



## TIME OF GRACE®

### *Keep the Faith: GOD Reigns*

#### Study Notes

#### *Summary*

What do you do when life feels out of control? When, despite your best efforts, you realize that you can't control anyone or anything? The answer is found in an often-forgotten story from the end of Jesus' life, a reminder that the perfect Person is always in control.

- **Luke 24:50,51:** <sup>50</sup> When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. <sup>51</sup> While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven.
- **Ephesians 1:20-22:** <sup>20</sup> [God] raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, <sup>21</sup> far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. <sup>22</sup> And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church.
- **Romans 8:34:** Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.
- \_\_\_\_\_ GOD \_\_\_\_\_!
- **Luke 24:52,53:** <sup>52</sup> Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. <sup>53</sup> And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.
- **Hebrews 4:14:** Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.

#### *Points to Ponder*

1. Compared to Jesus' death and resurrection, how often do you think about Jesus' ascension? Why do you think that is?

2. Meditate on Ephesians 1:20-22, listing the powerful truths connected to Jesus' ascension.
  
3. Write down five things that are out of your control that you tend to worry about. Then talk to the ascended Jesus and ask him to give you peace as you remember that he is in total control.

### *Homework for Next Week*

Read Ecclesiastes 3:1-14.

Time of Grace Ministry  
**Keep the Faith: GOD Reigns!**  
Luke 24: 50-53, Ephesians 1:20-22, Romans 8:34, Hebrews 4:14  
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One of the scarier parts of my life is my near complete lack of control.

I'm almost 40 now and I've learned that no matter how much I plan, how often I pray, how hard I try, at the end of the day there is so little that I can control. Like my daughters. My two daughters are so out of control. I don't mean they're bad kids; they're amazing kids. But I've realized that as hard as my wife and I try to train them up in the way they should go, that's out of our control. We can teach them, we can discipline them, we can correct them, we can bring them to the cross of Jesus. We can read them Bible stories, we can model selflessness, we can do a thousand different things but in the end, we just can't control how they behave or exactly what they believe.

And it's true with everything in my life - my relationships and you and the church and my finances and the weather - all of it is outside of my control. And I'm not sure if you've realized this just yet but the same is true for you. It's not a Pastor Mike thing; it's a human thing. Now we can do our best and we can make our plans, we can set our goals, and we can try to achieve them but in the end, all of it is outside of our control.

Maybe I could demonstrate it like this: This little piece of paper is tiny compared to the size of this room; a couple inches by a couple inches. But what happens the closer this piece of paper gets to my eyes? This giant room - I start to lose sight of it. Just a couple of inch rectangle and suddenly, I can't see half of the room or most of it or barely any of it. And the more you think about the things you can't control, the more that happens to you, too. Everything goes dark. You lose sight of the big picture. And in fact, you can lose sight of God.

I wonder if that's happened to you at all recently? With whatever's going on in your life that you're so frustrated with and you want, you wish you could change it, but you can't and the more you fixate on it, the more you just feel flustered and overwhelmed and out of control. You're not sleeping well, you can't help your kids plan for the future; it can be a really difficult time when you have zero control.

But that's why today I want to help you keep the faith. Starting today, and for the next few weeks, I want to help you push away those situations you can't control so that you remember the bigger picture; so you remember the Christian faith. So you don't forget the size and the glory and the power of the God that we worship. That's my goal today; to help you keep the faith. And I need you to pay really close attention to those words. I didn't say that the goal was to help you keep faith as if any kind of faith or whatever belief would work for you. It won't. This is Christianity, not Disney, so just believe. It's not some magic cure. No, I told you that my goal is to help you keep the faith. The specific faith. The faith of the prophets of the Old Testament and

the apostles of the New. The one true historic Christian faith that Jesus Christ gave to us. The faith that says there is a God and that God controls, that God can, that God cares, that God is, that God endures, that God exists. We're going to unpack the bigness of the attributes, the qualities, and the character of God. We're going to try to remind ourselves that whatever is stressing us out, it's so small compared to God because if we can keep that faith, then, fear and worry and anxiety will lose their grip on our hearts.

So today, I want to kick off by telling you a story that many Christians forget. In all the excitement about Jesus' birth and his miracles, his death and his resurrection, this story so often in our Bibles gets overlooked but I hope you don't overlook it. I hope if 'famous Bible stories' was a contest that got medals, I hope you would hang a medal around the neck of this story because it deserves it. So let me start today with a picture. This picture was taken just a little while ago right on the top of Mount of Olives at the Chapel of the Ascension. Historically, dating back almost 1700 years, this is the spot where many people think that Jesus ascended into heaven. But there's something I want you to notice about this picture - nobody else is there. The day I showed up at the Chapel of the Ascension, I looked around waiting for the tourists but nobody was there. It was the middle of the day and even though this spot is just three or four blocks from where all the tour buses line up for the iconic shot of Jerusalem, none of them stopped there. I talked to the guy who was kind of managing the site and he said that I was the eighth human being to stop there that day. And that number was a reminder to me that many Christians move too quickly past the ascension of Jesus. But today, we're not going to do that. Today, we're going to slow down and think deeply about the last day that Jesus spent here on earth. And in the process, we are going to learn that we very, very much have a Savior who is in absolute control.

