

# The Ascension

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Preacher: Rev. Keith Ganzer

[ 0 : 00 ] Please be seated. Our text this morning as we hear from the living God and his word is Acts chapter 1 verses 1 through 14.

Last week we finished the book of Acts. Except, of course, as one friend reminded me this week, we're never really finished with any book of the Bible. And so Dan has decided we need to start over and do it all again.

You're just a little worried that I'm telling the truth. But we're not going to do all of Acts again. But this week and next we are returning to its beginning for two reasons.

One, because today is the Sunday after Ascension. And next week is Pentecost. And so it's marvelous to take up the text that described those events in these weeks.

Two, we return to these chapters to see clearly again what we've been studying for months. Because in the first two chapters of Acts, Luke gives his readers the main theme and plot of the story.

[ 1 : 18 ] So those two objectives work together. Today we're focused on the Ascension. And so let me get right to it. I want to address three topics as we consider the Ascension.

One, I want to address what the Ascension means. Two, what the Ascension was. And three, what the Ascension implies.

What it means. What it was. And what it implies. We begin with what the Ascension means. And we start in Acts 1 where the apostles are puzzled.

Because nothing's gone according to plan. As far as they were concerned, when Jesus had called them, they were signing on for a Jewish renewal movement. They believed Jesus was the Messiah. The King of Israel. And they thought that meant that Jesus, with his extraordinary power and teaching, would rule in Jerusalem and restore God's people. That was what the prophets had promised, wasn't it?

[ 2 : 25 ] That God would restore Israel. The nations judged for their wickedness. And the world turned at last. Righteousness filling the earth.

And Jesus had entered Jerusalem as a king. But only to die. They were wrong. Jesus wasn't the Messiah.

He was cursed by God. And then, confounding all expectations, Jesus had risen from the dead. And here he is again, talking about a kingdom. Verse 3. To them he presented himself alive, speaking of the kingdom of God.

What did it mean? Were their dreams back on track again? That's their question. Verse 6. Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?

[ 3 : 23 ] Surely now it must be the time. Look carefully at Jesus' response. He said to them, It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority.

He warns them that they won't have a timetable. They won't have a sense of where they are on God's calendar as he unfolds his purposes.

But then he says something that suggests they were right. But not entirely. Verse 8. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.

And you shall be my witnesses from here in Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. You shall be my witnesses.

Witnesses of what? What does this mean? In the first century, when someone was enthroned as a king, his authority took effect through witnesses, heralds, going throughout the territory of his kingdom, proclaiming the good news that we have a king.

[ 4 : 41 ] And it was always good news in the ancient world. Because in that world, everyone knew that anarchy was far worse than any authorized government.

And so the heralds, the messengers, the witnesses would go off to the far reaches of the kingdom to announce that Claudius or Nero or whoever was now the rightful king and that he as king demanded allegiance.

And that is exactly what Jesus tells them to do. And he tells them to do it.

Because in the resurrection and the ascension, which is about to happen, Jesus is indeed being enthroned as Israel's Messiah, the king, and therefore the Lord of the whole world.

The ascension itself is the answer to their question. Because put another way, their question, will you restore the kingdom? Is this, are you the king for whom we've waited so long?

[ 5 : 53 ] Jesus' verbal promise of the Spirit and the commission to be his witnesses points to the answer. And the answer is yes. But not in the way you imagined.

Now besides the commission to be witnesses, there are two other backgrounds to this passage that reinforce this meaning of the ascension. Jews reading this account would instantly see Daniel chapter 7, a well-known text, a popular text of the early Christians, that speaks of one like a son of man, brought upon the clouds of heaven to the ancient of days and presented before him and given kingly power over the nations and the beasts of evil and chaos.

The ascension of Jesus is Daniel 7 fulfilled. The human figure, the son of man, now exalted into the very presence of God himself, enthroned as the king of the nations and triumphant over the forces of evil he defeated on the cross.

Romans reading this account, or anyone who knew the Roman imperial cult, would know that in that cult, the one seen being taken up to heaven, is the one thereby revealed as the divine ruler. Even today, if you go and stand under the famous arch of Titus and look straight up in the arch, you see in the center a carving of the soul of Titus, emperor in the first century, ascending to heaven.

[ 7 : 34 ] The message was clear. In ascending to heaven, the emperor had become a god. We'll see that the ascension of Jesus is in a different category altogether.

But even still, every Roman reader of Luke's account would be thunderstruck to see that Luke means to say that Jesus is the real God and King.

The Caesars are but parodies. For the Jew, the ascension speaks of the Son of Man exalted as king over all the nations. For the Roman, the ascension portrays a sudden and unexpected rival to Caesar.

