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Better the day of death than the day of birth. The ascension.

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Transcript

Ecclesiastes chapter 7. A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of birth. It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of face the heart is made glad.

The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth. It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools, for as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fools. This also is vanity.

Surely, oppression drives the wise into madness, and a bribe corrupts the heart. Better is the end of a thing than its beginning, and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit. Be not quick in your spirit to become angry, for anger lodges in the heart of fools.

Say not, Why were the former days better than these? For it is not from wisdom that you ask this. Wisdom is good within inheritance, an advantage to those who see the sun, for the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money, and the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it. Consider the work of God, who can make straight what he has made crooked.

In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider, God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him. In my vain life I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evil doing.

Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself? Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time? It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand, for the one who fears God shall come out from both of them.

Wisdom gives strength to the wise man, more than ten rulers who are in a city. Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins. Do not take to heart all the things that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you.

Your heart knows that many times you yourself have cursed others. All this I have tested by wisdom. I said, I will be wise, but it was far from me.

That which has been is far off, and deep, very deep. Who can find it out? I turn my heart to know and to search out, and to seek wisdom, and the scheme of things, and to know the wickedness of folly, and the foolishness that is madness. And I find something more bitter than death, the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and whose hands are fetters.

He who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her. Behold, this is what I found, says the preacher, while adding one thing to another to find the scheme of things, which my soul has sought repeatedly, but I have not found. One man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found.

See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes. As Tremper Longman remarks, the opening verse of Ecclesiastes chapter 7 wouldn't sound out of place in the book of Proverbs. Indeed, there are verses like it within that book, perhaps most notably Proverbs chapter 22 verse 1. A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favour is better than silver or gold.

However, the second half of the proverb here perhaps suggests a connection with what precedes it in chapter 6. Daniel Fredericks maintains that this verse needs to be understood as the response to the question of chapter 6 verse 12. For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow?

For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun? In the end we all die, but a good name might outlive us. Interpretations of the second half of the proverb vary in part according to commentator's sense of how pessimistic and or cynical the preacher's vision is.

There are occasions when death might be referred to life. We might think about Job's description of his experience, for instance. The preacher has also spoken of situations of extreme suffering, with no relief from toil.

Perhaps the verse ought to be read in light of that. Alternatively, we might consider the way in which the day of death can be the seal of a good reputation, to which the person yet to be born has yet to attain. It seems to me that in the light of the first half of the proverb there is a good case for this interpretation.

It has been said that Christian faith is practice in the art of dying well. The preacher is convinced that the house of mourning, where we consider the day of a person's death and our own lives in terms of our own coming death, is a site where we will best learn wisdom. We might think of the statement in the Psalm of Moses in Psalm 90 verse 12, so teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.

In fact, perhaps paradoxically, the hearts of people who mourn will be made better. Unlike several translations, it might be best to translate this as made better rather than made glad. The heart that gives itself to the activity of mourning can be deepened and matured in wisdom.

By contrast, fools are drawn to feasting and levity. They adopt a hedonistic disregard for the death that awaits them and thereby miss out on the opportunity to learn wisdom. On paper, the eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die attitude of the mindless hedonist may sound similar to the counsel of the preacher in places like chapter 2 verse 24.

There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. However, when we look closer, there are marked differences. The preacher's approach is not one of a determined thoughtlessness with respect to the approach of death, but of grateful enjoyment of life in the vapour, while being mindful of its transitory character and of the importance of measuring our lives by something greater than the distracting pleasures of the moment.

Death is the end of life, but in forcing us to consider the end or terminus of our lives, it also encourages us to think of the end or telos of our lives, what our lives are ultimately about. Such lessons are well sought in a wise man's funeral as we look back with others upon a life well lived. The preacher focuses upon a further aspect of this in verses 5-6, drawing attention to the company that we will find in these different places and activities.

The wise may give painful rebukes and correction. However, such rebukes, in contrast to the smooth words of the flatterer or the seductress, will encourage our long-term good. The company of fools is found in a place of shallow song and levity, which, like thorns burning under a pot, are of little use or value and will only last for a short time.

The connection of verse 7 with what surrounds it is difficult to ascertain and some commentators believe that some part of the text might be lost in transmission. However, the actual textual arguments for this are relatively weak. Perhaps the point of the text is to underline the fact that the wise should never be complacent in their imagined wisdom, as wisdom can easily be corrupted when not kept burning through good company.

