

Glory in His Face: Ascended King

Acts 1:1-11

By David Strain

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Now would you take your copies of God's Word and turn with me to the book of Acts, chapter 1. Acts chapter 1 - page 909 in the church Bibles. Before we read God's Word together, let's bow our heads and turn to the Lord for His help in prayer. Let us all pray.

Our Father, we pray now that You would give us the help of the Holy Spirit, that we may not merely understand the truth but believing it, grasp Christ by faith anew and be enabled to obey, taking the same Gospel that has gripped us and changed us to the ends of the earth, for the renown of the name of King Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Acts chapter 1 at verse 1. This is the Word of Almighty God:

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom of Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." 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. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by

them in white robes, and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Amen, and we praise God that He has spoken in His holy, inerrant Word. May He write its eternal truth upon all our hearts.

Well this evening we have come in our ongoing reflections on the person and work of our Lord to consider a further glory that shines upon us from the face of the Lord Jesus - the glory of Christ, the ascended King. Of all the phases of His saving work - His incarnation and birth, His obedient life, His atoning death, His glorious resurrection, Heavenly session, His coming again to judge the living and the dead - of all the phases of His redemptive work, the ascension is without a doubt the least celebrated and probably the least understood. Without it, however, we have an incomplete, indeed an impoverished picture, of the fullness of the work of Christ for us. We miss vital aspects of what has been done on our behalf and we are particularly impoverished in our understanding of the calling of the church in the world if we neglect the ascension.

I recently watched again the first and only televised recording of the coronation of a British monarch - the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. It was, of course, a spectacular affair. If you've seen the clips of it you'll know what I mean. There was the great military procession, the vast crowds that thronged the streets of Westminster, the golden horse-drawn carriage bearing the Queen to Westminster Abbey. There was a great trumpet fanfare and choral anthems as the nobility, in their finery, processed toward the throne with the insignia of majesty, the royal scepter and the golden orb and the crown itself. And then came the Queen, with a long crimson robe, walking slowly down the nave of the Abbey to the seat of King Edward, there to be crowned by the Archbishop of Canterbury. As the crown was at last placed upon her brow, the seven thousand strong congregation rose and shouted, "God save the Queen! God save the Queen! God save the Queen!" It was enough to make even this hardened Scot manage a stir of patriotism.

In a real sense, the ascension of Christ was His coronation procession as He moves from earthly ministry to heavenly glory. But maybe one of the reasons that we often miss that about the ascension is because the regalia of royal splendor are nowhere to be found in the Scriptural accounts of the ascension. There are no angelic choirs, as there were, for example, at our Savior's birth. There are no cheering crowds as there were at the triumphal entry as He made His way into Jerusalem. Even the soldiers who had been charged with His torture twisted a crown of thorns and knelt before Him, albeit in mockery. But at His ascension to the throne of heaven there is no crown to be seen, neither does anyone bend the knee. On a sign nailed to the cross above His head, wicked Pilate unapologetically proclaimed Him King - "This is the King of the Jews," he said. But here at His ascension there are no heralds proclaiming His accession

to heaven's throne.

Instead of the paraphernalia of outward majesty, the insignia of royalty that attach to this coronation are of a different order altogether. They're designed not to stun us with outward displays of opulence, but rather to jog our memories, to ring the bell of Scriptural resonance. The images that adorn Jesus' coronation has been seen before in Bible history, and as we recall them, they help us understand what is really going on here. We might, for example, recall the story of Moses and Israel at Mount Sinai. We heard some of that this morning, in God's kind providence, as we looked at Hebrews chapter 12:18 and following. Remember, only Moses was permitted to ascend the mountain of the Lord. Anyone else who touched the mountain were to be destroyed. And there on the mountain, Moses received detailed instructions on how to build the tabernacle, "according to the pattern," God said, "that I will show you." Hebrews 8:5 explains the earthly tabernacle that Moses saw was merely a copy of the reality of heaven into which not Moses would pass but the Lord Jesus Himself would ascend there, to represent us as the Mediator of a better covenant. As Moses was hidden by a cloud as he ascended to God on a mountain, so Jesus was hidden by a cloud as He ascended to the true dwelling place of the Lord in heaven. And there now He sits enthroned, as the Mediator of the better new covenant.

