

## **Megatrends.**<sup>1</sup> (slide.1)

Today marks the seventh week of Easter; it is also Ascension Sunday. Because it's Ascension Sunday, we want to take some time and look at how this event spoken of in Scripture is central, not only to the work of Christ, but central to our lives even now. Debi already read our text, so let's open by seeking our Lord in prayer (slide/black.2).

In 1982, a man named John Naisbitt wrote a book. It was a huge bestseller; sold more than 14 million copies. The name of the book was *Megatrends*. It focused on a shift that was just beginning to take place, as the world (especially the West) was moving from an industrial society to an information society. Today we take that for granted, but back then that idea was a big deal. The book made a number of predictions, but one especially stood out. Naisbitt made the case that as "high tech" continued to increase, there would be a proportional need for, what he called, "high touch"—for human contact/presence in our lives.<sup>2</sup> So here we are some forty-three years later, and we see this in action. You go to a coffee shop, and there in the corner is someone with a laptop and a pair of headphones and a file folder stuffed with documents. And he's taking calls and working on spreadsheets and writing emails. And that person could have certainly saved the trip and done all of that stuff from home. But why is he there? There is something about being around others. It's what Naisbitt spoke of—that need for presence. And if it's not at the coffee shop, it's someplace else (at the gym/mall/park) anywhere with other people.

Interestingly, years later, Naisbitt wrote a follow-up book that further developed this idea and connected it, not only to our need for other people, but also to our need for meaning and for that which is spiritual. That piece in our humanity that pines for something more—for that greater sense of presence.<sup>3</sup> But here's the crazy thing. This need for presence is so great that if we do not get it from *good things*, we'll search for it in *not-so-good things*. Things that will dehumanize us and break us and impoverish our souls. And yet there is a wisdom that is older than us. And this wisdom than us tells us that this "presence" we seek is to be found, not merely in things (as wonderful as they are), and in the fullest sense not merely in people (as important as they are), but in Christ. And this is true, not only among those who profess the Christian faith, but even among those who do not. So that's part of what I want us to consider today. But let's first look at the verses Debi read.

## **The Book of Acts.**

In Acts 1 we read that (slide.3) after Jesus suffers, after He dies, after He rises from the dead, He presents Himself to His disciples and gives them "*many convincing proofs that He is alive.*" Now, admittedly, it's an odd time for these followers of Christ. They see Jesus and He's the *same*, but He's also *different*. He's *human*, but He's also *something more than human* (Mark talked about this over the past few weeks). On the one hand, Jesus has properties that are different and unlike that of any other human they had ever seen. He's not always immediately recognizable, He walks through walls, He appears and disappears at will. And yet, at the same time, He has properties similar to that of an ordinary human. He walks and talks and can be touched and He even eats food. He's *physical*, but at the same time He's *more than physical*.<sup>4</sup> And you want to ask, "*Is human flesh capable of doing this?*" And apparently this kind of human flesh is!

So He's with His disciples; He (slide.4) tells them to not leave Jerusalem but to wait instead for the gift of the Holy Spirit. The disciples misunderstand what Jesus is saying and mistakenly ask (slide.5), "*Lord, are You at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?*" In his commentary on this passage, John Calvin rolled his eyes and wrote that (slide.6) "*There are as many errors in this question as there are words*"<sup>5</sup> The disciples were expecting something immediate, something political, and something exclusive to Israel. But Jesus (slide.7) responds by telling them to hold their horses and to not concern themselves with timelines. Jesus has a very different kind of kingdom in mind. Something bigger, and broader, and less-parochial and localized than they imagined. So again, He tells them to wait. And again, mentions the coming of the Holy Spirit. And He speaks of them being His witnesses "*in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*" And then something strange happens. We read that (slide.8), "*After Jesus said this, He was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid Him from their sight.*" He's gone, yet verse 10 (slide.9) tells us that the disciples kept looking up into the sky. Suddenly, two figures dressed in white stood beside them, explained to them that Jesus had been taken into heaven, but that He would one day return.

