

Setting Your Heart on Things Above

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[0 : 00] Well, some things in our lives draw our minds and our feelings easily and command our attention, don't they? Some natural, some good, others not so good.

One of the prettiest pictures is of a mom and her newborn baby. And this baby's just got those big eyes, don't they? And they're just staring at the mom and the mom just wants to look at the baby. Got eyes for no one else. And wherever the mom goes, the baby's looking and tracking the mom. Very pretty picture. A beautiful sunset. The sun going down.

There's people gathered. They don't have eyes for each other. They've only got eyes for this beautiful sunset. If you've been to Clifton or Camp Spare on a sunset evening, everyone's looking at the sunset. These beautiful things that capture our attention and just keep us watching.

Keep our eyes there because they're just so beautiful and nothing else around us is important at that point. But some not so good things grab our attention.

[1 : 07] Gollum in the Lord of the Rings. Remember the picture of him looking at his ring, his precious? And he's like all goggle-eyed and his face is all drawn and he can only think of his precious and nothing else?

There's a picture, I think, of someone who's enslaved to something on earth that's pulling his attention and drawing him into himself and not outward and with other people.

The same picture we've got of people on their phones. We often see children, teenagers, adults, all very interested in their phone the whole time.

And you can't, yes, someone's talking, but yes, and they do this conversation thing, but we know they're not listening because they, this phone is so important. Well, God wants Christians to have our minds and hearts drawn toward, locked on to Jesus.

He doesn't want us to have any normal old picture of Jesus. There's a reason why we celebrate the Ascension. There's a certain picture that he wants us to have in our minds of who Jesus is, but he wants us to be drawn to this, the highest, most compelling image, imagery that we can have of any human being, but of Jesus as Lord sitting at his throne, sitting on his throne at the right hand in heaven.

[2 : 35] And that's why we celebrate the Ascension, because it does that. It draws us to the highest, most beautiful, most compelling picture of Jesus. And the most powerful truth that we can think of this side of the new creation is of Jesus enthroned in heaven.

So we're going to spend our time looking at that. So before we look at what the Ascension means for us, we need to look at what it means for Jesus. We'll see that it exalts him to the highest place that man can occupy in the universe, but it gives him a level of glory that no mere man is able to display.

So we're going to look at the Ascension and Jesus as Lord. The Ascension and Jesus as Lord. So that's the first point. You'll remember that the account is in Acts chapter 1.

We'll look at it in just a short while. But it's the clouds that take him up to heaven that tell us something very important about him. They're not just a transportation device.

There's something deep going on with these clouds. And so Acts 1 verse 9 says Jesus is talking to his disciples about how they're going to receive power. And he's going to give them the Holy Spirit.

[3 : 47] And Luke writes, after he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes and a cloud hid him from their sight. So there's this cloud taking Jesus up to heaven.

Why is the cloud important? Well, the cloud's important because there's only two people who get to write clouds in the Bible. One of them is God.

And the other one is the Son of Man. Now this cloud imagery comes from Exodus, where God first appears. Remember we did our series in Exodus? Remember Mount Sinai, how God comes down

on Mount Sinai?

In pillar of smoke and cloud and fire. And then afterwards a pillar of smoke and cloud and fire goes with them into the wilderness. But it's also picked up in the Psalms, in what are called the Psalms of Ascent.

We read one as we started our service. Lift up our eyes as they go up to the temple mount. But one of them, Psalm 68, is about how they reenact the taking up of the ark of the covenant.

[4 : 49] They would do this every year. And as they go up, they have this huge procession and sing about, yes, the ark is going up to the temple. But how God also ascends and rides in the skies and what that means for them.

So let's have a look at that. Turn with me to Psalm 68. Psalm 68. And we just need to spend a bit of time there because that is one of those Psalms that beautifully captures this imagery of the God who rides on the clouds of heaven.

Now, it's a fairly long Psalm, so we can't go through all of it. I'm going to highlight just the first four verses for now. So Psalm 68.

