

Heavenly Living
Acts 1:1-11, Colossians 3:1-17

Well friends, now that Peter Jackson's latest and final movie in the Hobbit trilogy has left the theatres and been released on video-on-demand services, it marks the end of an epic fantasy dynasty that started back in early 2000's, which has seen a total of six feature length films been produced about the stories and characters of Middle Earth created by author J.R.R. Tolkien.

Some of you may know that it is a habit of mine to watch all three extended editions of the Lord of the Rings movies back-to-back over New Years, and now when I'm able to get my hands on the extended versions of all three Hobbit movies I will be able to watch all six of these movies back-to-back!

That will be almost 18 glorious uninterrupted hours of elves, hobbits, dwarves, wizards and awesome sword fighting and battle scenes!

Now, whether you are into fantasy as much as I am or not, I'm pretty certain that you have become somewhat familiar with this story of the Hobbit and the Lord of the Rings as the movies have been in the theatres over the past 15 years.

You might have become familiar that there is Wizard named Gandalf who happens to have a certain fondness for Hobbits, especially ones named Bilbo and Frodo Baggins.

And you probably know there is a magic ring that has to be destroyed in the fires of Mt. Doom and that Frodo ends up going on a quest to destroy the ring and eventually succeeds in doing so.

And so I guess in one sense you could say that you "know" the story of Middle Earth and the Lord of the Rings – but do you really?

Anyone else who is a fantasy buff like me would want to point out that Frodo wasn't actually able to destroy the ring in the end, it was that nasty little creature Gollum who bit off

Frodo's finger and got the ring and carelessly ended up falling into the fires of Mt. Doom that destroyed the ring.

And knowing the story isn't just about the details and fine facts either – it's knowing what the story is about – for example how the ring symbolizes the allure of power and how power seems to be able to corrupt almost anyone.

Now, I'm using our knowledge of certain parts in the epic story of the Lord of the Rings to illustrate how we like to focus on certain parts of another epic story – and then mistakenly think that we know what that story is all about.

It's the epic story of God's plan to restore the covenant of Creation, and while Christmas and Easter are certainly exciting focal points in this story – they are not the entire story.

In fact if you only focused on these two chapters of the story, and skimmed over the rest of it you would come away not really knowing the story. At best you would have a rather distorted and incomplete view of the story, and in the worst

case scenario you would completely misunderstand what Christmas and Easter were actually about because you have no idea of the context they take place in.

So - that's why our current series is called "Jesus is more than Christmas and Easter" and so far we've looked at what Palm Sunday, Good Friday have to contribute to this epic story...

...and now that we've celebrated the Easter Resurrection we are going to continue looking at the other essential chapters in this story such as the Ascension, Pentecost and Jesus' 2nd coming.

And I've explained before that the significance of Christ's Ascension is like the significance of the ceremony by which a president elect actually becomes the president.

Whoever wins the next U.S. Presidential election does not automatically become President on the night they count all the votes – they may have won the election but they do not

have the powers or the capacity or hold the office of the President until they are installed and sworn in.

It works the same way with Jesus' resurrection friends.

Even though it's important evidence that Jesus' sacrificial payment for our covenant violations was sufficient and the power of death has been broken – resurrection without the ascension is like winning the election but never being installed into power.

Now I don't know how you've typically viewed Christ's ascension – but for me it was always sort of a bitter sweet ending to the story of Jesus, and left me feeling kind of sad – the way I always did after I finished reading one of the Narnia stories when the four Pevensie children had to return to our world after finishing one of their fantastic adventures in Narnia.

There's this anticlimactic feeling to it when you read about it in the book of Acts – after the emotionally intense events of

Good Friday and rollercoaster ride upon receiving the news about the resurrection things sort of just taper off...

Jesus appears to his disciples to convince them he is truly alive and does some more teaching about the Kingdom of God with them, and then one afternoon while they are out for some lunch Jesus just ascends up in to heaven – and the disciples are left staring up at the sky.

The only razzle-dazzle in this whole event is that they suddenly notice there are two men nearby, dressed in white, who tell them that Christ will return the same way they saw him leave.