Or we might recall Daniel chapter 7, a passage from which Jesus drew His favorite self designation. In the gospels, again and again, we find Him calling Himself the "Son of Man." Daniel saw a vision of one like a Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven, approaching God the Father, the Ancient of Days. And there in a moment of coronation he receives from the Ancient of Days, God the Father, dominion and glory and a kingdom that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which shall not pass away and His kingdom shall not be destroyed. Acts 1:9, if you like, records the fulfillment of Daniel's vision seen from below, as it were, from the point of view of the disciples who watched it happen. We see Him taken from our view by the clouds and Daniel 7 is the other side of the story. It's what happened next. Coming in the clouds of heaven, the Son of Man is crowned King of Kings and Lord of Lords by the Ancient of Days.

Or we might point to Psalm 24, a coronation psalm, celebrating the rise to the throne of Israel's king. Here, the themes that you see in Moses' ascent on the holy mountain and Daniel's vision of the royal coronation of the Son of Man, those themes come together. David asks, "Who may ascend the hill of the Lord and who shall stand in His holy place?" And he answers, "He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully." The only one who can go to God is one who is thoroughly clean, clean in heart and hand, in thought and in word and in deed, clean inside and out. The problem is, that's not me and it's no you either. We are sinners, and like Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai, none of us can safely ascend to God's presence in our own merits and righteousness.

The psalmist, however, isn't thinking about you or me. He does have someone in mind. He says, "Lift up your heads, O gates! Be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in! Who is this King of glory? The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle, the Lord of hosts. He is the King of glory!" The psalmist is talking about Jesus, the God-Man. He is the One who can go where we cannot. He has pure hands and a clean heart and He alone ascends the hill of the Lord. To Him, the gates of the heavenly Zion swing wide and welcome and they remain open to welcome us whom He represents and for whom He died. Trusting in Jesus, we too now may go to God and ascend the hill of the Lord, unafraid, made bold to come to the throne of grace that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. Not because we are clean or pure in ourselves, but because we've been clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ, our triumphant King. The ascension is Jesus' coronation procession. He ascends to the throne room of heaven, there to preside as the Mediator of the new covenant, to reign over all things until the end of the age, and to open wide the gates of heaven to all who trust in Him.

Now all of that is wonderfully true, but as we turn our attention tonight to the account we find in Acts chapter 1, I want you to notice how Luke, the author of Acts, teases out the implications of the ascension for us. In particular notice that for Luke, the implications of the ascension are mainly missionary in their nature. Look at the text please - Acts 1:1-11. In an echo of the Great Commission at the end of Matthew's gospel, Jesus calls the apostles to be His witnesses, verse 8, "in Jerusalem and in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth." Those are the last earthly words of Christ as He ascends before their eyes. This is what is left ringing in their ears. These are their final marching orders as they behold their Savior rising to ascend to a place of absolute dominion and heavenly authority and rule. Luke is not content, in other words, to let us merely thrill at the wonderful truth that our Jesus reigns. He will not leave us comforted alone, merely comforted by the knowledge that the one who died for us is also the one who governs all things on behalf of those for whom He died. No, Luke wants us to see that if we grasp the point of the ascension at all, we also will go with the good news about Jesus to the world over which He reigns. Luke wants us to see that if we grasp the truth of the ascension at all, we will go with the good news about Jesus to the ends of the earth over which He now reigns.

MISSIONARY POWER

Look with me at verses 4 to 8 first of all please. Here we learn that the ascension means that we have been given missionary power. Because of the ascension, we have been given missionary power. Twice that point is made in the text. Once in verse 4, the disciples are told to remain in Jerusalem until the promise of the Father, that is, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, came upon them. Again in verse 8, "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you

will be my witnesses.” The reason Jesus ascended was so that He might pour out His Spirit on the church. That was the point of the conversation, remember, with the disciples in the Upper Room on the night in which Jesus was betrayed. John 16 and verse 7 - “I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away, that I ascend. For if I do not go away, the Helper, the Holy Spirit, will not come to you. But if I go, I will send Him to you.” Jesus ascended, He went away, in order to pour out the Spirit on the church. Peter makes the same point in the next chapter of the book of Acts at the conclusion of his great Pentecostal sermon. The Holy Spirit, having now been given, explains to those who hear, this Jesus God raised up, of that we are all witnesses, being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured out this that you now see and hear.” Having died for us and risen for us, Peter says, He also ascended for us, received the Spirit in order to give Him to the church, to empower the church to fulfill the commission given to us.

