

# The Savior and the Great Commission

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*Jesus From Tomb to Throne*

By Dr. Sinclair B. Ferguson

**Bible Text:** Matthew 28:16-20  
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Our little series these weeks, I think Neil said there were six parts to it, is about that little thought about period in the ministry of the Lord Jesus between his resurrection and his ascension, and I think we're adding on one extra talk at the end about the significance of the day of Pentecost. But the gospels tell us towards the end that there was a period of about six weeks after the resurrection when Jesus visited the disciple band, you remember he did that on the evening of the resurrection Sunday; they were talking together and he appeared in the room and he began to help them to understand the scriptures better. And Luke who records this, tells us that he opened their minds to understand the scriptures and apparently he kept coming back on various occasions and it would have been wonderful to have been there for those six weeks of Bible study with Jesus as he explained the scriptures. Now as we read in Matthew 28 today, we've come to the end point of those weeks and here is the record of, if you think about it, the last words that Jesus spoke to more than one individual at a time. The last words Jesus spoke to more than one individual at a time. He spoke directly from heaven to Saul of Tarsus, didn't he, when Saul said on the Damascus road, flattened into the dust as he was, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." But apart from that and apart from the marvelous vision that John has in the book of Revelation and some of the extraordinary experiences that Paul had, these are essentially Jesus' last words to the church.

16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. 17 And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. 18 And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 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, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

If you belonged to my generation and went to college or, as people in Scotland would say, the university in the 1960s, some of you were up-and-running in your professions in the 1960s but I was a student in the 1960s and I think it was probably one of the differences between college life in those days and nowadays when certainly college life

in the United Kingdom and particularly in Scotland and education in the United States, there was a great gulf fixed between the professors and the students. For example, we would never have dared to ask a professor a question. If we saw a hand go up in class, we all thought but never said exactly the same thing another visiting American student who doesn't know how we operate here. And I had, you know, Derek Thomas and I would probably be able to tell you, I know he could tell you all kinds of interesting stories about the legendary individuals whom we had as professors. One of my legendary professors when I was a theology student, there were a few when I was studying in the arts faculty, but one of my legendary professors, indeed the senior professor in my own discipline who became my doctoral supervisor and never addressed me by my Christian name until I had a PhD, he always called me Mr., Mr. Ferguson. And he had some lovely idiosyncrasies. He had been honored by the Queen, he had military distinctions, and he wore a monocle; apparently he had one good eye and one not so good eye and he would wear this monocle in his eye, and I have a number of highly entertaining stories I will not detain you with this afternoon about that monocle. But one of his idiosyncrasies was this, we had regular chapel services in the theology faculty and every time this professor preached, he preached on exactly the same text and it became something of a joke, and not only did it become something of a joke but eventually when somebody does that kind of thing, people even in a theology faculty, maybe especially in a theology faculty, begin to lose interest. And so this particular nameless professor's sermons were not quite as well attended as those of the other faculty members because, I guess, people thought it was the same old-same old when he comes to preach. And actually this was the passage he always preached on. He had a little squeaky voice and he would say, "Our text today is Matthew 28:16-20." And since I was hoping for decent grades, I was always there.

About 20 years later, about 20 years later, one day out of the blue it dawned on me why my esteemed professor was doing this. It wasn't because he didn't know anything else in the Bible, it was because he understood, as we thick-heads students apparently had not yet grasped, that these words are actually among the most important and significant words in the whole Bible, and there is a sense in which you could say these words are as important as everything you find between the beginning of Genesis and the end of the book of Malachi. Indeed, they seem to be quite deliberately designed to help us to see that Part 1 of God's story has come to a conclusion and Part 2 of God's story has just begun, and over the years the more I've thought about these verses, the more I've realized how wise, from one point of view, Professor Anonymous was to say to us, "You need to be thinking constantly about these verses because they are absolutely of the essence of understanding what the Christian church is and what the Christian church is for." And I suppose we should have realized that because, for most of us, we want our last words to be hugely significant for the people who are devoted to us and love us so much, and no less obviously is true of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I was thinking this morning, actually we could do the next series on this text and I could wear a monocle in my bad eye and eventually there would be nobody coming to Wednesday lunch because eventually you would get worn down. But it's a hugely important passage and essentially a very well known passage, and perhaps because it is so well known, we tend to just kind of skate over it. We know Matthew 28:18-20, it's the

