

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to 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.”

(Acts 1:6–11)

Introduction

As Protestants, we tend to not place a lot of weight on a Christian liturgical calendar. Indeed, there are many in Reformed circles who consider any worship gathering of the church outside of the Lord’s Day to be a violation of the regulative principle of worship, and therefore a sin for churches to do so. In some circles, a church gathering in commemoration of Ascension Day would be deemed “Papist.”

There seems to be little scriptural warrant for such an attitude, and most Christians around the world recognise this. For the most part, Christians have little problem celebrating significant events in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ—such as his incarnation (Christmas) and his death (Good Friday). In recent years, we as a church have deliberately gathered on Passover (Maundy) Thursday to share the Lord’s Supper together, and have also made a point of observing Ascension Day.

Even among those who do not hold to an overly restrictive understanding of the regulative principle of worship, Ascension Day tends to be given little thought. I recently mentioned to another pastor in our Sola 5 association that I was preaching at our Ascension Day service and, with some surprise, he asked, “Oh, do you guys still have an Ascension Day service?”

To some degree, Ascension Day is given little thought because, at least in South Africa, unlike Christmas and Good Friday, it is not a public holiday—and it does not fall on a long weekend. It is also a day that, unlike Christmas and Easter, is not given virtually universal commemoration in Christian circles. Nevertheless, even if the *day* each year is given little attention, we would do well to reflect on the significance of the *event* that it commemorates. Properly understood, the ascension of Christ is one of the most significant events in his life and ministry.

As we study the New Testament ascension accounts (Mark 16:19–20; Luke 24:50–53; Acts 1:6–11) and the Old Testament ascension prophecies (e.g. Psalm 68:18 [cf. Ephesians 4:8–10]; Psalm 110:1 [cf. Acts 2:34–35]; Daniel 7:13–14; etc.), we learn several significances of the event. Below—using Acts 1:6–11 as our primary text—but comparing it with others—I want to list just four important ascension truths with which we must come to grips.

Remember Jesus the King

At heart, the ascension is about the enthronement of Jesus Christ, and so, as we think about the ascension we must do so remembering the King. Recording the actual event, Luke writes, “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” (v. 9). In his earlier account, Luke writes, “While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven” (Luke 24:51). And Mark, in his typical matter-of-fact fashion, writes, “So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God” (Mark 16:19).

Mark’s description is important, because, in ancient times, the right hand of a king was a place of privilege and authority. A throne would often be placed on the right side of a king, where a co-regent or a prince would sit, signifying his authority over the people under the headship of the king. A seat at the right hand of God is a symbol of divine, royal authority.

Christians with a working knowledge of the Bible understand the significance of the resurrection—that it points to Christ’s enthronement. Daniel specifically prophesied this event:

I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given 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 one that shall not be destroyed.

(Daniel 7:13–14)

There are certain extreme forms of theology that suggest that Jesus is not today seated on his throne, but will only take his throne at the second coming. Daniel was clear that the Son of Man “was given dominion and glory and a kingdom” when “he came to the Ancient of Days,” not when he will return from the Ancient of Days to the earth. It was when he ascended to his father, and sat down at the right hand of God, that Jesus took his eternal throne.

As we gather with the church for worship, and as we go into the world to our places of employment, and as we gather with family and friends for social events, we do well to remember that Jesus sits on his throne. “The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all” (Psalm 103:19).

Take heart, Christian, as you remember that Jesus is King. As you face unemployment, or grief, or sickness, or uncertainty, or sadness, or worry, Jesus is on his throne. “His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, ‘What have you done?’” (Daniel 4:34–35).

At a recent Sola 5 pastors’ fraternal, one pastor, whose wife is currently undergoing treatment for stage 3 breast cancer, was reflecting on some of the lessons learned during the trial. At one point, he said, “We’ve learned that the same God who was with us before my wife had cancer is the God who is with

us now that she has cancer.” That is the theology of the ascension: that Jesus Christ is on his throne, ordering the events of humankind for his purposes to his ends. He is King.

Proclaim Jesus the King

The disciples approached the site of the ascension with their own agenda in mind. “So when they had come together, they asked him, ‘Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?’” (v. 6). Even at this point, despite three years of instruction, they still did not quite get it. They remained ethnocentric and expected a physical manifestation of Christ’s kingdom. Jesus, however, would not allow them to remain distracted from their commission: “He said to them, ‘It is not for you to know the 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’” (vv. 7–8).