So if you have a Bible with you or you just want to follow along on the screen, let's go to the very end of Luke's gospel, chapter 24, where we find these words: "When Jesus had led his disciples out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them." So there Jesus was at the spot that I just showed you the picture of; three-quarter mile east of the city of Jerusalem, little village in Bethany, that he knew and loved. And as he gathered with them, he lifted up his hands to bless them. Now, I did some nerdy Bible research this week and I found every time in the entire Bible that the lifting up of hands is mentioned and here's what I learned. That when people lifted up their hands, they were trying to express some connection with God. In the church culture I grew up in, there wasn't a lot of lifting up of hands. There was folding of hands, there was lowering of hands; that was a symbol of our connection with God. But honestly, it's not really biblical. What you find in the Bible is that when hands are lifted up, something is happening with God. People lift up their hands and confess their sins almost like opening their hands, admitting to God what they had done. Or they would lift up their hands when they needed something from God. God, no earthly help is going to work right now; I need divine supernatural help so I stretch out my hands to you. Or sometimes people who lift up their hands in words of praise; that God was not small, he was big and glorious and exalted and magnified and so people lifted up their hands to show this connection with God. And that's what Jesus did with his friends. He extended his hands, he wanted to remind them that there was something happening with God, and he blessed them. He didn't warn them in that conversation, he didn't threaten them, instead he blessed them. He spoke good words about a good God in his last conversation on earth. Literally. My favorite part of the ascension story is the very next

verse. Verse 51: "While Jesus was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven." Just like that, Jesus is taken up into heaven. I'm not sure if he floated like a balloon, if he blasted off like the Mandalorian, but he took off into the sky and they saw him no more. But did you catch that little word? "While." While he was blessing them. In other words, as Jesus went up into the clouds, he was speaking words of blessing. The passage didn't say after he had blessed them he left them. Sometimes that happens in church, right? The pastor lifts up his hands, he speaks this nice blessing, God be with you, God keep you, may his face shine upon you, and then after he's done, he leaves. But that's not what Jesus did. As his hands expressed that connection with God, he started to bless and in the very process, those were the very last words that Peter, James, John, Mary, and the disciples heard from the lips of Jesus. In other words, he didn't leave them with a threat, like a parent who's concerned about their kids: "Don't make me come back down there." Or Peter's right there, you know, Peter who always messed things up. If Jesus wasn't ascending saying, "Peter!" No, instead the last words off the lips of Jesus was a blessing.

And oh, I've got to tell you, I love that so much about the Christian faith; that the last thing we hear from Jesus, the last words he speaks to humanity during this journey here on earth, is a good word. Have you noticed that about our ministry just yet? Have you noticed that about the message of Christianity? That there are hard words, they're convicting words, they're really humbling sermons, devotions, and conversations but at the end for everyone who believes in Jesus, the final word is a blessing. That as you watch at home, there might be times when we have to talk pretty real, where it's going to be blunt, you get Bible slapped, you realize you can't act like that, you've got to stop doing that. But for everyone who trusts in Jesus, that's not the last word. We don't say amen limping with guilt and shame, feeling hopeless like we can't do it, because the last thing our Jesus says to us is a blessing. That there's a God who's for us, a God who is in control of the universe, a God who forgives us, who wipes away our shame. There was death on the cross but then there was resurrection and ascension blessing. I love that. Can you imagine if it was any different? Can you imagine if we gathered as Christians and we talked real about our sins and then said try harder? No, the good news of our faith is that there's always a Jesus who leaves us with a blessing. He lifts up his hands, his pierced hands. He connects us to God and he speaks a good word.

Ah, but that's not all! Jesus speaks this blessing, he ascends to heaven, and then do you know what he does there? It's good news. Check out how the apostle Paul described the ascension of Jesus in Ephesians 1. He said, "God raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked - not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church." Ooh! I love those words because where is Jesus? Well, he's at the right hand of God; that's where he ascended to. Okay, but what does that mean to be at the right hand of God? Well, it simply means that Jesus is in control. Paul said he is far above. Not just above, not a bit above. He is far above everything in this universe - every ruler, power, dominion, authority; every virus, every sickness, every cancerous cell, every broken relationship. All the stuff that freaks us out and we worry about - where is it? Underneath the feet of the ascended Jesus. As the king of the universe, he's not running around from city to city, village to village, like he used to. No, he is above all of it. He sees all of it and he rules all of it - did you catch it? - for the good of his church.