Much as the fools congregate together like thorns under the pot, so the wise need to be like clusters of burning coals, keeping each other glowing hot through rebuke and correction and encouragement in wisdom. Wisdom, if we are not careful, can be subverted or compromised, not least through temptations to exercise oppression and the allure of a bribe. Verse 8 recalls verse 1's claim about the day of a person's death being better than the day of their birth.

The proverb of verse 8 has two mutually interpreting halves, like many such proverbs. The end of a thing is connected with the patient in spirit, who bides his time and sees a matter through to its proper conclusion, while the beginning of a thing is connected with the proud in spirit, who boasts greatly before having accomplished anything. We might think of the proverb uttered by Ahab in 1 Kings 20 verse 11, Let not him who straps on his armour boast himself as he who takes it off.

The patient in spirit is a person who has mastered his spirit, while the proud in spirit is mastered by his pride. The picture is filled out in verse 9 which shows the connection between pride and anger, which makes a person rash, hot-headed and reactive, quite ill-suited for prudent circumspect and effective action. The wise man masters his own heart first of all, and consequently is able to act in the proper manner at the proper time, rather than precipitously and incautiously.

The warning against romanticising the olden days in verse 10 should probably be read in connection with verse 8, with its claim that the end of a thing is better than its beginning. The person who asks such a question may by implication be driven by pride, impatience and an unruly spirit. There are plenty of occasions where present things are unfavourably compared to past things in scripture, for instance the Laodiceans being called to return to their former works, so this verse should be interpreted with some care.

Like most such verses we need to consider it in light of other things that we know, and especially in the light of the surrounding context, to arrive at a good understanding of what is being said and what is not. Here are a few suggestions. First we ought to

consider the way that excessive nostalgia for the past can serve to distract us from present responsibilities and possible joys.

Our responsibility is to live in and learn to find some joy in our own times, not to render ourselves fruitless and joyless by yearning for some other time that God has not given us. Second, such an attitude can arrest necessary movement towards maturity. The wise do consider the past, they assess their own times both favourably and unfavourably in terms of what they learn from it.

However their posture is forward looking and creative, determined to leave something for the future, not just to long for a vanished past. Third, in terms of the broader themes of Ecclesiastes, there is nothing new under the sun. A romanticised past is a greatly airbrushed past.

While there are indeed many respects in which our own times may compare poorly to the past, a general preference for the past almost invariably comes with a blindness to the evils of the past, which may have taken a different form to our own, but were no less real. It might be a temptation to read this statement as a support for a progressive vision over a conservative one, but we ought to consider that the preacher's perspective is no less dismissive of the progressive's equally unrealistic and airbrushed future of lots of new things under the sun that will fundamentally change humanity's situation. The progressive's future is no less illusory than the conservative's past.

Verses 11 and 12 explore the relationship between wisdom and wealth. Solomon was blessed with both, his wealth largely proceeding from his wisdom in ruling his kingdom. Having both wisdom and wealth is a blessing indeed.

Indeed wisdom and wealth are alike in their protection of their possessor. However, if one is to be preferred it must be wisdom. Nevertheless, as we might have come to expect from the preacher, this positive statement about wisdom and wealth – the sort of statement that we might encounter in the Book of Proverbs – is counterbalanced by a reminder of the vaporous character of life.

While wisdom and wealth are powerful, we are not ultimately the masters of our fate, not even when we have great wealth and great wisdom. God is. Life is transitory and opaque and the lives of righteous persons may be cut short while those of wicked persons are often prolonged.

There are several perplexing verses in Ecclesiastes chapter 7 and verses 16 to 18 are definitely some of them. What does the preacher mean by saying that we shouldn't be overly righteous and not be too wise? This seems a very strange thing for scripture to say. It is in such statements that many are led to believe that the words of Ecclesiastes are not really canonically authorised.

These are words perhaps of a cynical sage that are within the canon but are not held as authorised by the canon. Rather the canon includes this voice in order to deny it. Popular as this position may be with many commentators and pastors, I don't find it persuasive in the slightest.

However, if we dismiss this position we still face the problem of trying to interpret these verses. What does it mean to be overly righteous or overly wise or on the other hand is he saying that moderate wickedness is okay in verse 17? On closer reflection it should be apparent that there are several ways in which these statements could be taken as wise biblical teaching. We might for instance think about Martin Luther's startling counsel.