Everyone with me? For the director of music of David, a psalm, a song. It's a chorus song. It's like what we sing in church. They would have been singing this as they go up.

Now, I don't know what the tune is, but I'm just going to read it. I really feel like singing it, but... May God arise. May his enemies be scattered. May his foes flee before him.

[6 : 02] As smoke is blown away by the wind, may you blow them away. As wax melts before the fire, may the wicked perish before God.

But may the righteous be glad and rejoice before God. May they be happy and joyful. Sing to God, sing praise to his name.

Extol him who rides on the clouds. Hmm. And it goes on. But that's a beautiful picture of God riding on the clouds.

And when he does that, he's taking out the enemies. Imagine starting a church chorus like that. The psalm goes on.

It's a great psalm. I'm going to leave you to read it, the whole thing. Here's your homework. Go and read Psalm 68, the whole thing. But just turn with me to verse 32. We get more imagery of God being on the clouds.

[7 : 05] In fact, I think we've got a bit of time. So verse 17 will help us as well. Because we've already heard about God bringing in chariots. Tens of thousands.

So have a look at verse 17. The chariots of God are tens of thousands and thousands of thousands. The Lord has come from Sinai into his sanctuary. When he ascends on high, he led captives in your train.

You led captives in your train. You received gifts from men, even from the rebellious, that you, O Lord God, might dwell there. Ooh. Now, we think chariots.

We think of like a carriage of going from one place to the next. Like we would get in our chariot to go to pick and pay and buy some groceries. Okay. In the Old Testament times, they didn't ride chariots to go fetch the groceries. They rode chariots to go chop people's heads off.

It's a wartime language. Okay. A person riding in his chariot has put all his armor on. He's got his sword strapped to his side. He's got his driver.

[8 : 02] He might have a guy with a spear and his sword bearer, a guy with a shield, and a guy with a bow and arrow. Like he's armed to the teeth, and he's going to war. Notice verse 18.

When you ascended on high, you led captives in your train. You received gifts from men. So he defeats his foes, and he drags them. They come dragging behind him through the streets wherever they were.

Well, not God will be doing that, but in those days, if they had a big triumph, the king would win a major battle, and then he would bring all his captives. Everyone he beat would be behind him, embarrassed and shamed, and everyone would throw fruit at them and jeer at them.

You know like how the opposite rugby team loses a game? It's a bit like that. Like when the Springboks play, and the poor French or the English or the New Zealanders, completely vanquished.

That's picked up in Ephesians, remember? But Jesus is sending and giving gifts to his church. Last part of call in Psalm 68. Down to verse 32.

[9 : 13] Sing to God, O kingdoms of the earth. Sing praises to the Lord, to him who rides the ancient skies above, who thunders with mighty voice. Proclaim the power of God, whose majesty is over Israel, whose power is in the skies.

You are awesome, O God, in your sanctuary. The God of Israel gives power and strength to his people. Praise be to God.

Notice that last bit. This God of immense power gives power and strength to his people. Now why clouds? I mean, what is the thing about clouds?

Well, it's cool. None of us ride clouds. But clouds do one of two things. They either give you life, if there's a little bit of rain, or they give you death, if there's a lot of rain.

Or in God's case, when he rides on the clouds, there's wind, there's tornado-level wind. There's deluge-level rain.

[10 : 21] And then on top of that, there's sheet lightning going from one side of the earth to the other. So when God rides the clouds, it's an indication that he's this mighty warrior going to war with the enemies of his people.

It's a glorious picture of protection and power. None can withstand this God. All foes are going to fall before him. Just imagine yourself before that being.

You want him to be your friend. Not your enemy. There's one way you can make him your friend, and that's if you're friends with his son, the only other person who rides these clouds.

And that's that Daniel 7 picture. That's why Daniel 7 is so important. Daniel 7 stands behind all these pictures of the ascension of Christ, in the New Testament where he speaks about himself in the Gospels, the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, and specifically here in Acts 1, where he ascends up to heaven on these clouds.

