

## Acts 2:29-36

### God's exalted King

#### Introduction

Someone's absence normally requires an explanation. If one of my children is going to be absent from school, I need to email the Student Attendance Officer and let them know why. If you're not going to work, you'll certainly need to explain your absence to your boss. Like the woman who phoned in to say that she had just had a baby on the side of the road, which was a surprise to her colleagues because they didn't know she was pregnant. It turns out, neither did she! It was a surprise to all of them. But happily, it was a healthy baby girl. And if you can't make it to a social event, you'll probably send your apologies and provide a reason. Someone's absence normally requires an explanation.

Over the last four weeks we've looked at the evidence for the resurrection. We've seen overwhelming evidence that Jesus was crucified, died and was buried. And we've seen compelling evidence to support the claim of his disciples that he rose from the grave and appeared to them. The conclusion that the evidence pushes us towards is that Jesus is alive. But if he's alive, where is he? His absence requires an explanation. And the Ascension provides it. That's what we're thinking about this morning. Having appeared to his disciples over a period of 40 days and given them many convincing proofs that he was alive, the Bible tells us that Jesus returned to heaven. At the end of Luke's Gospel, we're told this: **When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven.** (Luke 24:50-51) The book of Acts tells us that **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...** (Acts 1:9-10) The disciples saw Jesus ascend bodily to heaven with their very own eyes. They saw it. And they preached it. In Acts 2, that was just read for us, Peter explains what was happening at Pentecost as the work of the ascended Jesus. It's a verse we'll return to next week. He says this: **'God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it. 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.'** The clear testimony of the New Testament is that Jesus is physically absent from the world, because he is physically present in heaven.

This is how Article IV of the Church of England's 39 Articles of Religion states it:

*Christ did truly rise again from death, and took again His body, with flesh, bones, and all things appertaining to the perfections of man's nature; wherewith He ascended into heaven, and there sitteth until He return to judge all men at the last day.*

The question, then, is not *where* Jesus is because the Bible tells us that he's sitting at his Father's side on the throne of heaven. The question is what he's doing there. And here's the first thing he's doing: he's securing our salvation. That's our first heading: The ascended Jesus is securing the salvation of his people.

### The ascended Jesus is securing the salvation of his people

Let me read you some verses from the book of Hebrews. The writer is contrasting the work of the ascended Jesus in heaven, with the work of the high priest in the tabernacle on the annual Day of Atonement. On that day, the high priest would go through the curtain of the tabernacle into the Most Holy Place, which was thought of as God's throne room on earth. He would enter with the blood of animals that had been sacrificed. Then, once inside, he would sprinkle the blood on the lid of the ark of the covenant, which was thought of as God's throne on earth. It was an act of atonement that happened once a year, hence the name, the Day of Atonement. We can think of atonement as at-one-ment. It was an annual act to bring together and restore the fellowship between God and his people, through the forgiveness of sins. Ultimately, it was a picture to help us understand what Jesus has done. The writer to the Hebrews says this: **But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, so obtaining eternal redemption.** (Hebrews 9:11-12)

At his Ascension, Jesus entered the Most Holy Place of heaven, *the* throne room of God. He did so not by means of the blood of animals that had been sacrificed but by his own blood, shed on the cross. And he did so once for all time, for the forgiveness of sins. Whereas the high priest went into the Most Holy Place on one day, once each year, Jesus Christ has entered God's heavenly throne room once for all time, to remain there forever. And the writer to the Hebrews goes on: **...he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence.** (Hebrews 9:24) People talk about having friends in high places. We have a friend in the very highest place. The presence of the ascended Jesus at his Father's side in the throne room of heaven is the guarantee that his sacrifice on the cross has worked. He is sitting not standing, because his work is finished. His sacrifice has been accepted once for all time for the sins of his people. The nail marks in his hands and feet, the spear wound in his side, the thorn marks on his forehead are eternally present before the Father.

Imagine coming to the end of a big meal in fancy restaurant. The waiter comes over and presents you with the bill. It's for an eye-watering amount. But then the owner of the restaurant takes the bill and stamps it with three words, in bright red ink: 'PAID IN FULL'. That's what the presence in heaven of the ascended Jesus secures for his people. It guarantees that when the charge sheet for our sin is presented to us, it has stamped on it in bright red ink, 'PAID IN FULL'. Because of the ascension of Jesus, the way to God stands open. You and I can enjoy fellowship with God the Father, through Jesus the Son, and have full assurance of our salvation. We can live each day with the deep peace of knowing that our sin is forgiven, that Christ's sacrifice has been accepted, and that our salvation is secure.

The ascended Jesus is in heaven *for us*, securing our salvation. And he is at the Father's side, *interceding* for us. That's our next heading: The ascended Jesus is interceding for his people.

### The ascended Jesus is interceding for his people

Let me read some more verses from the book of Hebrews. In chapter 4, verse 14, it says: **Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to feel sympathy for our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.** And in chapter 7, verse 24, it says: **...because Jesus lives for ever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.**

At the right hand of God, on the throne of heaven, we have a steadfast friend. He will never abandon us, changes his mind about us or breaks off the friendship. He understands our weakness and frailty. He knows what it is to live in a broken world full of sin and temptation. He knows what it is to face enemies and feel alone. When we find the going hard, he understands. And he never forsakes us. He never stops caring. He lives forever to intercede for us. At the Father's side, he asks whatever he wills and secures for us daily grace and mercy. And that's what gives us confidence that we will persevere till the end.

