

## Sermon for May 29, 2014 - Ascension

Acts 1:1-11 (NIV84)

### Theme: Christ's work of saving us –Phase 2

- 1) *He trains us to be his witnesses*
- 2) *He empowers us to be his witnesses*
- 3) *He takes His position to lead us in our witnessing.*

*In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach <sup>2</sup> until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. <sup>3</sup> After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. <sup>4</sup> On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. <sup>5</sup> For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." <sup>6</sup> So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" <sup>7</sup> He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. <sup>8</sup> But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." <sup>9</sup> After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. <sup>10</sup> They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. <sup>11</sup> "Men 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."*

What exactly are we celebrating this evening, as we remember Jesus' ascension? Are we celebrating the end of his work here on earth? No, rather we're celebrating the beginning of its second phase. Let me explain what I mean:

Probably the most famous passage of the New Testament is John 3:16: *God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* Did you notice this passage naturally divides Jesus' work of saving us into 3 phases? Phase 1 is God sending his Son – Jesus freeing the whole world from the debt of sin through his life, death, and resurrection. Phase 2 is people believing in him – Jesus calling people to faith to personally receive his forgiveness. Phase 3 is receiving the gift of eternal life – Jesus coming at the end of time to give believers the salvation He promised.

Jesus' ascension does not mark the end of his work, but a transition into an important second phase: Jesus calling people to faith through the proclamation of His Gospel. When we view Jesus' ascension for what it properly is – then we will rejoice in the relevancy it has for us: that He works in and through us to spread his salvation. Let us consider the importance of Jesus' ascension, under the theme: **Christ's work of saving us – Phase 2.** *1) He trains us to be his witnesses 2) He empowers us to be his witnesses 3) He takes His position to lead us in our witnessing.*

### Part One: He trains us to be his witnesses

Luke, the author of Acts, begins: *In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach <sup>2</sup> until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.* Who is "Theophilus" and what is the former book referred to in this verse?

Theophilus is a name, which means “God lover”. We don’t know whether or not Theophilus was a real person, but this book is certainly intended for everyone who is a lover of God.

Luke’s former book is his Gospel in which he *wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach*. Did you catch that? Luke did not say he wrote about the things Jesus had finished, rather the things Jesus began to do and say. In other words, Jesus’ work is not finished.

Luke’s Gospel records phase one of Jesus’ work for our salvation: God the Father sending His Son to take on human flesh and blood in order to win our righteousness. Jesus lived the perfect life of obedience to God’s law that you and I have not lived. He was tempted in every way, just as we are, but was without sin. But that doesn’t mean Jesus died sinless. You see, God the Father placed on his innocent Son every sin that has ever or will ever be committed – so much so that he became sin personified on the cross. All our sins died with Jesus. They have been paid for in full. His resurrection proves it. Jesus’ life, death and resurrection bought for us the righteousness we need to stand before God - this was phase one of Jesus work for us. Phase two is Jesus freely offering his salvation to all through faith in the Gospel – the very thing Jesus was getting chosen apostles ready to start doing, as we read:

*After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.*

Why did Jesus spend forty days proving he was alive? Because the entire Christian faith hangs on the fact that Jesus rose from the dead. If Jesus hadn’t risen, then sin would not have been paid for and we would be doomed to hell. But Jesus is risen, and he proved this fact beyond any shadow of a doubt.

Jesus also used the forty days between his resurrection and ascension to teach his disciples about the Kingdom of God. Do you know what the Kingdom of God is? . . . Simply put: the kingdom of God is Christ’s gracious rule in the hearts of his believers. When a person realizes his sinfulness and looks to Jesus in repentance and faith, all his sins are forgiven and he becomes a member of God’s Kingdom. Why? Because, through the Gospel, the Holy Spirit has turned this person away from trusting in himself to trusting in Jesus for salvation.