Put all of this together and you get the point that the ascension is the unequivocal declaration that Jesus, the King of Israel, is Lord of the world.

He is the King, they sought. He is the Messiah whose kingdom extends to the ends of the earth. And Luke means to emphasize that over this worldwide kingdom, Jesus is already enthroned and ruling.

[ 8 : 44 ] But His rule won't be quite as they expected. Because now as they witness to the present reality that Jesus is the King, they are to wait.

to wait for the time when the kingdom will finally come and the world live completely under God's just rule.

For now, Jesus says, you wait and you witness. Not of one who may be king at some point in the future. You witness of one who has already been appointed and enthroned and who will come again.

The kingdom of righteousness spoken of by the prophets will come in full. But not yet. Peter says, according to His promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. All the while counting the forbearance of our Lord as salvation. What does the ascension mean? It means Jesus is already appointed and enthroned as the world's true king.

[ 9 : 56 ] And one day, His kingdom will come fully and finally. And in the meantime, there's a job to be done. Before we consider just what that job is, what it means to witness to the ascended Lord today, I want to ask and talk about what the ascension event itself was, what the ascension was, add what it means, what was it?

Because I think this, far from being irrelevant, is crucial. It's very hard for us to move the ascension out of a fantasy world into reality.

So what actually happened? There are two errors to avoid here. we cannot be overly literal on the one hand, thinking that Jesus did some kind of literal takeoff to a far away locality within the same space-time continuum in which we exist.

In that case, heaven, in other words, is somewhere way out there in space beyond the stars. But on the other hand, neither can we be overly modern about it, thinking that Luke only means to say that Jesus is now somehow spiritually present everywhere and that his spiritual presence in our hearts or something is now his real identity.

In that case, heaven is nowhere at all. It's just some kind of non-material platonic zone or something. But that won't do either.

[ 11 : 32 ] If I read Luke's account correctly, though plenty of mystery remains to be sure, if we take the ascension seriously as Luke records it, we must think differently.

At the end of his gospel, Luke is clear that the resurrected Jesus was an embodied human being. And when he comes to the ascension, nothing is changed.

It must be said that Jesus is ascended as a human being in heaven, thoroughly embodied in his risen state, that right now there is a human being at the helm of the cosmos.

Let that challenge your thinking for a second. Because for many of us and myself included, it almost seems like a category mistake to think of Jesus as an embodied human being in heaven.

Our cultural notions of heaven and quite frankly, the thinking that has characterized much of our Western Christian tradition is strongly other than this.

[ 12 : 43 ] But as I read the scriptures, heaven and earth, God's space and ours are different to be sure, but not always in the way we think.

For starters, they're not very far apart from one another. To use the words of one commentator, heaven and earth interlock and intersect.

And though for now they retain distinct identities, there is coming a day when they will join up, open and visible to one another, the new heavens and the new earth.

You know the moments in scripture. Just those moments when the curtains pulled back and the world as it actually is in which heaven and earth interlock and intersect becomes clear.

Think of Elisha seeing the heavenly army of horses and chariots all around him. Think of Peter and John at the Mount of Transfiguration. Think of the Lord Jesus himself standing by Paul in the night.

[ 13 : 42 ] There's a lot about this I don't fully understand, but let me say this again, that at this moment the embodied ascended Lord Jesus Christ sits at the right hand of the Father in heaven.

And if that is so, then heaven is a real place that can contain material beings. And it is a place not very far from where you sit this morning.

This isn't easy for us to think about. One New Testament scholar puts it this way. We post-enlightenment Westerners are such wretched flatlanders.

Although New Age thinkers and indeed many contemporary novelists are quite capable of taking us into other parallel worlds, spaces, and times, we retreat into our rationalistic closed system universe as soon as we think about Jesus.

C.S. Lewis, of course, did a great job in the Narnia stories and elsewhere of imagining how two worlds could relate and interlock. But the generation that grew up knowing its way around Narnia does not usually know how to make the transition from a children's story to the real world.

[ 15 : 04 ] brothers and sisters, I'm not talking fantasy. I'm talking reality. Paul says we wrestle in our real everyday lives against forces of evil in the heavenly places.

And Paul says that in our real everyday lives, the ascension matters because he says, as you heard read this morning in Ephesians, you can know the greatness of the same power that raised Jesus and seated him at the Father's right hand in the heavenly places.

The power that enthroned him above all rule and authority and every name that is named, not only in this age, but in the one to come. Paul's talking about the real world, our real world.

And somehow it's linked, as Paul says, to the fact that we are even now seated with Christ in the heavenly places.

As I read the New Testament, heaven is all around us and it intersects with our world. And it's there that the ascended, embodied Lord Jesus is enthroned as king over every other king and ruler and authority and force on the planet as we see it.

