus says. Although this may seem to involve two separate actions—*going* and *making disciples*—a better translation of this command is "Make disciples as you go along." It is assumed that Jesus' followers will often be "on the go" and actively doing something. And whether they are far away or close to home, their task is to walk alongside others by teaching them about Jesus and by demonstrating, through the work of the church, what it means to serve him.

"Making disciples" does not mean just bringing others to a one-time "moment of decision." It involves continued learning together, growing together, and increasingly under-

standing what God has done in sending Jesus to die for our sin and calling us to serve him. All who follow the ascended Jesus share in this task.

Because we serve the Lord of all, we regularly ask ourselves whom God has in mind for us to meet as we go along. We seek to make disciples of our children, our neighbors, our co-workers, our whole world. And when we doubt or struggle in this task, Jesus promises that the authority of heaven will support us in it—always.

How can you carry out this calling as you go along today?

Lord Jesus, we want to hear and follow you. Help us to be your disciples, learning from you, that we may make disciples of others as we go along. Amen.

CONTINUING THE WORK

“You will be my witnesses. . . .”

—Acts 1:8

When Jesus ascended into heaven, his work here on earth had only just begun.

The book of Acts records the story of the early church. But as a companion volume to the gospel of Luke (compare Luke 1:3-4 with Acts 1:1-2), Acts tells the story of what it means to be a follower of Jesus after the ascension. And it opens with a surprising detail: the “former book”—that is, the gospel of Luke—tells us only what Jesus *begun* to do and teach.

So what happened after the ascension? Well, the book of Acts shows that Jesus’ followers went on doing and teaching the things Jesus did and taught. Or, rather, Jesus went on doing and teaching these things by working through his disciples.

What an amazing outcome! Jesus did not leave his followers alone. He continued to use

his power working through them to teach, forgive, restore, and heal. And he did all this through the Holy Spirit even when his disciples didn’t fully understand what the kingdom was all about.

This should humble us, for God’s kingdom is not something we can arrange into existence. And this should encourage and excite us, since it means that Jesus continues to work through us even today, to be witnesses of his love, justice, and mercy.

Watch today for Jesus’ continuing work in and around you.

Lord Jesus, thank you for the work you are doing on this earth. Thank you that your work continues as you reign in heaven. Equip us as your witnesses, to the Father’s glory. Amen.

ASCENSION POWER

That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ . . . and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms. . . .
—Ephesians 1:19-20

Some stories are so good that they simply need to be told again and again. The ascension is one of those stories.

As Jesus' followers looked back on that day when he ascended into heaven, they began to see how it marked a turning point in their understanding of him as the Son of God. Until that time, they had worked alongside Jesus, recognizing him as a great teacher and miracle worker. But after Ascension Day, they began to realize he is the cosmic Lord of all.

Many of our daily routines feel rather "un-cosmic." We talk to our neighbors, drive to work, pay our bills, wash our clothes, and so on. In many situations we may also feel limited in our ability to do things: we are disabled, or in prison, or feeling "stuck" in life.

Yet God's Spirit wants us to see that the same power that raised Christ from the dead and seated him at God's right hand is at work in us. God can transform our routine chores and conversations into expressions of his love. The same authority that the ascended Christ has as Lord of all extends into our routine actions and interactions.

If you have difficulty believing this, go back and recall the story of the ascended Lord. Remember who it is that you worship and serve as a follower of Jesus, so that you may know him better and hope in him.

Lord of all, open the eyes of my heart so that I may know you better. You fill all things; fill me so that your power, love, and authority are clearly visible in all I do. Amen.

HONOR THE ASCENDED ONE

To which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father"?
—Hebrews 1:5

The ascension changes the way God's people understand history.

As faithful Jews, Jesus' first disciples knew Psalm 2 well. They understood how futile it was for humans to try to stand against God. They knew that someday God would call the world to account.

And now they knew how.

Originally, this psalm probably celebrated the crowning of Israel's kings. But those who knew Jesus saw more in its words: a prophecy of the reign of Christ. As the author of Hebrews notes, God did not even give the angels—much less human kings—the kind of authority we read of the Son having in this psalm. In the ascension and reign of Jesus, God proclaims that his Son is the "heir of all things," appointed to rule over world history and the universe (Hebrews 1:2).