Which means that this thing, this thing you worry about, this thing that overwhelms you, this thing is not face-to-face with King Jesus. It is underneath the feet of our ascended Savior. So if you know Jesus and Jesus knows you, if you praise Jesus and Jesus blesses you, if Jesus is not against you but for you and this is under his feet, why would you have to worry? This might be out of your control but not his. So for all of you who worry out there, let's write down today's big idea. It's this: But God controls. But God controls. That is the faith that we share. But God controls. My God, the God who knows me, the God who lived and died and rose from the dead for me, that God is in absolute control. You can't control the weather but Jesus can. You can't control a virus but Jesus can. We can't control our children but thank God, Jesus can. We can't make good come out of that situation but Jesus can. He has. He did. And he will. So when you feel yourself freaking out, take a deep breath and remember: But God controls.

It makes me think of Tina. At the church where I used to be a pastor, there was a woman who often came with her mother and the woman's name was Tina. I think I've told a couple of you her story. She was a middle-aged woman but because of some cognitive challenges, she thought and communicated like a much younger child. One day in church, Tina sat there as I preached and I was preaching pretty bluntly about the badness of sin; that all of us have sinned and sin is way worse than we think. The wages of sin is death, sin can separate you from eternal life with God. But as Tina listened, she pushed back. You know, I was about to get to the good part; that Jesus died for the badness of our sin so that we could have eternal life through faith in him. But Tina, she didn't want to wait. And so she leaned over with big eyes and she said to her mother in a whisper that was loud enough for most the church to hear, "But mom, Jesus died!" But Jesus died. Like the guilt, the conviction, was getting close to her faith so she pushed it back, she kept the faith, but Jesus died. And friends, you can do the same thing. When life just feels so overwhelming and you're losing sight of the big picture, you pushback and you keep the faith and you remember Jesus died, Jesus rose, and he ascended into heaven for us.

Check out how the apostle Paul puts it in Romans 8. He said, "Christ Jesus who died, more than that who was raised to life, is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us." And if you remember that, well then maybe you could feel like this. Let's jump back to Luke 24 and see how this story ends. Verse 52 says: "Then the disciples worshipped Jesus and returned to Jerusalem with great joy and they stayed continually at the temple praising God." Now that is a crazy section of Scripture because it says here that the disciples returned to Jerusalem. I mean, do you remember how out of control Jerusalem was in those days? We're talking, what, 42 days since Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem. Forty-two days! So guess who's still there? The Romans, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the enemies; the very men who had plotted and planned to murder Jesus Christ were right there and now these Christians come back. But you felt their emotion, didn't you? They returned not overwhelmed with fear; they returned with faith. They celebrated and worshipped with great joy. They praised God. Why? Because Jesus was at the right hand of the Father and he was ruling Jerusalem and all things for their good.

And I want you to remember that because I'm about to say amen. And this service will be done and you're going to go back to your own Jerusalem, to situations and people that could be dangerous; things you just can't control no matter how hard you try. You don't know if you're going to get sick or they're going to get sick. You don't know if you're going to get the job, if you're going to have enough. You don't know about graduation or school, your exact grades, the

breakup; you just can't control it. But that doesn't mean you have to be afraid because God controls. Remember not just who Jesus is but where Jesus is and you can push back fear and you can keep the faith.

So let me leave you today with a passage and a puppy. First, the passage. Hebrews 4 talks about the ascension like this: "Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess." Let's hold firmly. Let's remember the faith, this big faith in this big God, Jesus is our high priest, he has ascended to the right hand, so there is no reason for you to be concerned, no reason to feel overwhelmed. Push back that fear, remember the faith, and you're going to be okay.

And if you do, you might end up like Norman the puppy. Two days ago in a virtual devotion group that I'm a part of, we were talking about control; just how hard it is when you're in a world where so much feels like it's out of your control. But one of the women from the group told an amazing story about her puppy. A little chocolate lab named Norman. She told us that Norman loves getting into the car. He jumps up on the backseat; I picture his tongue wagging, his tail whipping back and forth. He loves it when the car starts, he loves sticking his little face right out the window as the wind whips by. But do you know what else she also told us about Norman? He has no clue. He has no clue where they're going. Norman is absolutely out of control. His little paws never touch the gas or the break or the steering well itself. He sits in the backseat having no idea where he's going but there's one thing he does know: He knows the one who's in control. That the one at the wheel is the one who loves him, who feeds him, who cuddles with him, who cleans up his messes. So he doesn't pace back and forth in the backseat; Norman just breathes deep and he enjoys the ride. And you can, too. It's true, you and I are not in control but we know the one who is - our Savior, our King, our God is in control. So push back that fear and keep the faith.

Let's pray.

Jesus, right now, I'm trying to picture you not humbled, not weak, but so glorious that you are far above America and China, above every celebrity, every president. There is nothing that doesn't look tiny in your sight and that includes the things that we're worried about. Help us to remember, Jesus, where you are and who you are and what you're doing. You are interceding for us and you're ruling everything for our good. So for all of us who are more afraid than we should be, for all of us who are worrying when we don't have to be, I pray that you would send the Holy Spirit to open our eyes just to see you and to know you better; to know your power and the depth of your love, to know that you're in control.

I thank you, Jesus, for who you are. I thank you for what you've done and I thank you for the promise you've made. We pray all these things as your forgiven people and we now join to pray that prayer that you yourself taught us:

Our Father, in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread, forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever, Amen.