[ 16 : 27 ] And with heaven nearby, we wait for his kingdom to come in its fullness. We wait as he too is waiting. As the world mocks his authority and rejects his rule and ignores his invitation to repent and believe and see the truth, he's waiting because some do see and are saved.

Some see and are saved as his followers bear witness to the kingdom and its king slowly, patiently, sometimes painfully.

And how do we do that? How do we be his witnesses? What does the ascension imply for our lives?

The answer, the answer, I think, is in what we've studied for months. The answer is in the book of Acts. Because this is the task that propelled the early church and the apostle Paul to witness to the reality that in Jesus, the one true and living God has become king of the world and king in a way that ought to make Herod and Caesar tremble.

King in a way which sends his heralds out announcing his kingship with full boldness and unstoppable spirit-given power. As Acts begins, so also it ends.

[ 17 : 59 ] The final verse of the book, Paul under house arrest in Rome for two years, what does Luke say he's doing? He's preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness, Luke says, and unhindered.

The final words of Acts reinforce what we've seen all along that through riots and prison and shipwreck and theological disputes and over long distances and dangers and face-to-face with the powers of evil, nothing stops the witness that Jesus the King is Lord of the world.

So we ask ourselves a basic question. Do we care? We've been nine months in this book.

Ask yourself as I asked myself this week, has this truth even started to grab hold of you? It must grab hold of you because ours is a slippery world, a world in which beliefs are treated as opinions, where statements of truth are reduced to personal likes and dislikes, where openness and tolerance are the supposed champions of the day and Acts reminds us, the Ascension shouts at us that it's all a lie.

that that's not how things really are, that that's not how things were in Luke's world, and it's not how things are today. To witness to the reality of the Ascension, to claim that Jesus is Lord, was never and can never be reduced to what we call a simple religious claim.

[ 19 : 57 ] It was and is a claim about reality, ultimate reality, reality that includes politics and culture and commerce and family life and anything and everything else you can think of.

The Caesars of our day promise peace if we just keep religion to ourselves and leave the public square in their capable hands. And to that, Luke says emphatically, no!

And so must we. Or do we not see that under the smile of tolerance is the cruel fist of secular power?

The task of the church is the same today as it was in Luke's, to find ways of declaring that Jesus Christ is Lord, openly and unhindered, and with full recognition that this is to make a statement about the real public world in which we live.

that it's only about me and my religion in so far as it's truly about God and his kingdom. We must be reminded that Acts shows us this, that whatever troubles the church faces, whatever divisions and persecutions and disputes there may be, whatever storms and shipwrecks try to take us off our course, we must end up, whether in Rome in the first century or in Vancouver, or New York or Shanghai in ours, wherever the Lord has his church, the church must say to the powers of the world that Jesus is Lord and that they are not.

[ 21 : 42 ] The ascension means that Jesus Christ rules the world, and we declare it as fact as we wait and pray every day as our Lord instructed us for his kingdom to come.

And we go out knowing that even now Jesus rules through the lives and testimony of the faithful, through the suffering and the witness of his spirit driven followers.

He rules, calling the world to account, demonstrating a new way of life that upstages all of Caesar's pretensions to offer salvation and peace and justice.

Jesus Christ is Lord. For too many of us, he's the Lord far away in heaven, or he's the Lord deep inside our hearts, but he's not yet the Lord who works through us in the real world, who tells us how to run our businesses, how to use our money, how to do justice and love the poor and speak and act against evil in the name of the king who defeated it.

All the while, all the time, proclaiming and preaching the good news that the world so desperately needs, but will so furiously resist, that Jesus Christ is Lord.

[ 23 : 13 ] Remember Paul's accusers in Thessalonica in Acts 17? These men, they say, these men have turned the world upside down and they've come here and they act against the decrees of Caesar saying that there is another king, Jesus.

Early Christianity was not just about teaching people a new way to be religious. It was not just about reconnecting them with their inner selves. It wasn't even just about finding a new means of securing

a place in heaven after we die.

If Acts teaches us anything, if the ascension means anything to us, it is this that the main point is that Jesus, the Messiah, is the true Lord of the world and he calls everyone to account.

Our task is to announce him as such and to watch as his kingdom comes in lives and in communities and to risk the consequences.

It is to go into the world vulnerable, suffering, praying, misunderstood, misjudged, just like the early church in Acts, always, as Paul says, bearing in the body the dying of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may be displayed through us.

[ 24 : 38 ] You shall be my witnesses to the end of the earth. and to do it, we're going to need the power Jesus promises.

We're going to need the fresh wind of the Holy Spirit. So come back next week and we'll talk all about it.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.