Be a sinner and sin boldly but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly for he is victorious over sin, death and the world. As long as we are in this world we have to sin. This life is not the dwelling place of righteousness but as Peter says we look for a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

Luther's counsel here is valuable for those who might struggle with what people have called scrupulosity, with an overly sensitive conscience whose demand for perfection is preventing them from actually living. Righteousness becomes a sort of spiritual obsessive compulsive disorder, a constant attempt to avoid incurring the slightest guilt. However we are sinful human beings, we live in sinful societies and perverse orders.

Such an obsessive righteousness fails to acknowledge our flawed human nature, our inescapable embeddedness in sinful structures and other such things. Rather we should recognise our fallenness, our frailty and our limitations. We should abandon any of our messianic conceptions of ourselves, any excessive obsessions with personal moral purity that prevent us from actually living and serving God and our neighbour.

We should also abandon our hubristic attempts to pursue some angelic purity as weak and sinful human beings. Much as there are dangers in an obsessive quest for righteousness, there are dangers in an obsessive quest for wisdom. We might consider for instance the fact that life goes on, irrespective of the fact that our tasks of reflection and deliberation are less than perfectly accomplished.

At some point we have to turn from our reflections and deliberations to the tasks of living well. This will very often feel premature as we must satisfy ourselves with a limited and imperfect attainment of wisdom in any particular matter. However if we were obsessed with making perfect choices, always exercising the optimal degree of wisdom, we might never conclude our deliberations in actual decisions and actions.

We would always be second guessing ourselves or be paralysed in indecision. Once again appreciating our human limitations and moderating our quest for wisdom as our quest for righteousness is important. Sin and folly are to be expected and perfection is a

futile quest.

We must acknowledge the fact that we are sinners and foolish in many respects. We must curb our sin and our folly as much as we can and throw ourselves upon God's mercy and gracious protection for the rest. This is the difference between a healthy pursuit of righteousness as self-confessed sinners and a futile and self-destructive quest for angelic perfection in a manner that will actually prevent us from the positive business of righteous life.

Fear of the Lord is the answer to our own human deficit of righteousness and wisdom. Human wisdom is limited but nonetheless it is powerful. The preacher compares it to rulers in a city which can coordinate and order the people.

Wisdom is like this to the wise man, enabling him to master and direct his own spirit and also to help others around him. To ground his warning against a preoccupation with pursuing a level of righteousness that unhealthily chafes at human limitation, the preacher reminds us that no one will or can escape the reality of human fallenness and depravity. All of us are corrupted by sin.

None of our acts are free of it. Yet this account need not be understood in an incredibly negative sense. Much of the preacher's point here is to give us a better measure of ourselves, not to drive us to despair.

As Fredericks notes, moral realism is central to the preacher's counsel in these verses. Verses 21-22 continue the theme. Which of us has never said something carelessly in the heat of the moment, due to peer pressure, or otherwise through weakness and general human sinfulness and folly? Recognising our own imperfections, we should be a lot more merciful in our assessments of others, putting more charitable constructions on their actions and thereby also saving ourselves from the sting of cruel statements that we might otherwise needlessly take to heart.

There are many times, for instance, when someone will say something bitterly cruel in the heat of an argument and then long to take it back. The person who recognises their own imperfection will not hold others to their statements in such situations, but will give them an easy way to climb down from their statements as they can, not making them lose face. A number of commentators observed the way that the concluding verses of this chapter return us to the preacher's opening statement concerning his quest in chapter 1. There are several parallels between the statements of the two passages that substantiate these connections.

In returning to his initial statement, the preacher is presenting us with some of his findings in the matters that he had aimed to seek out. Wisdom is a lot less scrutable and much harder to be grasped than many might suppose. This itself is an important lesson.

Wisdom, the reason beneath things, is deeper and less accessible than people might suppose. It typically eludes us. One of the great findings of true wisdom is the extent of wisdom's limits.

Prominent in the first nine chapters of the Book of Proverbs is the figure of the adulterous woman and the woman folly who seduces simple young men away from the path of wisdom. We can even see such women ensnaring the wise like Solomon whose heart was led astray by his many wives. The woman is powerful because the heart of the young man goes after her and if she is not a wise woman she can lead him to his doom.