Great Commission. Now tell me something new. So what I want to do is maybe we could all do this, you could do it in your mind, I want to put my forefinger and my thumb onto a thread that runs through this passage and just pull out that thread a very little, and one of the ways of doing that is just by noting in these words how regularly the word or idea of "all" appears. Did you notice that as we look at these verses? Verse 18, Jesus says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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 that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always," or for all time, "to the end of the age."

Let's try and think about these three "all's today, try and get into the heart of what Jesus is saying here because they're very striking things for Jesus to have said. First of all, he says all authority in heaven and earth has been given to him. Now you might say but surely he is the Son of God and therefore by definition had all authority in heaven and on earth, but Jesus isn't so much thinking of himself here as the eternal Son of God who shares all authority with his heavenly Father, he's thinking about himself as the one who has taken our flesh and borne our sin on the cross and risen from the grave to be our Lord and Master. He's thinking about the way in which he came into this world and took our human nature to do something very special, to get authority back. I said in many ways this is the end of Book 1 of the Bible and the beginning of Book 2 in the Bible because you remember how Book 1 begins, how when God had made everything else, at the apex of his creative powers and purposes, he makes a man and a woman as his image and in his likeness. And you remember what he gives them, he gives them authority. He makes man male and female in his image, after his likeness, and he gives them dominion or authority over everything. That's the reason why when you read in the early chapters of Genesis one of Adam's first tasks is to go around the animals and give them names, and in the Bible, in the Bible culture, the person who names something is able to name that something or that someone because they have this privilege, the authority to do that, and that's a little indication and we see this in the early verses of the Bible, that the animal kingdom actually was underneath the human kingdom, that Adam had authority over everything that God had given to him. Then we notice that Adam lost that authority and everything began to fall into a state of disrepair, and he no longer had authority over the animals. Interestingly, he no longer had authority over the ground. What God had called him to do was to extend his dominion or authority from the garden to the ends of the earth. He said, "I want you to go forth and I want you to fill the whole earth with your authority. Show that you have been called by me to reign and take this little garden that I've given to you and expand it and extend it until the whole world is a garden, and let these animals multiply and these trees multiply, and all of this is to be under your authority." And then presumably at the end, what Adam was expected to do was to get to a place where he was able to say, "It's finished." Just like your little boy or girl or grandchild might do a painting or make something and then you would hear from the next room this cry, "Done it! Done it!" And then they would rush through and show you what they had done, and of course you would say even if you didn't understand the squiggles, you would say, "That is absolutely magnificent."

And that's what God called his children to do. The tragedy of the story is, and that begins near the beginning of Book 1, is that Adam and Eve refused the authority of God, mistrusted the word of God, mistrusted the character of God, believed the lie of the serpent, and everything came tumbling down. They began to squabble with and to blame each other. There was a homicide in their family. The animal kingdom went into a condition of disorder. The ground that Adam had tilled with joy now he would have to work with the sweat of his brow and God said to him, "Adam, I actually made you from next to nothing." Now I'm not talking here about questions of evolution but you and I need to know that we were actually created from the slime because that's what the Bible says. God created man from the slime, the dust of the earth, and God said, "Without fellowship with me, Adam, that's where you're going to end up." That's why at most funeral services you've attended, the words "dust to dust" have been used and do you understand what these words mean? They mean we're made of dust and without dependence and trust in the Lord that Adam was called to exercise, he would return to dust. He would not only lose his authority over the animal kingdom and the earth, and actually although he was meant to exercise it with great grace, he lost authority over his wife, didn't he? Actually because he didn't say to her, "You shouldn't do this, my dear," she lost his respect.