I don't have time to read them again, but that Daniel 7 is a very important passage for understanding who Jesus is. Coming on the clouds there is Jesus going up to heaven.

[11 : 46] I know it sounds like he's coming down, but he's not. Daniel's in heaven, and he's looking at this person coming up to heaven. given glory, authority, sovereign power, so that all nations and peoples of every language worship him.

His dominion is an everlasting dominion. What the Bible is connecting is that Jesus is both a human and divine being.

because the only other person that rides clouds is God. So this other person that rides clouds, it says Son of Man, but I mean, look at the stuff that he's given. So that as he rides these clouds, it's talking about this God-like power that is given to this individual who gets to ride these clouds.

So that in Colossians 3, when Paul says, put your mind on Christ, raise your heart up to heaven, who is now seated with God in heaven, it's these pictures that he wants us to have.

Does that make sense? This is the picture we're meant to conjure up. Now isn't that a glorious reality to be thinking about? And to just just have that in our minds about who Jesus is and who God is, especially when we're faced with any reality in our life that is somehow making our life less nice.

[13 : 19] In other words, an enemy. Anything. Personal enemies, bigger issues like cultural wars, maybe our past, anything that we battle with on the inside, negative thoughts, temptation to sin, our past mistakes.

Jesus, as the cloud-riding God-King of the universe, can and does give you the power to fight back. Now that's an amazing promise.

That that being, with all that power, gives some of that power to you. Now how can I say that that's true? Well let's now look at what the ascension means for us, so that we know who we are meant to be, what the ascension does for us.

And the first thing that I want us to notice is the ascension gives us power to change the world. The ascension gives us power to change the world. So turn now to Acts 1. And that's the account of the ascension.

So pick up the story at verse 6. So Jesus is meeting with his disciples. He's meeting with them for 40 days. That's an important time marker.

[14 : 48] 40 days. It's a period of time in the Bible where God is preparing his people where something new and big is going to happen.

The flood, 40 days and 40 nights and then salvation. The rain stops. Moses, 40 years in the wilderness and then he comes to his people in Egypt and saves them. The Israelites, 40 years in the wilderness then they get to go into the promised land.

Disciples, 40 days. And then Jesus says, right boys, you need to know a few things here. He's starting something. This ascension thing is him starting something. Something big.

So, verse 6, when they met together, they asked him, Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel? Hey, you're the king. You've just been raised from the dead.

Let's go. Expecting him to stay there and not sure what next. Raise an army, throughout the Romans. Bring in economic prosperity.

[15:54] Keep on healing people. Notice, now many people think, oh, they've got the wrong idea. Jesus didn't come to establish a kingdom. He did come to establish a kingdom. He doesn't say that they're wrong.

He just says that their timing is wrong and also they didn't know what their role was going to be in this whole thing. So have a look. Lord, are you at this time? The emphasis is on this time, now.

Are you going to do this now? All these things he said, is it going to happen now? He says, no, it's not for you to know the times or the dates the Father has set by his own authority.

So yeah, it's going to happen, but it's not going to happen when you think. Also, it's not going to happen how you think because the next verse is important for us. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be my witness in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

And that's when he gets taken up in a cloud. What we see here is the start of Jesus' kingdom.

[17:05] It's a start. It's what's called the inauguration. Him being enthroned in heaven, sitting down at God's right hand is the inauguration. Remember last year we had the inauguration of King Charles III.

Anyone know? In England. We watched it some of us watched it. It's the start of his reign as he sits down.

That's the beginning of his kingdom and that's exactly what the ascension is all about. It's saying to the disciples to become the apostles when I leave you and sit down on God's right hand my kingdom has inaugurated.

It's begun. But the astonishing thing is he's not going to use angels and chariots and tens of thousands of chariots and chariots and angels which he's got at his command.

He's going to send eleven or twelve I don't know how many disciples there at this point. You guys go. You're going to take my kingdom.