She is a snare or a trap from which God protects those who cling to him. However, sinners readily get entangled by her. Verses 27 and 28 are verses that unsettle many as at first blush they seem to be quite misogynistic.

Indeed, a number of commentators read them in such a manner. Some, like Trempe Longman, argue that verse 26 is also making a more general comment about the perverse moral character of women, albeit from the perspective of a confused sage, rather than as the authorised teaching of the book itself, comparing such a statement to those of Job's friends in the Book of Job, present in the canon but not canonically authorised voices. He is talking about something that he has failed to find to this point, although he has searched for it.

We are not, however, as R. N. Wybray and others point out, told what exactly he was searching for. Given the surrounding context there are few possible hints in how to understand his statement concerning his failure to find a woman in contrast to his discovery of one man in the thousand. Humanity's lack of moral uprightness is the theme of much that surrounds this section, particularly underlined in the final verse of the chapter.

The woman who leads astray is the subject of the immediately preceding verse. As a matter of possible historical background, we might consider that Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines, exactly 1,000 women in his harem. He proved unsuccessful and unwise in his seeking out a woman as they led him astray, they proved unreliable and sinful, and they exposed his own fickleness and corruption.

He might not be claiming that no remarkable and outstanding morally upright woman can be found, just that he has failed to find one, and he has only chanced upon finding one such man in the thousand. This is hardly an empirical basis upon which to prefer one sex to the other. Perhaps against such a reading, we might consider the description of the valiant wife in Proverbs 31.10, an excellent wife who can find, she is far more precious than jewels.

Although, if the preacher is Solomon referring to the men he has chosen for his officials and the women he chose for his harem, his statement may be much more limited in its

scope. Merely referring to his own failures in finding such outstanding persons to this point, he praises the excellent wife but has, in 1,000 attempts, failed to find the perfect woman himself. The immediately preceding verse is focusing on a particular type of woman, the seductress.

Frederick's, for instance, suggests that the preacher is especially referring to this class of woman, rather than women in general. Others, Roland Murphy among them, suggest that in fact what the preacher has not found is the truth of the supposed discrimination between men and women in this matter, that one man in 1,000 could indeed be found rather than one woman. Rather, what he has discovered is his statement of verse 29, that all have gone astray.

That supposed one man in 1,000 proves to be illusory. Dwayne Garrett suggests that the preacher is contrasting the companionship and kinship of mind that a man can find in one special male friend, which he is less likely to discover in a woman. We might perhaps think of the friendship that David describes between himself and Jonathan in 2 Samuel 1, verse 26, for instance.

I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan. Very pleasant have you been to me. Your love to me was extraordinary, surpassing the love of women.

Geoffrey Myers pays more attention to the term found. What does it mean? Not so much that the preacher is trying to identify a particular class of item or person from a larger set, but that he is trying to figure or fathom out things and persons. Yet human persons, twisted by sin, prove largely inscrutable to wisdom.

While one man in 1,000 may be someone he could figure out, the preacher has yet to find a single woman that he really believes he has figured out. Whatever the actual meaning of his statement, there is no reason why it need be assumed to be misogynistic, and several interpretations would fit in the context. Perhaps Myers' interpretation has the strength of more strongly connecting with the concluding statement of the chapter.

Sinful human beings are inscrutable. The one thing that wisdom can clearly recognise about human beings is our universal corruption and sinfulness. God created us upright.

It is not God who created sin within us, but rather human beings fell and have pursued sin themselves. A question to consider. The moral realism of Ecclesiastes chapter 7 might be arresting at several points.

What are some of the areas where we might face the danger of being overly righteous? Acts chapter 1 verses 1-14 In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given command through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. He presented himself alive to them after his suffering, by many proofs, appearing to them during forty

days, and speaking about the kingdom of God. And whilst staying with them, he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, you heard from me.

For John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now. So when they had come together, they asked him, Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel? He said to them, It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth. And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven. Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John, and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas the son of James.

All these, with one accord, were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers. The book of Acts begins in a transitional place. Jesus is about to leave, and Pentecost is about to occur, but yet there are forty days between Jesus' resurrection and his ascension, and after that ten more days until Pentecost.

Such a situation might remind us of the beginning of the book of First Kings. The Davidic king is about to leave, and his appointed successor and his regime are being established. Luke introduces the book with a dedication to Theophilus, the same person to whom he had dedicated the third gospel.