During the 40 days before his ascension, Jesus trained his disciples – getting them ready to further his kingdom by proclaiming the Gospel. How did Jesus train them? Through Bible study, as Luke tells us in our Gospel lesson: *he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures*. (Luke 24:45 NIV84) Jesus showed them how every part of Scripture pointed to him and his work of saving us. This is how he prepared his apostles to be his witnesses, and this is how he trains us also.

Jesus has made us members of his kingdom through the faith in Gospel and he wants us to share this salvation with others. But before we witness our faith, Jesus wants us to grow in it. He wants us to study his word together so that he can teach us exactly the things he wants us to believe and proclaim; for it is only when we study his word that we become empowered to witness it.

## Part Two: He empowers us to be his witnesses

<sup>4</sup> *On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. <sup>5</sup> For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."* <sup>6</sup> *So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" <sup>7</sup> He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority*

After 40 days of instruction, Jesus' disciples were ready and eager to start witnessing the Gospel. This is why Jesus tells them to wait. But, why wait? Because they had not yet received the Holy Spirit whom God only promised to send after Jesus' ascension. Without the Holy Spirit, it is impossible to witness effectively because, without the Holy Spirit working through the Gospel, it's impossible to believe. After Jesus had ascended into heaven and taken his seat at the right hand of God, then and only then would everything be ready for the disciples to receive the Spirit and start calling the world to faith through the proclamation of his Gospel.

Jesus maps out the disciple's plan of attack to spread his kingdom: they were to start where they were at and then move into the whole world. We read: *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

Jesus has also empowered us to spread his Gospel by giving each of us his Spirit at Baptism so that we can share his Word. Because the Holy Spirit promises to work through his word, we can be confident that the Holy Spirit is present whenever we tell others about Jesus.

But where should we start? Right at home. Start with your family and then move on to your friends. Talk to your neighbors and then move on to strangers. Support your local and foreign missionaries with your prayers and offerings. Jesus has empowered us with the Spirit to spread His Kingdom, so let us do it!

Part Three: He takes His position to lead us in our witnessing.

Now that Phase One of Jesus work was complete (now that all sins have been forgiven, righteousness won, and his witnesses prepared and ready to spread the gospel) it was time to start phase 2 of his work: spreading his Gospel of sins forgiven to all people. We read: <sup>9</sup> *After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.*

In order to understand why Jesus had to ascend into heaven in order to begin phase 2 of his work, I want you to think about an aircraft carrier. These massive ships are like cities on the seas – filled with all sorts of people from cooks and mechanics to pilots and medics! Even though there are close to 5000 people on board one of these ships, only one person directs them all: the captain of the ship. He is the one who pilots the ship where he wants it to go. He is both responsible to keep his men safe and accomplish the mission for which the ship was sent. Sure, the helmsman navigates the ship and the lee helmsman directs all the people working in the engine room, but it is the captain who ties everyone together. They are all extensions of him – doing what he wants. And where will you see the captain work? On the flight deck? In the engine room? He might visit those areas, but in order to do his work effectively, he has to be on the bridge.

Jesus ascended into heaven to take command of his ship: the church. Like an aircraft carrier, Christ's church, is composed of many different people, with different gifts, working independently of each other. But Jesus binds us all together in one, using our various gifts and vocations to accomplish his mission. In order to be in control and direct the Church in all her affairs, Jesus needed to ascend into heaven. But even though he is there, make no mistake: he is still with us. A sailor on an aircraft carrier might not see his captain all too often, but he knows his captain is present. So we too know that our Jesus is present – working through us to accomplish his mission of proclaiming the Gospel to all the world, all the while watching over and protecting every part of his church.. Nothing happens in the church apart from his knowledge or will.

And when this important phase of Jesus work is finished – when the last person appointed to eternal life has come to faith; then Jesus will initiate the 3<sup>rd</sup> and final phase of his work: deliver us home to himself in heaven, as the last verses of our text indicate: <sup>10</sup> *They [the disciples] were looking intently up into the sky*

*as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. <sup>11</sup> "Men 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."* Therefore we pray: Amen, Come Lord Jesus. Amen.