For the disciples, this was something new and unexpected, but it would eventually make sense. Later (slide/black.10), especially in Paul's letter to the Ephesians and in the letter to the Hebrews, more details are filled in. In fact, every letter in the NT alludes to the Ascension in one way or another.<sup>6</sup> In addition, as followers of Christ went back and began rereading the Hebrew Scriptures, they discovered hints and references to the Ascension that went back to (slide.11) Daniel, who speaks of one like "*the Son of Man there with the clouds of heaven.*" And (slide.12) Isaiah, who tells of a vision of "*the Lord, high up and exalted, and seated on a throne.*" And (slide.13) David, who in the psalm Rich led us in earlier in our service, declares that the Lord said to his Lord, "*Sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies Your footstool.*"<sup>7</sup>

Along with those references, believers even began to see *allusions to* and *foreshadows of* the Ascension in many of the OT narratives. I get a kick out of this (slide.14) page from an old German prayer book that dates back to the 12th century. In the (slide.15) center, we see this stylistic depiction the ascended Christ. Surrounding Him are (slide.16) five OT stories that prefigure and anticipate that ascension.<sup>8</sup> I especially like these (slide.17) two. The picture on the (slide.18) top portrays Elijah being taken up into heaven in a chariot of fire. The monk who created this page was apparently not very good at painting fire so I'm guessing someone told him to just paint the chariot red. The one on the (slide.19) bottom tells the story of Enoch from Genesis 5. We're told that "*Enoch walked faithfully with God; then he was no more, because God took him away.*" The artist must have decided that God did this by yanking Enoch by the hair.

### **The Theology of the Ascension.**

In our (slide/black.20) modern day and age, we're not quite sure what to do with the Ascension. But for the Christians that came before us (especially for those who lived back when the NT was still *new*), the ascension of Christ to the right hand of the Father was central. We saw this today as Rich led us in the recitation of the Apostle's Creed. Our creeds speak, not only of Christ's birth/death/burial/resurrection, they also speak of Christ's ascension. For the ancient church, each and every part was understood as being essential for the redemption Christ promised—including Christ's bodily ascension to the right hand of God the Father. Our faith is not simply a religion of theological ideas, but of concrete events.

I like how Gerrit Dawson put it in his book on the Ascension. He writes that Christ did not live with His creation for thirty-three years (slumming, as it were) and then, once His work was done said, "I'm so glad that's over with; let Me get out of this skinsuit so I can go back to heavenly living." **No, that which He had, He keeps, and continues to keep.** As the angels declared to the disciples (slide.21), "*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.*" Christ's humanity was not something He wore for a while and then hung it up in a coat closet in some corner in heaven so He can go back to business as usual. Rather, His humanity is something He keeps forever. It is the clothing which He does not put off; it's the temple which He does not leave. It is a glorious, resurrected body—fully human, yet perfectly fitted for heaven.<sup>9</sup> And, according to (slide.22) Phil 3:21, it is the same kind of glorious body He will one day give to us, as the ruin of the First Adam is undone by the reign and mercy of the Second Adam.<sup>10</sup>

You see (slide/black.23), according to Scripture, God's goal is to redeem us body and soul. Without the Ascension we're left with a spiritual, mystic, otherworldly Jesus. But ours is not a faith that is exclusively spiritual or mystic or otherworldly. Rather, Christ is (slide.24) the **firstborn** of a new humanity (Col 1:15) and the **firstfruits** of those who have **fallen asleep/died** (1 Cor 15:20). A humanity redeemed/cleansed/glorified in Him. After all, through the God-man who kept His humanity, a portion of earth is now in heaven. John Duncan, the 19th-century Scottish theologian put it beautifully; he wrote that (slide.25) "*The dust of the earth now sits on the throne of the universe.*" To that end, the beginning of "the new heavens and the new earth" spoken of in Isaiah and the book of Revelation is already taking place even now (slide/black.26).