As almost all scholars recognise, there is a very close relationship between the book of Acts and the book of Luke. They are two books by the same hand, and beyond that fact they have deep thematic unity and structural relationships. Rebecca DeNova remarks upon their structural similarities.

The baptism of Jesus with water in Luke chapter 3 is paralleled by the community's baptism with the spirit in Acts chapter 2. Jesus' message is rejected in Nazareth in Luke chapter 4, and the community's message is rejected in Jerusalem in Acts chapters 3-5. Herod Antipas intends to kill Jesus in Luke chapter 13, while Herod Agrippa attempts to kill Peter in Acts chapter 12. Luke chapters 14-18 contains the gospel to the outcasts, and Acts chapters 13-20 contains a gospel that includes Gentiles.

Chapters 9-19 of the gospel contain Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, and Acts chapters 19-21 contains Paul's journey to Jerusalem. Both Jesus and Paul suffer a passion and four trials, Luke chapters 20-23 and Acts chapters 21-26 respectively. The death of Jesus in Luke chapter 23 is paralleled in Acts chapter 27 with Paul's death at sea.

In Luke chapter 24 Jesus is resurrected, and Paul is resurrected in Acts chapter 28. Beyond this we should also note similarities in the emphasis upon the temple at the beginning of the story, the emphasis upon the spirit, and then also themes of birth. The first volume was about all that Jesus began to do and teach.

Many have seen in this statement a suggestion of the fact that this following volume, the volume of Acts, concerns Jesus' continued work, that Jesus is working through his spirit in the ministry of the disciples that he has chosen. We might see similarities between this and the ministries of Elijah and Elisha, where Elisha is the one who completes the unfinished ministry of Elijah, and as in the stories of Elijah and Elisha there will be an ascension followed by a Pentecost, a gift of the spirit, here and in the succeeding chapter. Before Jesus is taken up he gives commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.

He gives them directions for what they ought to do. The apostles are his chosen messengers, they have been set apart as his special emissaries, the ones who represent him in a very particular way. They will be the foundation of the church, with Jesus himself being the chief cornerstone.

Their role is that of communicating his instructions and directives and also bearing witness to what he has done, bearing witness most of all to the resurrection. And for that end he presented himself alive to them after his death and resurrection on multiple occasions and with many proofs. We have appearances to single individuals, we have appearances to a couple of people on the road to Emmaus, we have sustained lengthy appearances and short appearances.

We have appearances in Galilee next to the sea and we have appearances in Jerusalem, we have appearances to men, we have appearances to women, we have at least one appearance to over 500 people at a single time, as Paul notes in 1 Corinthians chapter 15. If the apostle Thomas accepted Jesus' invitation in the book of John, then the apostles touched Jesus' very wounds that proved that it was he who had come back from the dead. Jesus walks with them, he talks with them, he cooks for them, he eats with them.

They see him indoors, they see him outdoors. They see him in daylight, they see him at night. He is seen by members of his family and by some of his closest acquaintances and then also by others that had slightly less familiarity with him.

The sheer range of resurrection appearances and the many ways in which Jesus

demonstrates that it is indeed he who has come back from the dead all serve to ground the faith of the disciples and secure their witness to the resurrection. He appears to them over a 40 day period. When we think of a 40 day period we might think of certain parts of the flood narrative or we might think of the story of Moses going up Mount Sinai or Elijah going to Mount Horeb or we might think of the time that Israel spent in the wilderness for 40 years.

Jesus had spent 40 days in the wilderness at the beginning of the book of Luke. But I think there's a different 40 day period that relates more directly to this which is the 40 days after the birth of Jesus and before his presentation in the temple. According to the law of Leviticus chapter 12, after the birth of a male child, a woman would bring a sacrifice of a lamb for a burnt offering and a pigeon or turtle dove as a sin offering to the tabernacle or the temple.

Within Luke's gospel we see a number of symmetries between the beginning of Jesus' life and his death. Jesus is born with a Mary and Joseph. After his death there are a number of Marys and also a Joseph of Arimathea.

Jesus is wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. Jesus is wrapped in linen garments and laid in a tomb. When Jesus rises he will be the first born from the dead.

This is a new birth event and here I think we see an extension of that parallel. Luke is the only one of the gospels to record the events of the presentation in the temple and there is a lot of emphasis upon the work of the spirit. There is a prophetic declaration by a man called Simeon.

