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Matthew 28:16 - 28:18



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg discusses Matthew 28:16-18, where Jesus commands his disciples to go into the world and preach the gospel to every creature. The disciples worshipped Jesus but also had doubts, highlighting the humanity of the disciples. Gregg explains how the word "authority" means "right to rule" and Jesus asserts that all authority has been given to him in heaven and earth, emphasizing Jesus' power and sovereignty. Gregg also notes that although the Gospel writers do not mention the occasion where 500 people witnessed the resurrection of Christ, Paul references it in 1 Corinthians 15:6.

Transcript

We're turning now to Matthew chapter 28, and there's not much left of Matthew for us to cover. We've done 195 sessions so far and we have only a little bit to cover before we finish up this great book, the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus, of course, earlier in this chapter rose from the dead and made some appearances to some women and to others and we find here one of the great appearances of Christ.

It's not entirely clear when this took place chronologically related to other appearances. It's the last appearance mentioned by Matthew, but it's not necessarily the last appearance of Christ chronologically because there are other appearances of the resurrected Christ recorded in other Gospels and even in the book of Acts that seem to have come after this. We cannot tell exactly how many days after the resurrection this particular story appertains to, but we know that sometime within the 40 days between the resurrection and the ascension this particular account applies.

It says in verse 16, Matthew 28, 16, And when they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted. Then Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you.

And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen. And with these words the Gospel of Matthew closes.

This account is often referred to as the Great Commission. Christians who do not read the Gospels carefully enough may think that this is the same commission only with different detail given, of which we read in Mark chapter 16, which actually is differently worded and was given on a different occasion. In Mark 16, 14 it says, Afterward he appeared to the eleven as they sat at the table, and he rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen him after he had risen.

And he said to them, Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved, but he who does not believe will be condemned. Now we call that the Great Commission also.

Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. Now there is a different setting here, however. In Mark chapter 16, Jesus uttered these words as the eleven disciples were seated at the table, probably in the upper room, and probably later the day, the very day of the resurrection.

The likelihood is great that this command in Mark 16 was given in Jerusalem, which is where Jesus and the disciples were on the day that he rose from the dead. Whereas in Matthew we read that the setting was on a mountain in Galilee. Now, in case you're not familiar, Galilee is located at the other end of the country from Jerusalem, and therefore this would be a different occasion, and as you can see there are different words uttered.

Now there's yet another Great Commission, or another place where we read of what we might call the Great Commission, in Acts chapter 1. And this is yet a different occasion than either of the other two. In Acts chapter 1, it says in verse 4, being assembled together with them, he commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which he said, you have heard from me. For John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.

Therefore, when they had come together, they asked him, saying, Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel? And he said to them, it is not for you to know the times or seasons which the Father has put in his own authority, but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be witnesses to me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. Now notice, he says you'll be witnesses to me when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you'll be witnesses to the ends of the earth. So we have three passages, actually there's also one in Luke, which is a little different, but we have these various passages where Jesus commissioned the disciples to go and preach and reach the world, all nations, every creature, and so forth.

Now the commission is not worded exactly the same in each case. In Acts, he says, you'll be my witnesses. In Mark, he says, preach the gospel.

In Matthew, he says, make disciples. All of these are part of the commission that Jesus gave to the church, but these three passages actually apply to three different situations, three different places, and as far as the exact chronology, it's not always clear, but it would appear that the Great Commission passage in Mark probably applies to the very first day, the first time Jesus appeared to the disciples on the day of the resurrection. The Great Commission in Acts applies to the last day that Jesus was with his disciples, because immediately after he spoke these words, we read that he ascended into heaven.

Somewhere between those two, we have the event that we read of here in Matthew. Now, what is the event? Where was it? Who was he with? And what was the nature of his commission? Well, let's read it. It says, Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them.

And when they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted. Now, who doubted? We have the eleven disciples. They're the only people mentioned here.

The eleven disciples went away to Galilee, but some doubted? Some of the eleven? This is difficult to fathom, because Jesus had appeared on the day of his resurrection to all of them except for Thomas, and we know that Thomas had expressed some doubt, but eight days later, Jesus appeared to Thomas as well, and Thomas ceased to doubt, and therefore it would seem that nobody was doubting anymore, at least not among the eleven. So it's possible that the group that we read of here was actually larger than just the eleven. It mentions that the eleven went to this mountain to meet with Jesus.

It does not say that they were the only ones there. I think we would do well to imagine, or to deduce, that the disciples, the eleven, who were the leaders of the group, met with a much larger group of persons who were believers on this mountain Galilee, and it is my impression that it was probably the occasion of which Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians 15.6. There, Paul tells us that there was an occasion after the resurrection where Christ appeared to more than 500 people at one time. Now, Paul is the only person who mentions that number of persons seeing Jesus after his resurrection.

We do not have any reference in the Gospels to that number of people anywhere seeing Jesus. Now, that doesn't mean that Paul is less reliable than the Gospels. If anything, he is at least as reliable as the Gospels, because his account is earliest.