So everything collapsed and so when Jesus says, "Now, disciples, you need to understand all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me," he is really summarizing everything that he came to do. He's telling his disciples that he has actually been obedient to the heavenly Father where Adam was disobedient and we likewise, but he has won the victory over the powers of darkness that ensnared our first parents, that he has offered a sacrifice to the heavenly Father. He came to redeem sinners and to bring them back to God and now that he has done all that, do you remember how he actually said this on the cross? As the Son of the heavenly Father, he cried out, "Father, I've done it!" And now he's saying to his disciples, "Because I have done everything that needs to be done, all authority in heaven and earth, all dominion in the cosmos is mine." That's who he is. It's a magnificent testimony and very simple explanation of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done.

But there's a second "all," isn't there? Not only does Jesus say all authority has been given to him but Jesus says to his disciples, "Now go into all the world and make disciples of all the nations and teach them to observe all the things that I've commanded you, and as you do that, baptize them into the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." Now this is actually a series in itself but focus down on two things here. The first is that Jesus is speaking about an enormous privilege that he is giving to his disciples. They are to go into all the world and they are to make disciples of all nations, and they're going to do that by two things: the first is sharing a privilege with those to whom they speak the gospel, and the second is giving directions to those who believe the gospel.

What's the privilege? The privilege is this: baptize them into the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Now I say this statement is an indication that Book 1 is coming to an end and Book 2 is beginning for this very simple reason: there is nobody on the left-hand side of your Bible who was ever able to answer the question who is God by saying

he is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Nobody in the Old Testament ever says that so this is a real indication that Jesus is teaching us something about the very character and being of God that was never really clear to anybody throughout the thousand years in the left-hand side of your Bible. The highest name they were given for God was Yahweh, wasn't it, what we used to call Jehovah, or in our Bibles the LORD in big capital letters, but by Jesus' time, they'd stopped calling God by that name. It was too holy. That's why actually nobody actually knows, there's not a person in the world that can tell you dogmatically and absolutely this is how that covenant name of God was meant to be pronounced. That's why if you go to different universities and study Hebrew, you'll find the finest Hebrew scholars all pronouncing the divine name with slightly different accents. Now why is that? Because if you know any Orthodox Jews, when they come to that passage in the Old Testament, they will not say Yahweh, they'll say HaShem, the Name, the Name, the Name too holy to be pronounced. But now, says Jesus, from now on here is the way true believers pronounce the name of God: Father and Son and Holy Spirit.

One of the things he's saying to us is this, when you become a Christian, one of the privileges, the kind of fundamental privilege is this, that you've come to know God through Jesus Christ and you're able to speak to God the Father as your heavenly Father, and you're able to address the Lord Jesus, the Son, as your own Savior, and you're able to say to the Holy Spirit, "Holy Spirit, you have been sent to me from the Father and from the Son. Do everything that you desire in me and especially bring me to see the wonder and the glory of the Lord Jesus as my Savior and Lord," and as the New Testament teaches us, "bring me frequently to say, 'O dear heavenly Father.'"

