

## [Luke 24:44-53](#)

Since this video goes beyond my usual congregations via YouTube, I hope my churches will forgive me if I begin this Ascension reflection with some material they may have heard before.

At this time I always remember the story told by one famous Anglican bishop about how he was invited to perform the reopening of a local Post Office. It happened to be on Ascension Day.

When he arrived, he found a hot air balloon tethered in the field. There was also a brass band. He learned that the Post Office had planned to combine his reopening with Ascension Day. So they expected him to soar up into the sky in the balloon while the band played the hymn 'Nearer My God To Thee'!

The idea of Jesus ascending into the sky is an intimidating story for us today. I was also intimidated one year when as a theological student the local Methodist minister invited me to fill his pulpit on the Sunday after Ascension. There in the congregation was the local university Professor of New Testament, following the Bible reading in his Greek New Testament. If ever I had to get a difficult reading right it was that morning!

I have found most help from a source not commonly quoted in my own theological tradition, indeed someone who is often reviled among Methodists. And that is John Calvin. He wasn't all double predestination and executing his enemies, he had some good points!

One of them was his doctrine of 'accommodation'. He said that in revealing himself and his truth to people, God often had to 'accommodate' the way he did that to the limited understanding of human beings.

The Ascension would be a good example of this. Jesus 'lifting off' like a rocket from Cape Canaveral seems strange to us, but how else was he going to show his followers that he was returning to heaven? So the Ascension story isn't designed to tell us that heaven is literally above us, the miracle is there to communicate a theological truth about where Jesus is in terms that would have been understood two thousand years ago. How Jesus would do it today I'm not at all sure, but this is how he needed to communicate it at the time.

Now when Jesus ascends, his disciples are left waiting for Pentecost and the arrival of the Holy Spirit. He expressly tells them to wait in Jerusalem for that event:

<sup>49</sup> I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.

Waiting can be an exciting time, as we anticipate something we're looking forward to. But it can also be a difficult time spiritually. 'Lord, when are you going to fulfil your promises? When are you going to do what we need you to do?' Does that sound familiar to you?

I recall a time as a child of primary school age when in the school holidays I went over the park that was opposite our house to play with my schoolfriend Tony. We were set upon by bullies, and Tony ran away. I was terrified.

But a few minutes later I discovered why Tony had run away. He had gone back to our house and returned with my father. The bullies then ran away!

It was awful waiting for those few minutes and not even knowing why Tony had gone, but the wait brought a good outcome.

Unlike those first disciples, we don't have to wait for the Holy Spirit. But those other times of waiting for the promise of God that I alluded to a moment ago *are* common to our spiritual experience.

And therefore a question that the Ascension helps us with is this: how do we wait well as Christians?

I see two elements in the story about how we can wait well for what God wants to do.

The **first** is that the disciples are ***blessed people***.

<sup>50</sup> When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. <sup>51</sup> While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven.

That's how Jesus leaves them – with a blessing upon them. But what does it mean to be blessed by Almighty God?

Essentially, if God blesses you, then you receive his favour. Perhaps the most dramatic example is when the Archangel Gabriel appears to Mary to announce her pregnancy. He says she is 'highly favoured' and that 'the Lord is with [her]'<sup>1</sup>. That's a blessing – well, that particular one may be a blessing and a half!

When I as a minister pronounce a blessing at the end of a service, what I am praying for is that everyone in that congregation leaves knowing that they are favoured by God. This is the good news: sinners receive the favour of God.

And it forms our core identity as Christians. It's the most important thing about us, that through no merit of our own we are blessed, we are favoured by God.

If we don't make it our core identity, then things go awry. I had an elderly lady in one previous appointment who made the fact that she was a Local Preacher central to her sense of worthy. But the time came when her mind and body began to fail. The most telling occasion was a service where she introduced the Lord's Prayer three times. We asked her if she would step down gracefully and we would hold an event to celebrate all her years of preaching, but she refused. I know it would have been had for anyone in her position, but she carried that bitterness with her as her health declined, instead of recognising the unchanging fact that she was a beloved child of God.

But more positively, if we do accept that we are favoured by God as his dearly loved children, then this holds us through the waiting times. On a small scale it happened to me earlier this week when I was preparing this talk. That morning I received an email that caused me some stress. I was rather anxious as I waited some hours for the outcome of it, and in the meantime had to go off and do other things.

But then the very teaching I'm giving you here hit me. What doesn't change is that I am a beloved child of God. I am blessed by him. Therefore I can trust God to work this thing out. And he did.

So can I encourage you, then, to live out your identity as a son or daughter of the living God? That he has adopted you into his family is a sign of the most monumental blessing you can possibly imagine. Let that truth hold you up in the times of waiting.

The **second** element is that the disciples are **worshipping people**.

<sup>52</sup> Then they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. <sup>53</sup> And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

Why do they worship Jesus? For sure, one reason is the blessing they've just received, but there has to be more. As good Jews, they would only worship Jesus if they thought he had divine status. They know now that he is more than a prophet. At the beginning of our reading, he has taken them through the

Scriptures and shown how necessary his suffering, death, and resurrection were, and how that good news must now go out to the nations. Instead of the nations coming to Jerusalem, now God's people will go from Jerusalem to the nations. All these things are wonderful signs that God's purposes are being fulfilled, and that God has kept his promise to Israel – just not in the way they were expecting.

And when they appreciate all that they are filled with wonder. And that wonder comes out in praise and worship.

It's interesting to compare this with the description the crowd at Pentecost gives the disciples when they hear them speaking in tongues: they say they hear them 'declaring the wonders of God'<sup>2</sup>, which could be a pretty good description of worship.

Yes, they are full of wonder at what God has done. They were slow to get it during the three years that they followed Jesus around, but now the shekel has dropped and it makes sense.

How does this help us when we are waiting? It would be good for us to be reminded of the amazing ways in which God has fulfilled his purposes over the centuries, supremely in his Son Jesus. It would be good for us to recount the promises God has made to his people and kept.

Sometimes we recount them in broad brushstrokes during the great prayer of thanksgiving at a communion service. We go back to the marvels of creation. We move on to God making a people for himself and continually calling people back when they stray through patriarchs, judges, and prophets. Ultimately, we celebrate the coming of Jesus, with his birth, ministry, death, resurrection, and – yes – ascension. The next time you're at a communion service, listen for the minister covering those great topics in the thanksgiving prayer.

These things fortify us because they remind us of the great truths relating to our God. Our faith and confidence increase. We sing his praise. And we become more certain that he will see us through the difficulties of the waiting time, because he is a purpose-fulfilling, promise-keeping God. His ascended Son is at his right hand praying for us, and his Holy Spirit is within us and praying through us.

Don't neglect worship. We engage in it because God is worthy of our praise. But as we worship, it builds up our own faith and trust.

So there you have it – two elements from the period between the Ascension and Pentecost that strengthen us in those periods when we have to wait to see God at work. One is done to us – we are blessed, we are favoured as adopted children of God by grace. The other we ourselves do in response – we worship, because God keeps his promises and fulfils his plans, and he will do the same for us.

I hope and pray that as a result, each of us will be able to bear the waiting times with greater faith.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 1:28

<sup>2</sup> Acts 2:11