Before any of the Gospels were written, Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, and therefore, in 1 Corinthians 15, where we have a list of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances, we have actually the earliest list in all the recorded Scripture. The Gospels which were written later represent later lists of appearances, although, of course, all of them are equally true. It's just that some were earlier than others.

Now, by the time the Gospels were written, although there had been an occasion where

Jesus appeared to over 500 people, the Gospel writers did not mention those people. But that does not mean that the Gospel writers do not mention that occasion. It's possible that this is that occasion, when Jesus met with his disciples on a mountain in Galilee.

Now, my reason for thinking so is this. Jesus, most of the appearances of Jesus after his resurrection that are recorded, occurred in Judea, not in Galilee. And yet it was in Galilee where Jesus had had a great following through most of his early ministry.

He spent at least a year, if not longer, ministering in Galilee, where most of his miracles were done, and where great multitudes had followed him. There were a great number of people indebted to him for having healed them, cast demons out of them, even raised them from the dead. And therefore, it is likely that you would find in Galilee at this time a larger number of people than in Judea who were eager to follow Jesus still, or at least were loyal to him, or felt indebted to him.

And this is probably where 500 or more gathered in Galilee. Now, this was an appointed mountain. A lot of times when Jesus appeared to the disciples after his resurrection, he appeared unexpectedly.

When they were in the upper room, they did not expect him, and yet he appeared. When they were by the seaside fishing in John chapter 21, they did not expect him, but he appeared. In fact, almost all the times when Jesus appeared, it was unexpected and unannounced.

However, on this occasion, this was an appointment that Jesus had made to meet with his disciples, because it says in verse 16, they went away to Galilee to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them. Now, remember earlier on the day of the resurrection, when the angel appeared to the women, the angel said to them, indeed he has risen, he's going before you into Galilee. There you will see him.

Behold, I have told you. And then a little later, those same women met Jesus on the road, and he said to them, go tell my brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see me. Now, those brethren that they were to tell, I believe, did not simply refer to the eleven disciples, because the eleven disciples did not have to go to Galilee to meet Jesus.

He later appeared to them that same day in Judea. So this commission to go tell the brethren to meet him in Galilee, that may be a condensation of his command. He may have actually told them the specific time and place to wait for him there, or perhaps just gather there as quickly as possible, and when he saw that they were there, he'd appear to them.

In any case, this was an appointed appearance, and it's the only one of which we know in the New Testament, after Jesus rose from the dead. It would appear that Jesus spent forty days appearing and disappearing among the disciples, and not really, most of the

time, not letting them know when he was going to appear or when he was going to disappear. But here we have the only pre-arranged, appointed meeting of Jesus and the disciples, and my impression would be that the reason for a pre-appointed meeting was only necessary because they had to gather a great crowd there.

You see, when the eleven were together, which was very frequently, Jesus could appear at any time. He wouldn't have to pre-arrange anything. Frequently, he found them together and appeared to them suddenly.

But the only reason there need to be an appointed place and appointed time is if you wanted to get a larger group together, then would likely be found together by chance. And therefore, the five hundred to whom Jesus appeared probably were gathered at this appointed place, and this commission of which we read here, I believe, was probably given to that assembled group. This was not really the part of the country that Jesus ended up in before his ascension, because by the time of his ascension, he had gone back down to Judea and his final meeting with the disciples was on the Mount of Olives, which is just outside Jerusalem in Judea.

So we know that this appearance of which we read in Matthew 28, which occurred on a mountain, was not the same appearance that we read of in Acts chapter 1, which occurred on a mountain also. The final appearance, just before his ascension, took place on the Mount of Olives in Judea. This was some undesignated, that is, undesignated to us, but prearranged by Christ to his disciples, mountain in Galilee.

And it says, when they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted. And that's why I believe, too, this was a larger group than simply the eleven. The eleven had seen him enough times before this to no longer be doubting.

Even doubting Thomas by this time had seen Jesus in Judea in the room and had put his doubts aside. But in a group much larger, especially where some would be looking at Jesus from something of a distance because of the crowd, there might be some whose doubts got the better of them, and that would explain the wording here. So those factors are those that lead me to the conclusion that this was that occasion of which Paul spoke when Jesus appeared to upwards of 500 people.

And therefore it's a very tremendously well-witnessed miracle. Miracles are not known to us from scientific inquiry. Science is not able to investigate miracles because miracles occur only once, and science can only investigate repeated phenomena.

But that doesn't mean that miracles are not true. Just like any other historical event, it's not repeatable, and therefore it's not the subject of science to study historical events. A miracle is, if a miracle actually occurs in history, it is just another historical event.

And therefore the knowledge of it comes down to us from witnesses, just like any other

historical event. On that basis, we'd have to say that the resurrection of Jesus is one of the best attested miracles, one of the best attested historical events in history, because we have four written witnesses of it, and we are assured by Paul that there were 500 who witnessed the resurrected Christ at one time. And Paul goes to Pains to point out, he says, of whom most of them are still living, though he says some have died.

