

Our Lord Jesus Christ has ascended into heaven, where He stands before God on our behalf, and sits at God's right hand to rule over heaven and earth as Lord.

And as a Church, we have rightly made a big deal about the Incarnation and the Resurrection. Christmas and Easter we know; but what is this *Ascension*, and what does it mean for us? Here's the short version: At Christmas, *God* descended to earth and became a man. On Good Friday, the *sinless* God-man died a *sinner's* death. On Easter Sunday, a *dead* man walked out of His grave, alive and well. Forty days later, that *man* was lifted up from the earth into the presence of God in heaven to receive glory and honor and power and majesty and an everlasting kingdom, which completed His miraculous journey of salvation and redemption. God came down to earth, and man arose to heaven.

That's the gospel of Jesus, and we should respond in repentance and faith, and in joyful worship, every day, yes, but especially every Lord's Day, and most especially on those days in which we particularly remember and proclaim the greatest moments of Jesus' life.

And so today, as our songs and scriptures have already done, I want us focus our hearts on the wonder of the Ascension, and in particular, I want to look at how the Ascension reshapes our expectations about Jesus and His kingdom, about the future, and about the Christian life. In our text today, we see that Jesus' apostles had a bunch of expectations, some of which were fulfilled, some of which needed to be corrected or modified, and some of which haven't come to pass yet. We're going to look at three big ones from Acts 1:1-11: *First*, the coming baptism of the Spirit; *second*, the coming restoration of God's kingdom; and *third*, the coming return of Jesus Christ.

We see the first expectation in v.4-5: Jesus tells the disciples to wait for the promise of the Father, which He further explains as the baptism of the Holy Spirit. We don't have time to consider everything that this promise entails, so for today, just focus on the one thing that our text tells us this baptism will do: In v.8, Jesus says that the apostles will receive *power* when the Holy Spirit comes. And notice back in v.2: it was through the Holy Spirit that Jesus had given commands to His apostles. His teaching was Spirit-empowered teaching. This means that we shouldn't be surprised when v.8 connects the *power* of the Spirit to the *mission* of bearing worldwide witness to Jesus. The apostles' teaching was to be Spirit-powered, just like Jesus.

So the first expectation that the disciples had was that the Father would send the Holy Spirit to empower them to be His witnesses all over the world. That's what *they* expected; what should *we* expect? On this first point, our expectation is very different than that of the apostles.

For them, their expectation pointed to the *future*. For us, this expectation has been *fulfilled* at the day of Pentecost, which we will celebrate next Sunday.

As Acts 2 tells us, the Father's promise came true just as Jesus had said in v.5, *not many days* from when Jesus spoke. On the day of Pentecost, the spirit came in power, baptized the Church with fire, and equipped her to bear bold witness for Jesus all over the world.

This *expectation* was fulfilled, but the *effects* continue to this day. The Spirit is *still* empowering the Church to bear witness for Jesus all over the world, and it is happening right here, right now. The Spirit is using God's Word, my tongue, and your ears to bring glory to Jesus.

But because this expectation was fulfilled, we need to be careful to correct wrong expectations that some people still have about the baptism of the Spirit. Some well-meaning but misinformed Christians still expect a new and different experience of the Holy Spirit as part of the normal Christian life, with some even making this a test of whether or not you are really saved. For example, if you do not speak in tongues, then you have not yet received the baptism of the Holy Spirit; you might not really have the Spirit dwelling in you.

But this expectation is *wrong*, and because it is wrong, it is *harmful* to the Church. It can undermine your faith, if you don't have such an experience, it can lead you into strange practices and behaviors in order to *pursue* such an experience, and it is a sectarian doctrine that sinfully divides the body of Christ.

What Jesus promised His Apostles was that the Spirit would come in a few days. A few days later, the Spirit came. What Jesus was talking about in Acts was fulfilled two thousand years ago. For believers now, we receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit by faith when we are baptized into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. This should be our normal expectation about the Spirit's work now, in light of the fulfillment of this promise at Pentecost.

The second expectation concerned the coming restoration of the kingdom. This is what we see in Acts 1:6: "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" Jesus will modify this expectation, but the main thrust was correct, because it comes from God's Word. God promised to restore the kingdom in Micah 4, and so the disciples were right to expect it.

But Jesus had some corrections to make to their expectations, in the *timing* of the restoration, in the *way* the kingdom would be restored, and in the *scope* of the kingdom. The disciples were expecting an imminent military/political restoration of the kingdom to Israel, but that wasn't what God had in mind.