And that's it – the story of Jesus time on earth is finished... and we're sort of sad that he had to go away so soon after He just came back from the dead...

But friends, remember that we don't vote for a gov't simply because we like them as people, but because of what they have promised to do once they are in power – and we expect them to deliver on their promises.

So to Jesus, as the Messiah made great promises for us with his payment of our debt and overcoming death – and we need to realize that if He does not ascend into Heaven there is no way that He can make good on those promises to us!

So instead of seeing this as anti-climactic, we ought to be shivering with excitement and anticipation as we read about Jesus ascension because it means He is coming into His power, He is being crowned as our Heavenly King and will be fulfilling His promises to us!

Jesus himself said as much to the disciples earlier on.

John 14:28 -29 “You heard me say, ‘I am going away and I am coming back to you.’ If you loved me, you would be glad that I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. I have told you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe.”

And more importantly John 16:7 *“But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the*

Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.”

Of course this is Jesus’ promise to pour out the Holy Spirit upon us in order to bring about all the renewal and redemption and transformation that He had accomplished and we are going to celebrate that Pentecost event next week Sunday.

And there are additional benefits available to us as well, now that Jesus is physically present in Heaven, and that is what the Apostle Paul is trying to help the Colossian Christians understand in the scripture passage that we read from the 3rd chapter of his letter to them.

So a bit of background on the Colossian church – it was a small church, most likely started by Epaphras, who became a Christian while Paul was ministering in nearby Ephesus.

And while things were generally going well for this small group of believers in Colossae, they were starting to encounter some

Jewish teachers who were arguing that these gentile Christians needed to observe some of their rules about diet, observing special religious days, and be circumcised so they might not fall back into the immorality of their pagan past.

But Pastor Epaphras discerned that this was false teaching about the Mosaic law and its use, and that it would mislead his people to put their trust in something other than Jesus Christ, and he knew that was a significant threat to his congregation.

So he sought help - and he travelled over 1000 miles to Rome, where the Apostle Paul was in prison - in order to have Paul write a response to the congregation and deal with this false teaching.

And friends, we still face the same sort of danger today in that we are willing to consider and entertain things other than Jesus Christ as the means by which we can live good and moral lives - because we want to avoid the dangers of falling into immorality.

And it may very well that we are tempted to listen to those go back and identify the Mosaic law, or certain parts of it to use as rules that we should obey in order to keep ourselves from sinning in order to make ourselves acceptable to God.

That's why I was so adamant when we covered the Covenant of Law that we must understand the Law as the means by which we show our gratitude to God for salvation – not as rules, which we can obey to become sin free...

Or maybe we are tempted to listen to those who up their own rules, such as Christians don't drink, don't smoke and don't swear, or listen to rock'n'roll or gansta rap, or watch R-rated movies, or read books like Fifty Shades of Grey – because these things are full of immorality and engaging with them would most likely drag us back into immorality, and we don't want that.

And we say – *“you know that kind of makes sense... if we follow those rules then we can avoid becoming immoral people.”*

And we can take this a step further as well friends.

Not only can rules appeal to us because we they help us avoid the consequences of immorality– like how misuse of drugs and alcohol can lead to addiction, impaired judgement and all sorts of bad decisions and tragedy; and promiscuous behavior puts you at risk of catching an STD or an unwanted pregnancy or just all sorts of emotional dysfunction... but by following rules and disciplines we can also receive the benefits of good living!

And we all want to live the good life don't we?

So we will eagerly observe and follow special rules about diet, exercise and health in the hopes that we and our families will be happy and healthy and live long and prosper.

And what makes this so dangerous to our faith in Christ friends is that it is creationally true – there is wisdom and benefit in avoiding immorality and living morally – that's how God created the world to work.

But these benefits can keep us from recognizing that the Law or rules are supposed to function as the means of demonstrating our gratitude, and especially that their other function is to reveal our sinful nature to us and make us aware of it and prepare us to receive God's solution for it – Jesus Christ.

So if we see the Law as rules to be obeyed in order to be good people and experience the benefits of moral living, instead of a means of showing gratitude and coming to understand our true sinfulness, then inevitably we will end up trusting in our own abilities, our own self-righteousness instead of in Jesus Christ - or we will despair and come to believe that we can never do enough good to please God.