So he's saying when people become Christians, there's a revolution. They are taken out of the name that they have by nature, which Paul tells us is children of wrath like the rest of mankind, and they are brought into this amazing fellowship of love and intimacy and knowledge of God as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. That's an immense privilege but it also comes with immense responsibilities, doesn't it? "Baptize them," he says, "into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit," and then he says, "Teach them to observe everything that I have commanded you." Now that's a beautiful summary for those who enjoy fellowship with God the Trinity. That's a beautiful summary of how we live the Christian life, isn't it? We don't reverse the order. If I do well enough in the first course of trying to be obedient to Jesus, then maybe I'll be lifted up into the upper class group of Christians. No, he says there's only one way around this works, you need to be brought into fellowship with God through the work of Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit, but then here is your responsibility, "Just go and do everything I said." "Wow," you say, "everything he said. Everything he said?" My dear friends, it's not even a small paperback, is it? Everything he said, it's a 100 page paperback and with some footnotes in the Acts of the Apostles and Paul's letters, Peter's letters, John's letters, Hebrews, book of Revelation, James and so on and so forth. But even this, it's a small paperback. It's probably shorter than a medium length novel. Actually you can carry it around in your pocket or in your purse quite easily. It doesn't weigh very much. It's a smaller book than the annual baseball statistics. Actually I wouldn't be surprised that it's about the same length as the rules of golf or of any sport. It's not huge. Here's the strangest thing in the world, I suspect it's a very unusual Christian who has ever actually

heard Jesus say that's the way to live the Christian life but what a thing it would be if many of us in this room this afternoon, we went home, we wrote a note to ourselves before we do our work, texted ourselves, put it on our Facebook page, tweeted it, whatever else, emailed it, or just put a letter in the mail to ourselves, or called somebody and say, "Remind me when I get home that I learned today that the way to live the Christian life is just to do everything Jesus said, and my first step is going to be to discover everything Jesus did say."

That would revolutionize your life. It really would. But do you know something else it would do? It might seem inordinately complicated but it would beautifully simplify your life and your family life, actually it would beautifully simplify your working life because you would know where to go to find out what are the driving principles I need to employ to live for the glory of God. Actually a pretty exciting thing that, isn't it? We could turn that into a traveling seminar and then advertisements on television. But let me put it very simply: if our love were but more simple, we would take him at his word and our lives would be – let me change the hymn – mainly sunshine in the sweetness of the Lord. Do you know my concern for myself just as a semi-normal human being would be this, maybe it's a wee while since I thought to myself, "I really need to refresh myself in everything Jesus said," and then I need to say to self, "Self, do what Jesus says."

Now there's a third "all" here and I'll just take a moment to explain it. Jesus says all authority has been given to him, Jesus says go into all the world and make disciples of all the nations and disciples of those who have had this privilege of knowledge of and fellowship with God dawn on them, and have learned the way to live to God's glory that sets them free from so much of the confusion and the garbage of life, but then there's a third thing he says to them and because he had said this to them, we can assume because of what he said to them, "Now go and tell others about this," that he means it for others and for us, "I'll be with you at all times to the very end." So there is one thing that you do not need to be afraid of if you listen to what Jesus is saying here. You do not need to be afraid that you will be left on your own to live this way to his glory because he has promised.

David Livingstone, do you know the name David Livingstone, great Scottish missionary, 19<sup>th</sup> century explorer? We know so much about Africa because of the great explorations of David Livingstone. He came to these words in his Bible and he wrote in his journal, "These are the words of a gentleman who has never failed to keep his promise." Some of you are South Carolinian gentlemen and you can put your hand on your heart and say, "I have never failed to keep my promise. It's the way I was brought up to live. By God's grace it's the way I have lived." Well, Jesus is a gentleman of the highest honor said a Scotsman so it must be true, but really true because he said it. He will never ever leave you no matter the fix, no matter the problem, no matter the darkness, no matter the opposition. He will never ever leave you as you live in fellowship with him and as day by day you say to him, "Lord Jesus, I want to do absolutely everything that you've taught me." It really is a very simple way to live the Christian life and it makes it glorious beyond words, doesn't it, to live it in the presence of the Lord Jesus.

So let's pray together today that we'll be able to do that.

*Lord, we thank you for your word. We thank you for these famous words so familiar to us. We thank you for this wonder that the oldest and longest standing memories that we have of the teaching of scripture are so often the most important and that they can be refreshed at any time in our Christian lives. So help us, we pray, to be a people who love to explore what our Lord Jesus taught and love to do what our Lord Jesus commanded and love to live within the promise of his constant presence, and we ask this for his name's sake. Amen.*