There is a warning in these words. If Jesus truly is God's Son and Lord of all, we must take his power and authority seriously. We have to surrender our lives to him. He suffered the punishment for human sin, so Christ can rightfully pour out his wrath on sin and its effects and call on the world to resist it.

But the goal is not merely for people to submit to Christ, but also for them to find refuge in the ascended Lord of all. Jesus is God's appointed provider of salvation. Will you receive his refuge today?

Almighty God, our world can be a troubling place. Bring our nations—and each one of us—more and more under his authority and protection. Amen.

HOLD FIRMLY TO THE ASCENDED LORD

Since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven . . . let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.

—Hebrews 4:14

Jesus' ascension to heaven gives us confidence before God.

Sometimes we use exalted language to describe Jesus: he is Lord, and he is the Son of God. He is "the heaven-born Prince of Peace . . . the Sun of Righteousness," as a Christmas hymn puts it. This is all true, and we rightly worship Jesus as the second person of the Trinity.

But the Bible also proclaims that the Son of God became one of us—a human being. Because he took on our human nature, Jesus is able to "empathize with our weaknesses." Think of that! Jesus knows what it feels like, as a human, to be tempted by sin—"and yet he did not sin." He understands what it is to suffer wrong from others. He grasps the weakness of physical exhaustion and pain. And now, all of that human experience rules at God's right hand in heaven!

The author of Hebrews reminds us that we do not pray to a distant, unfeeling God. Jesus is called a "priest," someone who represents human interests before God. He has been where you are, and he represents that experience as the one who has paid the price for sin.

Are you experiencing temptation today? Are you suffering or feeling weak? Jesus knows what that is. Hold firmly to him and receive his mercy so that you can serve God confidently, no matter what your weakness is.

Jesus, you are the one who "knows our every weakness." Thank you that we can pray confidently, knowing that you hear and understand us. Give us the strength we need today. Amen.

FINISHED!—AND FINISHING WELL

For the joy set before him [Jesus] endured the cross . . . and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

—Hebrews 12:2

After going to college, I spent two summers working in a restaurant. There was no sitting down on the job. As long as we had customers, all the employees had to be on their feet and busily working. Not until the work was finished could anyone sit down.

One of the things Christ's ascension reveals is that Jesus finished the mission the Father had sent him to do: "When [he] had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, [Jesus] sat down at the right hand of God" (Hebrews 10:12). Mission accomplished! But this does not mean Jesus stopped working. Being seated on the throne in heaven means he is actively ruling as Lord of all—sustaining all things while also praying for us, helping us, and working through us by his Holy Spirit (Hebrews 1:3; 2:18; 7:25).

Sometimes life can seem like a marathon. We feel as if there is always more to do, more coming at us than we can handle. Often we are hampered by our own sin and weaknesses that keep us focused on our own interests rather than on God and others.

Jesus' ascension reminds us where our race is headed. When we think of all that Jesus has accomplished, and all that he and the Spirit are doing for us today, we are given a kind of "spiritual second wind" to keep going, in the Lord's strength.

Don't lose heart. The ascended Lord will help us finish well.

Lord Jesus, we praise you for your finished work, assuring us of salvation. By your Spirit, strengthen us to keep living and working for you today. Amen.

BEFORE I LEAVE . . .

"[Father,] I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that [my disciples] may have the full measure of my joy within them."
—John 17:13

When my wife and I leave our young children with a babysitter, the parting instructions are very important. We discuss what the kids can have for a snack, what games they play, and what the bedtime routine is. The main point, of course, is that everyone can have a good time.

Jesus' words offer a kind of "parting instruction" for his followers. Among the last things Jesus did while he was on this earth was to pray that his followers might continue to believe in him, be protected from the powers of evil, and bring glory to the Father. And he prayed these things so that his followers would have complete joy.