### **Christ's Presence.**

So what does the Ascension point to for those who believe? Number one (slide.27), the Ascension points to *Christ's Presence* in our lives. So how does that work? It's a little tricky. We read the NT, and we are confronted by ideas that are seemingly contradictory. According to Matthew, Jesus said to His disciples, "*Lo I am with you always,*" yet Luke tells us that He disappeared into the clouds. Christ promised that He would not leave His followers as orphans, but then says that it is better that He goes. He declared that "Wherever two or three are gathered in His name, there He is in our midst," and yet Paul ends his first epistle to the Corinthians by crying out for Christ's return.<sup>11</sup> So what are the NT writers telling us? They seem to be telling us that we are to take all of these verses and, in a sense, "double-click" on that reality. And as we do that, we discover that Christ's ascension to the right hand of the Father does not rule out His continuing presence—*in fact, it's the complete opposite*.<sup>12</sup> The Ascension, in a real sense, represents the increased and heightened presence of Christ—not the loss of His presence, but the magnification of it (even beyond His earthly ministry). **And the reason why is because of Pentecost; the reason why is because of the work of the Holy Spirit.** In his *Institutes*, John Calvin spoke of the Spirit as the one who collapses the distance between heaven and earth.<sup>13</sup> He's the bond of the Trinity and the ground of our union (slide.28) "in Christ."<sup>14</sup> This union that is mentioned, not just here and there in the pages of Scripture, but a union that is mentioned some (slide.29) two-hundred times in Paul's letters alone!

This is the presence each of us desperately needs. This Jesus who is our home/harbor/resting place. Anything else falls short. Anything else is too small. Anything else is unable to bear the weight of our souls (slide/black.30).

## **Christ's Intercessions.**

So, number one (slide.31), the Ascension points to *Christ's Presence*. Number two (slide.32), the Ascension points to *Christ's Intercessions*. There's an Irish theologian; his name is Peter Orr. In his book on the Ascension, he writes that Christians have tended to focus their attention on what Christ *has done* and what He *will do*, but we don't always think about what He's *doing now*.<sup>15</sup> I suppose part of the reason why may be connected to the picture of Jesus "seated" at the right hand of the Father in His throne room. It seems passive. But in truth, a royal throne room is not passive at all. It might be best if we compared it to a jobsite, or an operating room, or an airport control tower. It's a place alive with activity. So what is Christ doing as we speak? Well, since the Day of Ascension, He's been working from home. He's with the Father. As king, He is ruling and reigning as Lord of all. But He's doing something else as well. We read in (slide.33) Rom 8:34 that this Jesus who lived and died and rose again and ascended and is seated at the right hand of God the Father—this same Jesus is (slide.34) "*interceding for us*"—for you, for me, for all who are called by His name, for all who seek to be His apprentices, for all who trust Him for salvation. As high priest, He is representing you to the Father and the Father to you.

Like the high priest (slide.35) of the Jewish temple who wore the names of the twelve tribes over his heart, Christ enters the greater Most Holy Place, not with names graven on precious stones, but as we read in Isaiah 49 (slide.36), with names "graven on the palms of His hands." And He sits at the right hand of the Father and advocates, and mediates, and intercedes for you who are called by His name. In fact, Heb 7:25 (slide.37) tells us that this Jesus actually (slide.38) "lives" to intercede for you. He who did everything that ever needed to be done to save you, is also (as we sang today) "the great High Priest whose name is love, who ever lives and pleads for you" (slide.39).

So the Son opens His mouth (this mouth that has never said a lie) and He has a gospel conversation with His Father. A conversation full of uninhibited, unscripted beauty. It's as if it comes out of His pores. And that conversation is about you, and about His love for you, and about His purposes for you, even now. And in doing so, He prays perfect prayers.<sup>16</sup> I like how Tim Keller puts it. He writes that Christ prays the kinds of prayers you would pray if you knew everything He knew.<sup>17</sup> You don't hear an audible voice from heaven, but you know in faith that Christ is far from silent.<sup>18</sup> And if He's not silent, then I suppose, more than anything, it puts our circumstances into perspective. If this is true (if it is true that Jesus is forever before the Father praying on your behalf) then the one thing we *can never* say is that God is unaware of what's taking place in our lives. We may not be crazy about what's taking place (that's fair), but the one thing we can never say is that God is not present or that He does not care.