This is the point. If you are a Christian at all tonight, the fundamental resources you need to be faithful in bringing the Gospel to the world have already been given to you. The Spirit has been poured out. You were baptized into Christ by the Holy Spirit when you were converted. He indwells you and inhabits you. You know sometimes I worry that we have made the work of mission and evangelism so specialized, so complex, that we fear we could never be of service in spreading the Gospel. “I wouldn’t know what to say. I don’t have enough Bible knowledge. I’m no theologian. I’m scared.” And all of that may be true, but Jesus ascended to heavenly glory to pour out the Helper, that is, the Spirit of enabling power, so that you might be His instrument in bringing the good news about Jesus Christ to your family, to your neighbors, to your community, to your world. The message of the ascension, you know, really is simply a call to faith in the provision of Christ. You may not feel powerful, but the power of Christ has been given to you if you’re a Christian. You may not feel equipped, but you are indwelt by another Helper who will work in and through you, even in and through your weaknesses, for the glory of the name of Jesus Christ. In the end, the question is not really whether you have what it takes to be of any use in the mission of bringing the Gospel to the world. That is not the question. The only real question is whether you are willing to believe Christ’s words that the Holy Spirit can empower and enable and equip you to go, all your weaknesses notwithstanding.

MISSIONARY CALLING

Missionary power then secondly, look at verses 6 to 9. Here we learn the ascension teaches us about the church’s missionary calling. Missionary power and missionary calling. Upon hearing Jesus’ promise of coming empowerment, the disciples get pretty excited, don’t they? Look at their question. “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” Now John Calvin says of that question that it contains almost as many mistakes as it does words. John Stott, a

practical, pragmatic, helpful Anglican as he is, manages to boil those mistakes down to just three. Let me list them for you. Verse 6, look at it again. The first mistake is that the disciples seem to have in mind a political kingdom. That was the Jewish expectation for the most part, that Israel would be empowered to rise to political dominance. Secondly, he had in mind an obviously national kingdom. They still fought in terms of Israel's geopolitical restoration. Israel would describe and delimit and define the extent of the kingdom of God in the world in their thinking. And thirdly, they thought in terms of an immediate kingdom. "Will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" That's how they conceived of their mission - political, national, and immediate.

And let's face it. That remains a real temptation for the church in every age, doesn't it, to think like that? How easily we equate the mission given to us by the ascended Christ with a political agenda. How easily we confine the limits of our horizons to our own national interests and speak as though the promises once made to ancient Israel pertain to our national life. How easily we think in short term categories, looking for immediate results, measuring success by numbers and the bottom line. But Jesus did not remain here with us to establish an earthly kingdom, a political, national, immediate kingdom in this world. He ascended to reign from heaven and to establish a kingdom that is rather spiritual, not political, universal, not national, and one that spans the ages. It is not instant. Look at how the conversation develops between them. They're asking about the kingdom. They're thinking in terms of Israel's final overthrow of Roman power, perhaps.

But in verses 7 and 8, Jesus answers not in terms of political triumph but in terms of the work of the Spirit by whom they will be empowered, not for military conquests but for the work of mission, for evangelism. The Holy Spirit will enable the apostles to provide inspired, authoritative, inerrant testimony, witness to the person and work of Jesus Christ. Today, that testimony, as our confession of faith puts it, has now been wholly committed unto writing. We are the custodians of it, the bearers of their witness still to this day, to the ends of the earth. We have it in Holy Scripture. As you and I open the Bible and say, "This is what it means, and here is where you see Jesus, and look at Christ in the pages of the Word of God," the apostolic witness continues and we are the agents and emissaries of it. That is the mission of the church. It is not political; it is exclusively spiritual. And the means of its advancement are not lobby groups or super packs; the means of the advancement of the kingdom of God are the Word of God in the enabling of the Spirit of Christ.

Notice too, the disciples are asking about Israel. They're thinking to define the kingdom in narrowly, nationalistic categories. But in verses 7 and 8, Jesus answers that the kingdom will span the nations. "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth." As Paul, in Philippians 2:9-11 reminds us, in the ascension, "God has highly exalted Jesus and given Him the name that is above every name so that at the name of Jesus

every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.” It’s Daniel 7:14 again, isn’t it? In His ascension, the Son of Man is given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples and nations and languages should serve Him. The covenant people of God to whom the church is sent in mission, to gather them from the ends of the earth, is an international community, a redeemed people from every tribe, language, and nation. The mission of the church is therefore multiethnic and multicultural and it is a mission that will always stall whenever the church excludes sinners on the basis of ethnicity or socioeconomic standing. In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. We are all one in Christ Jesus. Therefore whoever you are, if you are trusting in Jesus Christ, you are my brother, my sister, and this is your home. That is the message of the Gospel to you and it is the mission of the church in the world.

