Has Jesus left us alone?

Text: John 14:16-18

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**Scriptures:** Ezekiel 36:22-27; John 14:1-6; 16-27; Acts 1:6-11

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 68c, 120, 345, 439, 266, 331

**Series:** Heidelberg Catechism (LD18)

**Theme:** The abiding presence of the ascended Christ with His disciples through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

**Proposition:** Jesus has not left us alone!

**Introduction**

Some people say, “I hate goodbyes”. Perhaps you have felt like this sometimes – maybe at a bus station or an airport when someone you love is leaving to go somewhere else. Perhaps at times, if someone is planning to be away for a very long time we might think ‘*I wonder if I will ever see him/her again*’. Then there is the “goodbye” that is said by the bedside of a dying friend; the last farewell in this life.

Remember how the elders in Ephesus felt when the Apostle Paul left them? Luke records the event for us in Acts 20: “*There was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken,* ***that they would not see his face again****. And they accompanied him to the ship*” (v37-38). Have you ever felt abandoned, lost or lonely when someone you have depended upon goes away? This is often the painful experience of widows and widowers. Most of us, whilst we may not have experienced the grief of losing a husband or a wife, have felt lost or lonely at some times in our lives. How about you?

As we come now to focus on the phrase in the Apostles’ Creed “*He ascended into heaven*” and the explanations given in Heidelberg Catechism Lord’s Day 18 about Jesus leaving this earth, think about His twelve disciples. They had known about three years of close fellowship with Jesus during His public ministry. They were with Him 24/7, eating, sleeping, walking, talking, listening, questioning, and learning.

Gospel writer John writes of the occasion just before His death, when Jesus gathered his disciples and washed their feet. We have an expression in English ‘to drop a bombshell’. It means to give ‘a sudden piece of bad or unexpected news’. Jesus ‘dropped a bombshell’ when He said to His disciples “Truly, truly I say to you, that one of you will betray Me” (13:21). After supper, Judas left into the night, Satan having ‘entered into him’ (13:27).

Jesus then spoke tenderly to those remaining: “*Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, 'Where I am going you cannot come.'*” (13:33) Jesus was going to leave them alone. They could not go with Him to where He was going. Brothers and sisters in Christ, has Jesus left us alone? That is the question we seek to answer now as we look closely at our text from John 14:16-18 under three points:

1. Jesus has left this earth
2. The Spirit has come
3. Jesus will return to this earth
4. **Jesus has left this earth**

In that upper room in Jerusalem, where Jesus instituted Lord’s Supper, he was preparing to die, speaking his final words to His disciples and effectively saying “goodbye”. Jesus did die, He was buried, but He rose again and then: *“He presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God”* (Acts 1:3).

Then Christ bodily ascended upwards from the surface of this earth in the sight of his assembled disciples. “*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*” (Acts 1:9). This is reflected in Heidelberg Catechism Lord’s Day 18, answer 46. Jesus physically left this earth in a human body which is located at a particular set of spatial co-ordinates somewhere in this universe[[1]](#endnote-1). Jesus is **not** everywhere physically present as some (Lutherans) have suggested, saying that somehow He is materially there when Lord’s Supper is celebrated “in, with and under” the elements.

At His glorious ascension, Christ was admitted to glory, being now “*seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty*”. There is a human being in the presence of God, a man with ‘our own flesh’. A man of dust, such as we all are. Yet a man who is also unlike us. He is not like the prophet Isaiah who said in vision of God’s awesome presence: “*Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips*” (Isaiah 6:5). Jesus Christ is a man who is perfect, a man who is also God, in the person of the Son.

Because Jesus has departed, ascended to heaven, there are benefits which come to all who having saving faith in Him. Our catechism in Q&A49, brings this out: “First, He pleads our cause in heaven in the presence of his Father”. Jesus is the perfect high priest, as the writer to the Hebrews explains. “*For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners,* ***and exalted above the heavens****. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself”* (Heb 7:26-27). Further to this John writes in his first letter: “*If anyone does sin, we have an* ***advocate*** *with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous*” (1 John 2:1b). If Jesus had not left this earth, we would have no Priest, no Mediator, no Advocate to plead our case before the Throne of God.

As we heard earlier from John 14:1-4, Jesus comforted His disciples as He explained that He was going to prepare a place for them in His Father’s house and that through Him they would follow Him there in the future. Yet the Heidelberg Catechism states that now Jesus is ‘*not absent from us for a moment*’ (A47). How can that be if He has left this earth? The answer is in our text, as we’ll see in our second point:

1. **The Spirit has come**

In John 14, Jesus promised “another Helper”; separate from Himself. This is what He said: ‘*And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you”*’ (John 14:16-18). Jesus promised that another person with a different role would come to His disciples; one who would be with His disciples forever; so that they would never be alone.