In other words, at the time Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, most of those 500 were still around, and his mention of that fact is no doubt calculated to communicate the fact that if you have any doubts, there is still the better part of 500 people living today who saw him, and you might consult them if you wish, though a few, he says, have died since then. Well, this, I think, is that occasion. And on that occasion, we see Jesus speaking to them.

He says, Then Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you. And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

And then the word Amen is not likely to be the closing of Jesus' statement, but rather the closing of the book of Matthew. Matthew adds his Amen, as if to say, that's right, that is what Jesus told us to do, and that is what we are doing. Now, I'd like to talk about the content of this commission, some, and the time that we have remaining in this broadcast will only allow for us to scratch the surface.

We'll have to take at least one other broadcast to talk about many of the things in this great commission, but it is so important. It is very full, and so we will look at at least part of it now and part of it next time. When Jesus came to them and said, All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth, He was making a very important statement to the disciples, to the Christian, because the word authority means the right to rule.

Now, if a man has authority, that means he has the right to rule. He's the king, he's the boss, he's the ruler, and that's what authority suggests. A father has authority over his children in his home, and that simply means he has the right to rule.

Now, to say that somebody has authority is not quite the same thing as saying that he is all-powerful. We do not doubt that Jesus is all-powerful and that omnipotence is one of his characteristics, but it's not the same concept. To say that I've been given all authority is not saying quite the same thing as saying I've been given all power.

The King James Version renders this statement, All power has been given to me in heaven and on earth. However, the word power is not a fortunate translation. The word in the Greek here is *exousia*, which is a word that literally means authority, whereas *dunamis* would have been a more appropriate Greek word if the word were power.

So Jesus is not saying here that he's been given all power but all authority. Now, Jesus has, of course, both power and authority, but just so we'll understand the nature of what he's claiming here, he's not talking about his power but about his authority, and authority means the right to rule. A father who is paralyzed from the neck down and is an invalid in a wheelchair has authority over his children.

I know a man who is suffering from Lou Gehrig's disease and he's lost all control of his hands. He cannot use them at all. They just dangle at his sides, and yet he has ten children and some of them are teenage sons, and there are times when he's frustrated because he doesn't have the power to train his sons, to make them obedient.

He doesn't have the power to discipline them because his arms are totally impotent and his wife is small enough that she cannot really control physically their teenage sons, and it's a great frustration to him. But even though this man does not have the power to enforce his will over his sons, he does have authority over them, and that means he has the right to rule them. He is still their father.

He may not be able to enforce his authority, but he has that authority given by God, and that's important for us to recognize. Jesus, of course, has both power and authority, but when he speaks of his authority, he's talking about his right to rule, and the reason I emphasize this is simply this. The man I mentioned who has no use of his hands, he cannot make his children obey him, but if they do not obey him, they are not within their rights.

We often think that we have the right to do whatever we can get away with doing, and his sons may get away with disobedience, but they have no right to disobey because he has authority. Now, if he had no authority over them, then he would have no claim upon their obedience. That's what authority is, is a claim upon obedience, and while it is true that he can give a command to his sons, but they may disobey and he may not be able to stop them, yet their disobedience is wrong because they are violating his authority, his right to be obeyed.

Now, how does this apply to Jesus? What Jesus is saying to us is that he has been given a position by his father of absolute authority over all of things in heaven and earth. That means there's nothing in heaven and earth that is not under his domain, under his rightful rule. Jesus does not powerfully enforce his rule all the time.

There are people who resist him to their own hurt. There are people who try to cast his bonds off of them. There are people who curse his name and refuse to give him his way in their life, but that doesn't change the fact that he has the right to rule, that he's their authority.

It simply means that they accrue guilt and blame every time they do not submit to his authority. Now, in his case, it is not that he has no power to enforce his wishes. Christ

has all power, and eventually he will come and he will say, okay, enough nonsense, and he will bring all nations into submission to him, and that being so, his authority will be enforced.

At this point, however, he does not universally enforce his right to rule. He possesses it, however, and because he possesses a right to rule, you and I are under obligation to submit to him, to obey him, to do what he says, which is why Jesus said, after he said, all authority is given unto me, he says that people should be disciplined and they should be taught to observe all things that he has commanded. Why? Well, because he's the king.

He is the one in charge. He's the one in authority, and whether he enforces his wishes by force at the moment or does not, he still is to be obeyed, and those who do not obey Christ are not some kind of bold rebels living independently of Christ's authority. They are simply violators of his authority and will someday stand at his judgment seat where his authority will be enforced and all who have rebelled against him will be punished.

So teaches Christ, so teach the Scriptures generally. And so this statement by Jesus that all authority in heaven and earth has been given to him is a very key statement for understanding the claim that Christ has now over all. His Father has put him at his right hand and given him a name that is above every name, above all dominion, power, and authority, and every name that is named, and you and I have an obligation to submit to that authority and live under his lordship, to live under his rule, and to do so voluntarily, because if we do not do so voluntarily there will be consequences to pay, and eventually, voluntarily or not, every knee shall bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.