They are also asking about the timing of the Father’s plan. They think Jesus intends to restore Israel to power immediately. Verses 7 and 8, Jesus explains that the kingdom will come rather gradually. He speaks in terms of gradual expansion. He tells them about times and seasons. He rebukes them for inquiring into details of the Father’s secret councils. He is teaching us we are not authorized to expect immediately what God has ordained should ordinarily come gradually. The kingdom that Jesus has inaugurated will come in all its consummated glory one day, but til then, as Jesus Himself taught us, its progress in the world will be like a man who scatters seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day and the seed sprouts and grows, he knows not how. The earth produces by itself, first the blade then the ear then the full grain in the ear, when the grain is right but once he puts in the sickle because the harvest has come. Or Jesus said, “It is like a grain of mustard seed which, when it is sown in the ground it is the smallest of all the seeds of the earth, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches and all the birds of the air come and nest in its shade.” - Mark 4:26-32. That is the kingdom. It is a gradual, growing thing, not an immediate thing, not a sudden thing.

In an age of instant solutions, of immediate payoff, we want churches to be planted on a timetable. We want spiritual growth to be the inevitable result of the mechanistic deployment of the correct techniques. But that is not the nature of the kingdom. It does make progress, but the model written over every advance the kingdom makes is slow and steady. The kingdom is gradual, steady. It is supernatural, and it moves forward according to the secret purpose and plan of God. And while we do need to plan and pray and work with passion and zeal, we need to do it with a long term vision and with patient endurance.

MISSIONARY MINDSET

Missionary power, a missionary calling, and then finally the ascension instructs us on a missionary mindset. Look at verses 9 to 11 please. You have to feel sorry for the disciples at this moment, don't you? Verses 10 and 11 - who wouldn't stand gawking into heaven if you'd just witnessed Jesus ascend there? But more is going on, it seems, than simple amazement. God has to send angels to rebuke the disciples for looking into heaven. The point seems to be they are not to stand around pondering in astonishment the mysteries of what had occurred when there was work to be done. There was a mission to fulfill. "There was something fundamentally anomalous," writes John Stott, "about their gazing up into the sky when they had been commissioned to go to the ends of the earth. It was the earth, not the sky, that was to be their preoccupation. Their calling was to be witnesses not stargazers." You see one mistake the church often makes already - we too easily think in political, nationalistic, and immediate categories about the kingdom of God when our mission is actually spiritual, universal, and long term.

But here's another mistake. It's almost the opposite error. We sometimes become paralyzed by the contemplation of heavenly things when in fact the truth ought to propel us out into the world mission. And so the angels explain that Jesus is coming back in the same way that He just left. The same clouds that carried Him from their view will accompany His final return to judge the world in righteousness. The point, in other words, is that the mission of the church is urgent. It is urgent. Jesus is coming soon. Judgment is coming soon. If you are not a Christian this evening, the window of opportunity in which you have time still to turn from sin and trust in Christ is closing. Do not delay. Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts but now come and trust in Jesus Christ who ascended to be your Savior. But if you are a Christian, understand that the mission God in Christ has given to the church is pressing and urgent. The day is nearer now than when we first believed. There is a world that still needs to hear the unsearchable riches of Christ and you have been summoned to bear apostolic witness and testimony to the ends of the earth.

I wonder when Christ comes will He find us having been faithful in our task. Will we be found standing staring into heaven, thinking about spiritual things but telling no one of the King who bled and died and ascended and now reigns? We have missionary power because Jesus ascended, we have a missionary calling because Jesus ascended and He reigns and has sent us to proclaim and herald His victory and triumph, and we ought to have a missionary mindset, understanding the urgency of the hour and proclaiming Christ with passion and boldness, because the One who ascended is coming soon.

May the Lord bless to us the ministry of His Word. Let us pray.

Our Father, we praise You that Jesus is coming, that He, today, sits on the throne, that He has ascended to open heaven's gates for us. Teach us to take Him at His Word that we have the enabling that we need to go, teach us to have

a clear understanding of our calling, the nature of our mission as we go, and motivate us by the urgency of His quick return that we may be bold to go in Jesus' name. Amen.

Would you stand and receive the benediction?

And now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God our Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all now and forevermore. Amen.

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