The coming of the Holy Spirit had been prophesied in the Old Testament. Through Ezekiel, the Lord promised that He would ‘*put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statues and be careful to obey my rules*’ (Eze 36:27). This divine person is identified in our text as the “Spirit of truth”. That is the Holy Spirit who communicates truth. The Spirit is the One who inspired the true Scriptures (2 Pet 1:20-21). The Spirit is the One who applies the truth of Christ to our hearts: Jesus explained “*He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you*” (John 14:26); “*He will guide you in all truth*” (John 16:13). The Spirit is the One who glorifies Christ (John 16:14) who is Himself The Truth (John 14:6). The Spirit is the One who gives the power to those in whom He dwells to be witnesses for the truth about Christ (Acts 1:8)

The primary function of the Spirit to believers is to exalt Jesus and to interpret, teach and confirm Christ’s completed work of salvation. Many evangelical churchgoers have not been taught the truth about the Holy Spirit. His role is **not** to give spiritual gifts. These come from Christ, the ascended one (Eph 4:8). His role is **not** to enable us to be witnesses of the Holy Spirit, but of Christ the Saviour. His role is **not** to teach us new revelation, but to remind us of what Christ has said in His Word. His role is **not** to provide some of us with a second-blessing baptism of the Spirit, but to fulfil the Word of Christ who said to His disciples “*You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you*” (14:17b)

Pentecostal/charismatic churches who make the Holy Spirit central in their doctrine and life effectively, and perhaps unintentionally, deny the supremacy of Christ. The central focus of Scripture is on Christ the Son of God through whom God the Father saves His people via the supernatural the agency of the Spirit. In the words of the Westminster Shorter Catechism 6, the three persons of the Triune God are ‘*the same in substance, equal in power and glory*’. This is why the Nicene Creed says of the Holy Spirit ‘*who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified*’. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are the same in being, but different in their roles.

We could say that the Holy Spirit has a “background” role. We see in verse 16 of John 14 that both the Father and the Son are active in sending the Holy Spirit. He is the Spirit of the Father (Gen 1:2; Isa 11:2; Matt 10:20) and also He is the Spirit of Christ the Son (Rom 8:9; Gal 4:6; Phil 1:19; 1 Pet 1:11). This is why the Nicene Creed states that the Holy Spirit ‘*proceeds from the Father* ***and the Son***’. The Holy Spirit is a person just as much as the Father and the Son are persons in the divine Godhead.

The indwelling Holy Spirit is a guarantee that when we die, we will go to be with him in glory, not initially in ascended resurrection bodies somewhat like his, but as spirits without bodies. The Heidelberg Catechism answer 49 puts it like this “*we have our own flesh in heaven – a guarantee that Christ our head will take us, his members, to himself in heaven*’. Also the Spirit’s presence assures us that in the future Christ will be with us bodily when we are resurrected with glorified bodies on the New Earth.

For all who trust in Christ there is the comfort in life and in death. “*That I am not my own, but belong body and soul, in life and in death to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ*” (Heidelberg Catechism answer 1). It is the indwelling Spirit of God in the believer who enables us to say these incredible words with certainty. Brothers and sisters, we are never alone! Not in life, not in death! The indwelling Holy Spirit also enables us, by His power to make the goal of our lives, not earthly things, but heavenly things as we await Christ’s return in glory at the end of this age, which brings us to our third point.

1. **Jesus will return to earth**

At the Lord’s Supper table we remember that Jesus, the Lamb of God, died a sacrificial death on behalf of sinners; people like you and me. In explaining this sacrament to the Corinthian church, the Apostle Paul writes: “*For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes*” (1 Cor 11:26). We celebrate Lord’s Supper with hope and confident expectation that Jesus will bodily return to earth at the end of this age. In verse 18 of our text Christ promises his disciples “*I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you*”.

There is a pattern we see in Scripture with prophesy that looks ahead and predicts future events. There are multiple fulfilments of some prophesies, often soon after the prophetic words are uttered, and then some further time in the future and sometimes later again into the more distant future. We see, this for example in Malachi 3:1-2 where both Christ’s first and second coming are in view. “*Behold, I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap*”. The destruction of Jerusalem and the end of this age appear side by side, the first as foreshadowing the second in Matt 24-25, Mark 13 and Luke 21.

When Jesus says the words “*I will not leave you as orphans;* I will come to you”, these likely refer in the near term to His post-resurrection appearances, then further in the future, the coming of the Spirit of truth at Pentecost and then at the end of this age, Christ’s glorious bodily return to earth. Remember at the start of John chapter 14 that Jesus promised his disciples “*I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also*” (v3).

When Christ returns at the end of this age then God Himself will be with His people on the New Earth. This is described symbolically for us in Revelation 21 when the new Jerusalem comes down out of heaven from God (v2).

* A holy city – a place of belonging for holy people.
* A structure with massive foundations – a permanent place which will endure forever.
* A location with streets of gold – a precious place of unimaginable riches and beauty in Christ.
* A domain of light – a place of God’s presence where the glory of God illuminates, and its lamp is the Lamb.

Brothers in Christ, sister, do you ever feel alone, abandoned, left behind? Our catechism in Heidelberg Catechism Lord’s Day 18, answer 49 reminds us that we are not alone:

* Because the ascended Christ gives us direct access to the Father.
* Because His physical human body (our own flesh) in heaven guarantees our future physical resurrection.
* Because the indwelling Holy Spirit is a guarantee that we are children of God, and that Christ will take us to himself in heaven

Praise the Lord and be comforted by the truth that Jesus has not left us alone!

AMEN.

1. The Scriptures clearly reveal that Jesus left this earth bodily and will return to this earth bodily (e.g. Acts 1:9, 11; Matt 24:30).  We know that having been incarnate in human flesh (e.g. Phil 2:6-8), Jesus remains inseparably both fully human and fully divine (summarised well in the Athanasian Creed). We also understand that (as far as we know) God has created only one universe (Gen 1:1). Therefore,  as Christ is a physical being in His humanity, He must continue to be physically present in His resurrection body somewhere within this one material creation.  [↑](#endnote-ref-1)