[18:06] How? I'm like, what? Don't worry. I'm going to give you the most powerful thing I can give you while I'm there and you're here. I'm going to give you my spirit. And then they get the spirit and then they go out Acts 2, Peter's sermon.

Acts 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, Peter, miracles. Acts 4, Acts 6, works of mercy. And so as the church grows and builds because the kingdom grows and builds because they're spreading the gospel, they're telling people about the risen Jesus who's now sitting at God's right hand.

Acts 2 is the best example of that, of a gospel sermon there is because it focuses on exactly these things. The resurrection of Christ from the dead and ascension into heaven.

They speak the gospel, people believe and their sins are forgiven. They come into the kingdom.

They've got works of power, there's miracles, people are being healed and then they do works of mercy. People are poor and hungry and we'll feed them.

We'll be the blessing of God to the world. So friends, we, that's not just for them, that's for us. We're in the same position.

[19:22] By we, I mean you. And me. We get to participate in this huge movement. The beginning of the spread of the kingdom of God. Now yes, it's going on for 2,000 years.

I don't know. Are we in the beginning? Are we in the middle? Are we in the end? I don't know. But when it feels like the world is winning and we're not, Paul in Colossians says, put your mind onto Christ where he's seated on the throne in heaven.

Jesus does give us the power to change the world, to get stuck in and help change the world. Okay. But that's a big task. I'm not ready to take on the world. I'm barely keeping my life together.

That's the experience of many Christians. It's your experience. None of us live in this power place all the time. I'm barely keeping my life together. Well, the ascension, Christ's ascension helps us to tackle the problems that we have in our lives.

So let's end our time in Colossians 3. So turn to Colossians 3 now. And we'll look at how the ascension gives us power to change our lives. So the ascension, we've seen the ascension, what it

means for Jesus, it means he's this warrior king of heaven.

[20 : 43] He gives power to his disciples, his people, to change the world because he's now the ruler of all nations. End of Matthew 28.

But we don't feel like we can win. We don't feel like we can battle. We're playing, making, we've got small battles. Yes, battles out there, but the battle inside is a big battle. And the ascension gives us power to change our own lives.

So I'm just going to read from Colossians 3, first few verses. Since then, since then you've been raised with Christ. Remember Paul is writing to the church at Colossae, he's writing to a group of people.

Since you've been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.

For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. And when Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

[21 : 52] This, setting your hearts on things above, or some translations have seek, seek the things that are above. The word heart, if you've got the NIV, is not there in the Greek.

They've done a bit of an interpretation there. but it says, to set your heart or to seek the things that are above. Verse 2, set your minds, is in the text, and it's talking about your thoughts and your feelings.

But this seeking and setting, what is that to do with? The seeking and setting here is a determined desire to search for or yearn after something and you won't stop until you get it, and once you've got it, you won't let it go.

So the seeking and setting is looking desperately for something, getting rid of everything in the way, grabbing hold of it and not letting go once you've found it.

It's the same word used in the Gospels where Jesus says, seek first the kingdom of God. You seek it because it's so precious and meaningful. Anyone who's lost anything precious in their life knows exactly what I'm talking about.

[23 : 05] For me, it's often my keys at the bottom of my car. You don't rest. You know when you lose your cell phone? Everyone's got that little desperate feeling, oh, you can't live without your phone.

Your heart is there. So God wants our heart to be set on where Christ is set. Your heart and your mind are your thoughts and your emotions. Paul is saying you need to control them.

We need to control them because they're unruly. They're difficult to control, but we can control them. And the way to do that is to take them away from looking at the stuff that you're immediately concerned with, press pause and look up and remind yourself of the king of heaven and earth who's sitting at God's right hand and he's got all things under his control and power.

What does that do then to the thing that you're facing? This big enemy that you just have to give in to, your temptation, or you want to give that retort, or you're running after the things that you shouldn't be running after, but you've got the God, the cloud rider, the warrior king of heaven and earth.

what does that do to the problems you've got down here? Well, it makes it small. It should make it disappear, but it makes it small enough for you to handle.