There is a woman called Anna who has been constantly praying in the temple. And here I think we see parallels. Jesus, the first born son from the womb of the grave, is going to go into the heavenly temple and his mother and his disciples will go to the earthly temple and continue in prayer.

Perhaps we are even to associate Christ with the ascending sacrifice of the burnt offering of the Lamb and to associate the spirit that descends on the day of Pentecost with the dove of the sin offering that applies his blood to us. Beyond giving them directives for their future mission and giving them many manifestations and proofs that he was indeed raised from the dead and not just some appearance but a living body, Jesus also gave his disciples much teaching concerning the kingdom of God. While he had taught them extensively within the gospels, particularly in the form of parables concerning the kingdom of God, now they are prepared to hear much more.

They have seen the resurrected Christ, they have some idea of what the cross meant and now they are prepared to hear about the next stage, the mission that they will undertake and what role that will have to play in God's purpose. It might seem strange after all the events of the death and resurrection that Christ is leaving the scene.

However, to think this would be to miss the significance of the ascension.

Patrick Schreiner in his book *The Ascension of Christ* observes the way that the ascension is the culmination and completion of Jesus' ministry in each of its key aspects, its priestly aspect, its kingly aspect and its prophetic aspect. In the priestly aspect of Christ's work, he observes that while Christ sacrificed himself and offered his blood on earth, he interceded for his people on earth and gave them his peace and blessing. In heaven, he presents his blood, opening up the way for his people to enter into the heavenly sanctuary.

In heaven, he constantly intercedes for us. And from heaven he bestows his spirit which blesses his people and gives them peace and confidence to draw near to God. All of these points are central in the book of Hebrews.

He discusses the kingly aspect too. On earth, Jesus is designated as king, he conquers the forces of darkness and he lays the foundation for his church. But at his ascension, he is installed as king, he is enthroned over all spiritual beings and he becomes the head of the church.

Finally, as the ascended prophet, Jesus was filled with the spirit while on earth, but as he's ascended, he pours out his spirit and he empowers many witnesses to go forth. Jesus, on earth, was the one who spoke the word of God, but after his ascension, he continues to declare his word of his gospel to the world through his messengers, through his apostles that he has appointed by the spirit. Again, as a prophet, Jesus performs signs and wonders, but then as he becomes the head of the church as he ascends into heaven, he now performs signs and wonders through his bride, the church.

The ascension then is not a strange epilogue to the story of Christ. It's the completion of the story, the point where it reaches its intended goal. This fact is borne out by studying the New Testament epistles, where again and again we see references to the ascension and its meaning and its significance.

Although he had appeared to them after his resurrection in Galilee, on a mountain where he had delivered the Great Commission and next to the Sea of Tiberias or Galilee where they were fishing, he now instructs them to wait in Jerusalem until they receive the promise of the Father, the Holy Spirit. The gift of the Spirit had already been foretold, not least in the ministry of John the Baptist, who baptized with water but spoke about the one who had baptized with the Holy Spirit, the one who was his successor. John the Baptist had spoken about the baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire, and yet none of these things seemed to occur in the ministry of Christ on earth.

It was not until after his ascension that those things could take place. One key question rises in the minds of the apostles at this time though. Is this the time when the Lord will restore the Kingdom to Israel? This was something that was long anticipated, mentioned

throughout the works of the prophets, and now they're wondering is it going to take place? Jesus does not deny that such an event is going to take place.

Israel is going to have the Kingdom restored to it. However, it is not for them to know the times or the seasons. It will happen in the Father's good time.

Much of the book of Acts that follows will be wrestling with this question. How is Israel going to respond to the message of the Messiah? How is this Kingdom going to play out? Jesus does not answer their questions about the timing of the restoration of the Kingdom. What he gives them is a mission and the power to perform that mission.

They are first going to be anointed with the Holy Spirit and when they have the Holy Spirit upon them, they will be his witnesses, bearing his spirit and his message as they go to Jerusalem first, then all Judea, which probably refers to the entirety of Jewish Palestine, then to Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth. The book of Acts roughly seems to follow this pattern. It begins in the city of Jerusalem and it ends in the city of Rome.

After he says these things to them, he is taken up and a cloud removes him from their sight. How we relate such an event to a modern cosmology has raised many questions. There is no reason why the ascension of Christ, however, need demand the idea that Jesus is physically located above us.