And so Jesus tells them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by His own authority.” By mentioning times *or* seasons, He’s already broadening their idea of what fulfilment might look like, even though He does not give them a definite date or time frame like He did when He promised the Spirit’s coming “not many days from now.” He’s already told them in parables that the kingdom is like a tree, or like leaven tucked in the dough. It doesn’t come visibly and immediately like a military conquest. It comes *gradually* and *imperceptibly*, but also *undeniably*. You might not notice daily or even yearly changes, but at some point the tree will be huge, and the loaf will obviously have risen.

In manner, too, Jesus redirects them: the kingdom won’t come through a heavenly military invasion or a dramatic battle with Herod or Caesar. It comes about through the Spirit-empowered witness of the Apostles themselves. The kingdom will come through their preaching and teaching, not with swords and spears.

The apostles also weren’t thinking big enough: the kingdom wasn’t just for Israel; it would spread from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth! The kingdom of God was indeed being restored, but the apostles needed to adjust their expectations as to the when, the how, and the where. And so Jesus taught them to expect the kingdom to come gradually through the spread of the gospel to the end of the earth.

So what should we expect today? For that, I want us to look to the very next verse. Right after Jesus said these things, while they were looking, He was lifted up and a cloud took Him out of their sight. The apostles on earth are left standing and gazing up into heaven. But if we switch to God’s perspective, we see that Jesus was ascending to His coronation as King. Right after He finishes talking about how the kingdom would come on earth, Jesus was lifted up to *receive* the kingdom *in heaven*. That’s what we see in Daniel 7: we see the Ascension from heaven’s perspective, as the Son of Man comes before the Ancient of Days and is “given dominion, glory, and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him.”

Part of the reason why Jesus didn’t take the throne in Israel was that it was too small for Him! He was to be given dominion over all of creation; in heaven, on earth, and under the earth! But here’s where we need to avoid a wrong expectation: just because the kingdom is a spiritual kingdom, and a heavenly kingdom, doesn’t mean that it forever remains invisible, hidden away in our hearts.

Isn’t this what we pray for every week: “Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.” Jesus is king of heaven and earth right now; He was crowned king when He ascended into heaven.

But the kingdom is coming to earth as it is in heaven, and this takes place gradually as the Church spreads the gospel in the power of the Spirit. And one day, the kingdom will be undeniable, and every knee in heaven, on earth, and under the earth will bow to King Jesus.

And that brings us to our third expectation. This one comes from v.11: The angels tell the Apostles to stop gawking into the clouds, but to expect Jesus to return from heaven in the same way He went into heaven: bodily, visibly, coming on the clouds. This is the Christian hope: Jesus will come again!

But because of the kingdom expectations that Jesus gave us, we aren't supposed to sit around staring up into heaven and making various end-times chart that predict dates for His return! We're not supposed to have our bags packed for heaven. We're supposed to live the life of the kingdom here on earth. Yes, we need to know that Christ will come again; we need to be assured of that. But we don't *wait* for the Second Coming; we *live in light* of the Second Coming. Do you see the difference? Don't stand around waiting for the kingdom to fall out of heaven onto your heads! Bear witness now through your words and your lives and your worship that Jesus is already king here on earth just as He is in heaven!

When you see darkness and brokenness and sin and sadness in the world around you, do not stand looking into heaven! Ask Jesus to fix it, and then go be His hands and feet! He has given you the Spirit's power, and He brings His kingdom to earth through the Church, through you.

When we worship King Jesus, when we bear witness to His Word and works, when we obey His law as our highest authority, when we do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly before Him, not only are we proclaiming that the kingdom is coming; we are living as kingdom citizens right now. Our normal expectation, in light of the Ascension, is that we will spend our lives living and worshiping in the power of the Spirit, which is God's means of answering our prayer that the kingdom would come on earth as it is in heaven. The king has gone up to His throne in heaven, and we've been given a job to do, until He comes again.

And so the Ascension sets our expectations. Since Jesus ascended to the Father, He sent the Father's promised gift of the Spirit, just like He said. Since Jesus ascended to the throne of heaven, He rules and reigns, and His kingdom is coming on earth as it is in heaven. Since Jesus ascended into heaven in clouds of glory and yet has promised to return, so we eagerly await His coming again from heaven. And so we pray, "Come, Risen and Ascended Lord Jesus."

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