As we mark Jesus' ascension tomorrow, this prayer has continuing significance for us. We are among those whom the Father gave to Jesus, the dis-

ciples who would remain in the world after he left. Even though he is no longer physically present on earth, we hear Jesus' parting desire for continued faith and protection for us.

And it's important to hear his desire for our joy. Though following Christ may be difficult at times, that cannot snuff out the joy of having full life with him.

May you hear Jesus' prayer today as a prayer for you, and for all whom he calls to be witnesses to his complete joy.

Lord Jesus, thank you for praying for us, and for all whom the Father calls to you. Protect us, sustain our faith, and bring us joy until you return to live with us forever. Amen.

HE LEFT THEM

While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven.
—Luke 24:51

Today we celebrate Ascension Day, the day that marks Jesus' return to heaven.

For several weeks after rising from the dead, Jesus appeared to his disciples, taught them, and convinced them that he was really alive. His followers rejoiced. They also wrestled with their doubts (see Matthew 28:17; John 20:27) and tried to understand what it all meant.

Then, suddenly, the moment Jesus had prepared them for arrived. He had spoken many times of his return to the Father. Now, we're told, he "led them" to witness his ascension. He blessed them. And "while he was blessing them, he left . . . and was taken up into heaven."

When people leave us suddenly, we're often shocked, disappointed, or even hurt. Though it seems the disciples felt some of these emotions (see John

16:19-20; Acts 1:10), their ultimate response is noteworthy: "they worshiped him," and "with great joy" they praised God.

Jesus' disciples had been well prepared for this moment. They learned that Jesus had led them well, and because he led them to this moment, it had to be for their good. They saw that even as he left them, their Lord continued to give his blessing.

Jesus has prepared us, too, to worship God and serve him while he is in heaven. On this Ascension Day, let us remember his leading and blessing as we wait for his return.

Ascended Lord, we praise you. Help us to see your leading and blessing as you rule in heaven. Let us serve with joy until you come again. Amen.

WHAT'S NEXT?

"Why do you stand here looking into the sky?"

—Acts 1:11

For three years Jesus had taught and healed. He had instructed crowds from Jerusalem to Galilee with his words and by his example. After his death and resurrection, he appeared to his disciples to confirm their faith and help them understand the coming kingdom of God.

But now Jesus had ascended to heaven. And for a moment, his followers seemed a bit shocked. Perhaps they wondered whether they could follow Jesus into the clouds, or at least remain in the moment of this spiritual high.

Faithfulness to the ascended Lord, however, means that we do not just stand around staring after him. Yes, it is a good thing to contemplate the glory of Jesus as the Son of God. But we also remember that God has a plan for the world that continues even after the ascension. And he intends to use

all who have seen his glory, as long as they remain in this world, to extend his offer of salvation to the world. For the ascended Jesus will return, and we will answer for our faithfulness to his call while he has been away.

Have you met this Jesus? Are you prepared to follow him? Do not simply stare up toward heaven, longing to hold onto some spiritual mountaintop moment. Take the next step, embrace him as Lord, and go out to serve him till he comes again.

Lord Jesus, we worship you. You are one with the Father, ruling over everything until you come again. May we give our lives to serve you, sharing your good news of salvation as we go. Amen.



think
CHRISTIAN

INTRODUCES

**A new podcast that explores God's
sovereignty over pop culture.**

At *Think Christian*, we believe there's "no such thing as secular." What does it mean to watch, listen, and play through the lens of your Christian faith?

**Check out the new TC podcast at ThinkChristian.net/podcast or
wherever you listen to podcasts.**

Today

refresh, refocus, renew



ReFrame
Media



Back to God
Ministries International

3475 Mainway
Burlington, ON L7M 1A9

P.O. Box 5070, STN LCD 1
Burlington, ON L7R 3Y8

905-336-2920

info@todaydevotional.com

www.todaydevotional.com

facebook.com/todaydevotional

Today

refresh, refocus, renew



ReFrame
Media



Back to God
Ministries International

1700 28th Street SE
Grand Rapids, MI 49508-1407
800-626-3060
info@todaydevotional.com
www.todaydevotional.com
facebook.com/todaydevotional