John Bunyan expresses this brilliantly in his book, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Let me read you an extract from the chapter where Christian is at the house of the Interpreter. He writes this:

Then I saw in my dream, that the Interpreter took Christian by the hand, and led him into a place where a fire was burning against a wall. Someone was standing by the fire, continually throwing great amounts of water upon it, attempting to quench it; yet the fire burned higher and hotter.

Then Christian asked, *"What does this mean?"*

The Interpreter answered, *"This fire is the work of grace which is operating in the heart. The one who casts water upon it, desiring to extinguish and put it out, is the Devil. Now I will show you the reason why the fire burns higher and hotter, in spite of all the Devil's efforts."*

So the Interpreter took Christian around to the back side of the wall, where he saw a man with a jar of oil in His hand, which He continually but secretly, cast onto the fire.

Then Christian questioned, *"What does this mean?"*

The Interpreter answered, *"This is Christ, who continually, with the oil of His grace, maintains the work already begun in the heart. By this means, notwithstanding all that the devil can do, the souls of His people are graciously*

*preserved. And in that you saw that the man stood behind the wall to maintain the fire, that is to teach you that it is hard for the tempted believer to see how this work of grace is maintained in the soul.”*

We have a friend in heaven, who lives forever to intercede for us, and is distributing daily the grace we need to persevere until the end. Because of him, we can be confident that we will endure until we take our place in the new heaven and the new earth.

Thirdly, the ascended Jesus is reigning over his world. That’s our next heading.

### **The ascended Jesus is reigning over his world**

We’ve thought about the *priestly* work of Jesus in heaven, but the Ascension also marks his enthronement as *King*. At the end of Matthew’s Gospel, the risen Jesus declares, **‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.’** (Matthew 28:18) In Acts 2, that was read for us, Peter says **‘For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said, “The Lord said to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.”’** (Acts 2:34-35) In the book of Revelation, John says, **‘...I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the centre of the throne...’** (Revelation 5:6) The lamb is Jesus. The Ascension was his enthronement. He died and is alive and is on the throne in heaven as King. And that means that’s he alive and reigning today. He’s directing the course of history towards that day when he will return in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his enemies will be made a footstool for his feet. He’s in control.

I don’t know how you feel about getting in a driverless taxi. Apparently, they’re being trialled in London at the moment with a view to being launched later this year. I don’t know how I’d feel about using one. You may have read what happened to the robotaxi being tested in San Antonio, Texas, last month. When it drove itself into a flooded creek, an industry boss was forced to admit that they lack common sense. Call me old-fashioned, but I like the idea of having a driver behind the wheel. Well, the Bible’s telling us that there’s a driver behind the wheel of history. It’s Jesus. He’s in control. That’s what we need to know as we look at the world around us and see all that’s wrong. As we see wars and power struggles, sickness and disease, the Bible tells us that Jesus is in control, guiding it towards its goal. When all we can see is evil and darkness, the Bible assures us that Jesus is in control. He is reigning over his world. How that works, exactly, is beyond my ability to grasp. He’s not the author of evil. And there’s a difference between what he loves and what he allows. But he’s in control. And one day he will return to put right all that’s wrong with the world and hold all evildoing to account. The apostle Paul said to the meeting of the Areopagus in Athens, **‘...[God] has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.’** (Acts 17:31) Whatever we may face now, we can be confident that we are in safe hands. Jesus is in control. And one day justice will prevail, when he comes in judgement. But *before* that day comes, he is building his church. That’s our final heading: the ascended Jesus is building his church.

### **The ascended Jesus is building his church**

At the end of Matthew's Gospel, having declared that all authority on heaven and on earth had been given to him, Jesus says to his disciples: **'Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.'** (Matthew 28:19-20) It was the launch of his global mission. And it's the work that he is orchestrating from his throne in heaven today.

Earlier in Matthew's Gospel, he tells a parable of a wedding banquet. A king is preparing a banquet for his son. Those who had been invited refused to come. So he says to his servants, **"...go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find." So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, the bad as well as the good, and the wedding hall was filled with guests.** (Matthew 22:9-10) It's a picture of the gospel going out to the nations, as it still is today. And the Bible ends with a vision of the end of history, when there will be rejoicing in heaven because the wedding of the Lamb has come.

This great wedding banquet lies ahead of us, when Jesus will be united with his people from every nation, tribe and tongue. It's coming. The wedding invites are going out ahead of the big day. There's one with your name on it. All are invited. And not as guests but as the bride.

We all love a wedding. But earthly weddings are just a picture of the greatest wedding of all time: the marriage of Christ to his bride, the church, at the end of history. Whether you are married now or not, you *will* be married on that day, if you belong to Jesus. You will be his and he will be yours for all eternity, in the joy of the new heaven and the new earth.

Whatever our circumstances at present, we can lift our eyes above the here and now and look ahead to the glorious future that Jesus has in store for all his people. We can look ahead with certain and joyful hope, because the wedding feast is coming. And as we long for that day, he sends us out to extend the invitation to others, so they can be there too.

The ascended Jesus is building his church and preparing for his return.

## Conclusion

The Ascension is the culmination and climax of Jesus' life and ministry. Having died and risen again, he is now at his Father's right hand, securing the salvation of his people, interceding for his people, reigning over his world and building his church as he waits for the final moment of history, when he returns in glory.

We wait for that day with confident hope. And as we do so, he's given us a job to do. We have a mission to accomplish. We're to go into the world and make disciples. It's a huge task and, at times, a daunting one. And it's a job we can only do in the power of the Holy Spirit, whom he has sent to us. Jesus may now be at his Father's right hand in heaven, but he is present with us today by his Spirit, enabling us to do his work. And that's what we'll be thinking about next week when we celebrate Pentecost.

Let's pray.