### **Christ's Mission.**

Number three (slide.40), the Ascension points to *Christ's Mission*. It's what Mark spoke of last week: our participation in the fulfilling of God's redemptive plan; our call to all people, from every tribe, tongue, and nation.

As king, Christ reigns over all.

As priest, He intercedes for those who are His.

As prophet, He spreads His word as He sends us into mission.

Christ's humanity (which He holds onto even in His Ascension) is a vivid reminder that we are not to withdraw from the world around us. The Ascension reminds us that this material world and the lives of those around us are not discardable.

I like this quote; it comes from Robert Farrar Capon. Capon was an Episcopalian priest (2013). He writes that (slide.41): *±"We are given appetites, not to consume the world and forget it, but to taste its goodness and hunger to make it beautiful."* He goes on to say that it is, of course, much easier to play it safe and to not get involved. It's much easier to thirst for nothing and to deny that matter matters (slide/black.42). But playing it safe is not very godly. And playing it safe is certainly not what we saw Jesus doing. No, Christ saved the world, not by keeping His distance; rather, He saved the world by becoming human, and by becoming vulnerable, and by pouring Himself out on behalf of others who (much of the time) didn't get it and didn't care. But He did it anyway.<sup>19</sup> And He calls us to do the same as His workers: As Deacons, as City Group workers, As VBS volunteers, as Stephen Ministers. In our homes, at our jobs, in our neighborhoods. Within the circumstances, industry, art, and culture around us.

And we do this to the glory of God,  
By the power of the Holy Spirit,  
Through the grace of our Ascended Savior.  
Now and forever.

Let's pray.

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<sup>1</sup> Congregation reading: Psalm 110:1-4 (ESV).

<sup>2</sup> John Naisbitt, *Megatrends: Ten New Directions Transforming Our Lives* (New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1982).

<sup>3</sup> John Naisbitt, Nana Naisbitt, Douglas Philips, *High Tech High Touch: Technology and Our Search for Meaning* (New York: Broadway, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2003), 654.

<sup>5</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary Upon the Acts of the Apostles*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 22.

<sup>6</sup> Patrick Schreiner, *The Ascension of Christ: Recovering a Neglected Doctrine* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), 9-11.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel 7:13; Isaiah 6:1; Psalm 110:1.

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth C. Teviotdale, *The Stammheim Missal* (Los Angeles: Getty Museum Studies on Art, 2001), 70.

<sup>9</sup> Gerrit Scott Dawson, *Jesus Ascended: The Meaning of Christ's Continuing Incarnation* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing Company, 2004), 8, 42, 43; "Why the Ascension Matters: An Interview with Gerrit Scott Dawson and Jonny Woodrow," *Authors on the Line*, 5/08/13.

<sup>10</sup> Kevin DeYoung, *Daily Doctrine: A One-Year Guide to Systematic Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2024), 207.

<sup>11</sup> Matt 28:20; Acts 1:9; John 14:18; 16:7; Matt 18:20; 1 Cor 16:22.

<sup>12</sup> Schreiner, *The Ascension of Christ*, 33.

<sup>13</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.10.

<sup>14</sup> Dawson. *Jesus Ascended*, 46-47.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Orr, *Exalted Above the Heavens: The Risen and Ascended Christ*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* 47 (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2019), 1.

<sup>16</sup> Jamin Roller, "The Ascension: Why Did He Go?" (sermon: Village Church, 2016).

<sup>17</sup> Keller writes, "God will either give us what we ask or give us what we would have asked if we knew everything he knows." Timothy Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 228.

<sup>18</sup> Jason Helopoulos, "Christ Our Intercessor (Part 2): 4 Encouragements for the Pilgrim" *Place for Truth* (2014), <https://www.placefortruth.org/blog/christ-our-intercessor-part-2-4-encouragements-for-the-pilgrim> (accessed May 28, 2025).

<sup>19</sup> Robert Farrar Capon, *The Supper of the Lamb: A Culinary Reflection* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1969), 189-90.