The ascension, and the enthronement that it signifies, is not a truth to internalise only for personal comfort; it is a truth that must be thundered by the church to a world in need of a benevolent King. It is, in fact, only because of Christ’s authority as King that we have hope in our commission. It is because all authority on heaven and earth has been given to him that we can make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18–20).

If you are a citizen of the kingdom of heaven, you are also an ambassador for the King. As we reflect on the glorious truth of the ascension, we must remember our assignment to proclaim those truths to a world in need of a King. Where there is no King, people tend to do whatever is right in their own eyes—and that never ends well. We must take the good news to a lost world that there is a good King who is willing to forgive their sins and receive them as his own. We must proclaim the truth that to resist that King is rebellion of highest order and folly of the deepest sort.

The King is gracious and longsuffering, but he will not forever allow his authority to be resisted. A day is coming in which King Jesus will manifest his anger, and those who resist his authority will perish in the way as his wrath is quickly kindled. But there is hope, because those who will kiss the Son in submission will find eternal refuge in him (Psalm 2:12). The world needs to hear from ambassadors of the kingdom that the King of all authority offers to them the gospel of forgiveness and reconciliation through his death and resurrection.

Hope in Jesus the King

As Jesus disappeared into the clouds, the disciples stood absolutely distraught. “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?’” (vv. 10–11). Had they not listened to what he had just said about being witnesses? The commission was not to stay and gaze hopelessly into heaven, but to go hopefully and make disciples across the earth—*because he would be with them, in the person of the Holy Spirit, to the end of the age.*

The disciples failed to grasp the great comfort that the ascension provided them. Jesus had earlier told them, “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.... Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let

them be afraid. You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away and I will come to you’” (John 14:18, 27–28). When he told them that he was going away, they were filled with sorrow, but he said to them, “I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you” (John 16:6–7).

The Holy Spirit—the Helper or Comforter—would come upon the disciples in short order, but as they saw Jesus ascend to heaven, they were filled with almost paralysing dread. It took the appearance of angels to remind them that the ascension was a good thing, and they could take comfort in the rule of Jesus from the right hand of the Father and the consequent coming of the Holy Spirit.

Believers know what it is like to long for Christ’s return—to long to be where he is. There is nothing necessarily wrong with this longing. Paul himself expressed it: “I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account” (Philippians 1:23–24). He longed to be free from his sinful body, and there are times, no doubt, when we all feel that longing. But we must never allow that longing to paralyse us into inaction.

Yes, our ultimate hope is the final resurrection, but even now we can live lives of great hope because Jesus is King. We can confidently go about our commission because he will see to it that his will comes to pass. We can hopefully face the trials of life because we know that everything proceeds from his kind providence. The ascension provides every reason for us to persevere and to be bold in Christian service knowing that our labour is never in vain in the Lord.

Anticipate Jesus the King

Finally, even as they stared with some sense of foreboding at the spot in the clouds where Jesus was taken from their sight, the angels delivered a wonderful promise: “This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (v. 11).

Here, the angels were telling the disciples that Jesus would one day return. It was not important for the disciples to know *when* he would return, only *that* he would return. The return of Jesus foretold here is a return in the same way that he departed: physically and visibly. There are certain segments in the church today who deny a future, bodily return of Jesus to earth, but this text clearly teaches it.

The New Testament teaches the reality of the second coming, but it does not dwell on it. Instead, the New Testament emphasises that the resurrected and ascended Christ is reigning as King over the earth even now. God does not want us so fixated on the future return of Jesus that we neglect to do what he is calling us to do now. He wants us to be convinced that Jesus is reigning even now, so that we will boldly declare the gospel and expect fruit from it.

Nevertheless, the future, bodily second coming of Jesus Christ at the end of the ages is a truth that the Bible teaches, and we must affirm it. A day is coming—we know not when—when Jesus will return to earth, raise the dead, and sit in final judgement on all humanity. At that time, he will separate his people (the sheep) from his enemies (the goats), and the sheep will enter eternal life while the goats will be consigned to eternal punishment. The ascension reminds us very much of that truth. It gives us

hope, because of Jesus' resurrection and ascension, that we will also one day be resurrected and will enter into eternal fellowship with him.

Conclusion

As we, therefore, remember the ascension, let us, first, remember that Jesus is King; second, proclaim him as King; third, hope in him as King; and, fourth, anticipate his return as King to conquer all his enemies and receive, in its fullness, his eternal kingdom.

AMEN