The ascension of Christ is not just the ascension to a physically higher location. It is an ascension to a spiritually higher realm. It is perceived in our realm as a physical ascension into the sky, but the ascension is also a passing into a greater realm, a movement into heaven and God's special presence.

A similar event, of course, is seen in 2 Kings 2, where Elijah is caught up in the whirlwind. Again, we might think of this as a cloud. We've seen clouds earlier in the work of Luke, both in the event of the transfiguration and also in the Olivet Discourse as Jesus speaks about coming on the cloud.

That, of course, looks back to the book of Daniel, chapter 7, verses 13 to 14. I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days, and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him.

His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. Jesus coming on the cloud is the Son of Man ascending to God's very presence, entering into his rule. Gazing into heaven, they see him taken from them.

We should probably recognise some visionary aspect to what they're seeing here. It

might be similar to the event of Jesus' baptism, as the Spirit descends upon him in the form of a dove, and the heavens are opened. That is seen by Christ, and it's seen by John the Baptist, but there is no reason to believe that it was seen by anyone else present.

The same thing seems to be true of the ascension of Elijah. Elijah says if Elisha sees him ascend, he will have the double portion of his spirit. As the ascension is not just a physical ascension, but is a spiritual transition or translation between realms, it is not surprising that it should be seen only by those whose eyes are spiritually opened, to perceive not just regular terrestrial phenomena, but also spiritual ones.

As they are gazing into heaven, two men appear in white robes. These might remind us of the angels at the time of the resurrection. The two men in dazzling apparel who appear to the women, and instruct them not to look for the living among the dead.

As the two men instruct the women there, the two men instruct the apostles here, giving them a further sense of how this fits into the larger picture. Jesus was taken up from them into heaven, and he's going to return in the same way as they saw him go up. What this return will involve is not entirely clear.

Perhaps our minds might be drawn to Zechariah chapter 14 verse 4. After the ascension, the twelve apostles return to Jerusalem. The ascension occurred on the Mount of Olives. In the final week of Jesus' life, the Mount of Olives and the Temple Mount are set over against each other.

This quite possibly was in the light of that prophecy from Zechariah. It seems appropriate that the Lord ascended from the Mount of Olives, and now they will return to Jerusalem, which will be the staging ground for the first phase of the mission that they have to undertake. Entering Jerusalem again, they go to an upper room where they had been staying.

They are probably not living there, certainly not the full number of them, but they are based there as they spend their time in prayer and conversation in preparation for the day of Pentecost. A room that would have accommodated 120 people would have been uncommonly large within the city of Jerusalem. Here, in the ten days, the deep breath before the Spirit descends upon them and plunges them into their mission, the apostles are listed for us once again.

After the apostasy and the betrayal of Judas, the twelve are only eleven. They will have to restore their full number in the verses that follow. Here they are listed in a very similar order to that which we find elsewhere in the Gospels.

Peter begins the list as usual, and is succeeded by the other two of the core three disciples, James and John. Andrew, Peter's brother, heads up the remaining eight. In Luke chapter 6, verses 12 to 16, he had been listed second before James and John, and

alongside his brother Peter.

However, now that Peter, James and John have become a special group in their own right, he will take up the fourth position. The apostles are unified in the act of continued prayer, in which they are joined by the women and marry the mother of Jesus. The women here are probably not just their wives, but are probably the core women among the disciples of Christ who had followed him from the beginning.

Luke had mentioned these prominent women in Luke chapter 8, verses 1 to 3. Among these women were found the first witnesses to the resurrection. The presence of Mary, the mother of Jesus at this point, is also noteworthy. Mary had experienced her own sort of Pentecost back in Luke chapter 1, as the Holy Spirit came upon her and the power of the Most High overshadowed her, as Christ was conceived in her womb.

She will be personally present for this second great Pentecost also. And while Jesus' brothers had doubted his mission earlier on in the Gospels, here they are present with the disciples. In 1 Corinthians chapter 15, verse 7, we read that Jesus appeared to James, presumably his brother and seemingly alone.

The scene is slowly being set for the events of chapter 2, as the Spirit will descend upon the church, fulfilling the purpose of the ascension. A question to consider, how did the post-resurrection appearances of Christ differ from other sorts of miraculous appearances? How did they differ from the post-ascension appearances of Christ, to figures such as Stephen in chapter 7 and Saul on the road to Damascus?