[24 : 38] So verse three and four gives an interesting thing of how we to live our lives now. So we've been raised with Christ, that means to come out of the dead, you're alive for the first time.

Verse three, for you've died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Now the thing is, yes, it sounds like you're dead, so you've got two lives in a sense, you've got a dead life and you've got an alive life.

And it sounds like the dead life is just dead, you don't have to worry about it, but you do have to worry about it. It's a bit like part of us is dead, but there's, you know, like the Caribbean, yeah, most of the kids and the parents, the rest of us, so Pirates of the Caribbean, so it's like a fantasy thing and then it's about pirates and then they fight bad things, but it's all sort of supernatural and then these skeletons, now the skeletons are dead, they're like zombies, but they keep coming at you because it's the story, but we've got, this dead part of us is a bit like the skeleton, it wants to hold on to us, so we're sort of almost caught in the middle, I've got this dead me, hanging on, trying to make me more dead, and then I've got this other foot in the alive me, where is this alive me, hidden with Christ in God,

I'm up there, but I've got this other thing down here trying to pull me down, now, in this battle against sin, between a dead thing that's trying to bring you down, which we feel is strong, and the God of the universe and Christ, which, in that battle, who's going to win?

Yep, it's not going to be the dead thing, and then we go, oh, I can't, this dead thing is so much stronger than the living God of the universe, no, true, but there's a tension here, a struggle between basically our old and our new, so we're in the territory of spiritual warfare, and that's why Colossians 3, the rest of Colossians 3, is about getting rid of all the bad stuff in your life, and getting better at getting all the good stuff in your life, so because you're actually dead to sin, so count it as dead, don't think it's alive, it's not, you think it's alive, it makes you want to think it's alive, it's not, go over to the God side, go up, I'm not down here, I'm up, my living, the new me, is living somehow, hidden somehow, protected, held by God in heaven, and who, who can get that, who can go up there and wrestle me back, no one else, strange enough,

[27 : 39] I can, and I can convince myself, and God, that actually, as much glory as I've got with you, as much power as I've got with you, actually, I really can't, I really, you know the thing where people make excuses and you just know that they're just making excuses, when they don't want to come to your party or do something that you ask them to do, and the excuses are so pathetic, you're just ashamed, it's actually embarrassing listening to excuses sometimes, it's like, okay, okay, cool, whatever, whatever, just go do your thing, I think Paul is saying that when you're given to sin, you're doing that excuse making, because you're dead, the old dude is dead, it's not calling to you, you're calling to it, okay, but anyway, so he says, look, whatever's left over, kill it, verse 5, put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature, sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed, anyone who struggles with that, okay, listen, we all struggle with that, those are strong urges, you've got to fight hard, you're not fighting alone, but we'll get in that second, but get rid of, you can get rid of them, it says, put it to death, so you can get rid of it, because I'm up in heaven,

I'm not down here, and anyway, remind yourself, because of these, the wrath of God is coming, you know the God that rides the clouds with lightning, thunder, and all the other stuff, yeah, you make him your enemy when you mess around over here, you used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived, okay, so now you don't do that anymore, that's good, but you've got some other things you need to get rid of, verse 8, you must also rid yourself of all of these other things, anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language, lies, you've taken off your old self, you've put your new self on, okay, so get rid of that stuff, what must I put on, what kind of person must I be, verse 12 onwards, because your new self is being renewed, verse 10, sorry, in the image of its creator, verse 12, therefore as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, rather, clothe yourselves with compassion and kindness and humility and gentleness and patience, bear with each other, forgive one another if you've got a grievance, forgive us, the Lord forgave you, and of all these things, put on love and let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, and be thankful, cool, but that's not easy,

I often fail, as we all do, we need to help each other in this battle, not fight against each other in this battle, so this is spiritual warfare, now think of yourself in a battle, in a battle zone, you're in the trenches, you've got your guns, you've got your mates next to you, the enemy's big and strong, let's go, let's go, throwing hand grenades, and the guy next to you pokes you on your shoulder, pokes you on your shoulder, he pokes you on your shoulder, what is it?

you know, I'm so unhappy with Jerry, did you see what he did to the scrambled eggs this morning? What? And, and, Mavis, what? Mavis, what? Well, she was nasty to me the other day, did you see what she was wearing?