And that was the danger that Pastor Epaphras knew his congregation faced from these false teachers.

Now fortunately the Apostle Paul knew exactly how to counteract this false teaching and there is much good advice

and counsel in his letter to the Colossian church with regards to this.

But of particular interest to us on Ascension Sunday is how Paul says they can rely on Christ's physical presence in heaven to combat immorality instead of legalism.

Look at chapter 3:1-2 where Paul says *"Since, then, you have 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."*

In other words since Christ took on our human nature and redeemed it and ascended into heaven as a human being – that is the source of our life and all our blessings.

To set our hearts on this is to acknowledge it as the source of our life – as Proverbs 4:23 says "above all else guard your heart for it is the wellspring of life"

If we set our hearts on this it means that we are depending upon Christ having taken our human nature to heaven back into the presence of its original source of life and that restored connection between God and humanity will give us *everlasting* life – through the work of the Holy Spirit that Christ sent, not on our obedience to rules.

So when Paul says *"set your minds on things above"* He wants the Colossians and us to shape our thinking and how we respond to our own sinful nature on the fact that Jesus' ascension to the right hand of God means that our humanity is reconnected to the source of its life!

Not only that – but Paul wants the Colossian and us to know that the finished product of who what our human nature will become is sitting there in Jesus Christ – waiting to be revealed upon His return.

Because the truth is friends – in those moments of brutal honesty - we know there is so much about who we are that we would want to change about ourselves...

From how much we are overweight or underweight, and how we can become sick, to those choices that we make which are unhealthy but we do them anyways, to the ways in which we hurt others – accidentally or intentionally, to those habits which we feel we have no control over and we wish we didn't want to do them anymore, to the fact that we are all getting older and our death is always getting a day closer...

But the good news is that all these things that we want would to change about ourselves, and then some more... they are already changed in Christ's humanity in heaven. It's done and completed and finished, and it will be applied to us in its fullness when Jesus Christ returns! Amen!

And friends this truth frees us up, and Paul knew it would free the Colossians up as well, from the fear that we are basically stuck with being who we are, and that this is as good as it gets... and the way the enemy tries to play on that fear by accusing us that God won't accept us.

With the knowledge that we are already accepted into heaven through Christ's humanity, and that we have been made whole, and healthy, and completely faithful to God and full of joy in Jesus Christ we cannot be enslaved to rules and routines and disciplines that try to offer us ways of changing ourselves and promising us a better quality of life – and the enemy has no grounds to lie to us that we are not accepted!

Praise God for the Ascension! AMEN!

But friends we live in the time between times yes? As Paul says right now our life is "hidden" in Christ, so how do we live by faith and not by sight until that day when our life will appear with the return of our Lord Jesus?

Well Paul has some good instructions for the Colossians and for us on how we can do that- but he has to frame it all in the language surrounding the fulfilling work of Jesus Christ so that it can't be twisted into its own new set of rules that we would be tempted to use in place of having faith in Christ and in His ascension – such is our sinful nature...

But the good news friends is that the key to keeping all of Paul's exhortations in verses 5-17 from becoming practices that we observe in order to make sure that we are being good Christians, or to achieve living the blessed Christian life, is to make sure that we really understand and believe what he is saying in vs 1-4.

So let me repeat it again friends *"you have 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. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."*

And with your minds set on Christ's ascension friends you can go and re-read this scripture passage, and ask the Holy Spirit to show you which of Paul's exhortations hits home about how you need to live by faith.

Whether it be putting to death – with Christ on the cross – the acts of our sinful nature... or whether it be clothing ourselves

with things like compassion, humility, kindness, patience, gentleness and love... or if it needs to be teaching and admonishing each other through psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit..

So in whatever it is that the Holy Spirit prompts you to do in order to live by faith in Christ and His ascension friends – I can't think of better words to encourage you in living that way than Paul's closing words for this passage we've been looking at - and so I offer them to you.

"And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." (vs. 17)

And that friends – that is heavenly living! Amen