[31 : 07] Well, you don't have time for this nonsense when you're fighting a war? What you want is a guy next to you going, hey man, what do you need? Let's go get the, you see this thing that's trying to kill us? Let's go get that.

Don't worry about the other stuff. We don't have time for people complaining, we don't have time for nastiness, we don't have time for pulling each other down, we've only got time to be brothers in arms against the fight against the world, the flesh, and the devil.

These are big, strong enemies. Yes, Jesus is big and stronger, but he's given us the task to fight and we've got to fight this thing together. That's why Paul, in all his letters, like guys, in the church, don't be fighting each other, be nice, be forgiving, stop backbiting, it's going to, when we sin against each other, we stop the war effort from going forward.

You're actually sabotaging the going forward of the kingdom of God. But it's madness. And then you want to complain about little things. Okay.

So what must we do? Well, how do we do this thing? Well, I've simply been doing it. So don't do that. That's why he says, bear with each other.

[32 : 25] Kindness, gentleness, humility. Forgive if anyone has a grievance. Don't take it, don't take it out. Put on, put on and take off.

Put on good things, take off bad things. We all know what's good. We all know what's bad. The ascension tells you you've got the power to do it. You don't have the power by yourself. We're in a war together.

Ask for help. And when friends, when you see someone struggling, help them. And pull them down, help them. And the other thing, lastly then, we've got to remind each other, to not look down at the enemy coming at us because it looks like it's going to kill us.

But if you are in a war situation, and you are going down, and the enemy is big and strong, and you hear a tank rumbling through the woods. You know how the tanks sound as they come through? And this huge beast, monster of a tank, and it's your tank. You're looking at that tank. Now, I don't care about the other guys. Now I'm going to fight stronger because that tank is going to take them all out.

[33 : 37] So, in your life, when you look around and you're looking down, this is what we've got to tell each other. Amen. man, I can see when I'm doing this to myself, and when you're doing it to yourself, and when I see others doing it, when you're looking around and you're looking at the ugliness, you're looking at the shame, you're looking at the bad things, you can't seem to get rid of it.

It looks like they're winning. Amen. Amen. Look up. Put your heart, set your heart, set your mind, set your thoughts, set your emotions, talk back to them, fight with them, wrestle with them, until they're a little bit away and a little bit more up, or a lot away and a lot up.

Thinking about how glorious Christ is, how strong He is, how He's given you this power, and keep doing it. Keep looking up. Keep reminding yourself, look at the scriptures and see what beautiful images it speaks about Jesus, this amazing King.

Go to Revelations, go to the Psalms, it's all over the New Testament. Keep getting rid of, keep fighting. The old and ugly dying, rotting self falls away and the new, shiny and glorious living you gets to rise up and let Jesus, the God King of Heaven, be the one that you look to, to sound like, to aim at looking like, and sounding like, and acting like.

And you become more and more glorious, and less and less ugly, more and more effective, and less and less bound. Well, that's what the ascension is all about for us from this passage.

[35 : 29] Shall we ask Jesus to help us do these things? Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we can only convey in words that can't really capture who you are, and we get a glimpse, Lord, and we're drawn to it, and we know that it's real, and then there's this thing that's just a little bit beyond our reach, but Lord, you are ruling in heaven, and you call us upward, you call our hearts, our minds, our backbone, our feelings, everything upwards towards you, sitting at God's right hand in heaven, ruling over the world.

You call us to trust you there, to put our lives in your care there, and not to worry, and not to fight our own battles down here on earth, but to use your power, and your people to extend your kingdom, and we trust you, Lord, that you will do this in our lives.

Amen.