

# Jesus: The One Who Is, Who Was, Who Is To Come “He Ascended” (Acts 1:6-11)

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on 4/7/2013

## Introduction

- ❖ The challenge of Christian orthodoxy, in the face of heresy, has always been the careful maintenance of biblical mystery and paradox. Mysteries and paradoxes are found in every religion, but the Christian faith is uniquely comfortable to abide with such things.
  - ▶ Think about it: Orthodox Christians have always insisted that Jesus is both divine and human all at the time, or that God is somehow Three as well as One, or that he is sovereign over every human decision and yet still gives us the freedom and responsibility of choice.
    - Orthodox Christians are comfortable saying that God is jealous and wrathful while at the same time he is merciful and loving. We insist that faith alone saves, and yet we say faith without works is dead.
  
- ❖ Admittedly these are paradoxical truths. But that doesn't mean they're illogical. They don't go against reason. But they do go beyond it. That's why faith is necessary. Holding these paradoxical truths carefully in balance – because we find them carefully balanced in Scripture – requires a degree of faith. And the challenge of orthodoxy is maintaining that balance while every wind of false doctrine is blasting against it.
  - ▶ Heterodoxy (or heresy), at its core, is a rejection of this balanced approach to biblical mystery and paradox. Heresy is birthed out of the effort to explain away theological mystery or to relieve the tension of holding paradoxical truths.
  
- ❖ In his book, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics*, NYT columnist Ross Douthat explains it this way. “*The great Christian heresies vary wildly in their theological substance, but almost all have in common a desire to resolve Christianity’s contradictions, untie its knotty paradoxes, and produce a cleaner and more coherent faith. Heretics are often stereotyped as wild mystics, but they’re just as likely to be problem solvers and logic choppers, well-intentioned seekers after a more reasonable version of Christian faith than orthodoxy supplies. They tend to see themselves, not irrationally, as rescuers rather than enemies of Christianity— saving the faith from self-contradiction and cultural irrelevance.*”<sup>1</sup>
  
- ❖ So whether it's a denial of the Trinity, or the dual nature of Christ, of God's sovereignty or wrath, the root motivation has always been to make the faith make more sense. *But at what cost?* At the cost of denying one spectrum of biblical truth. At the cost of committing heresy.
  - ▶ My point today is that Christians who are concerned with truth – with biblical truth, with *all* biblical truths at both sides of the spectrum – need to familiarize ourselves with the various mysteries and paradoxes in Scripture. We need to know what truths have to be held in careful balance.

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<sup>1</sup> Douthat, Ross (2012-04-17). *Bad Religion* (Kindle Locations 337-341). Simon & Schuster, Inc.. Kindle Edition.

## The Already but Not-Yet Kingdom

- ❖ In today's passage we're presented with a good example. It's the Bible's teaching regarding the *Already but Not-Yet Kingdom of God*. Look at Acts 1:6. Last Sunday we considered vv1-5 where we're told the Risen Jesus spent forty days giving proof of his resurrection and teaching his disciples concerning the kingdom of God. He then gave them marching orders to wait in Jerusalem until they receive the promised Holy Spirit.
- ❖ Following that occasion, the Risen Lord appears to them again in v6, and there they pose a question. "*Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?*" All the excitement of these resurrection appearances, all this talk of the kingdom of God and the promise of power from the Holy Spirit himself, was stirring up the disciples full of anticipation.
  - ▶ And their question is quite telling. Their emphasis on "*restoring the kingdom to Israel*" suggests that they were expecting a political kingdom, a restoration of Israel's monarchy. Remember, at the time, they were subject to the Romans.
    - But here is Israel's Messiah, the Anointed One, the long-awaited King! Will he at this time restore the kingdom to Israel? Will he restore Israel's national sovereignty? That's what they're wondering.
- ❖ This was a popular expectation among first-century Jews. Turn with me to Luke 19:11. "*As they heard these things, he proceeded to tell a parable, because he was near to Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately.*"
  - ▶ And it was not just the crowds buying into this messianic hype. Look at chapter 24:21. Immediately following Jesus' death, we find two disciples disillusioned on the road to Emmaus because they had "*hoped that [Jesus] was the one to redeem Israel.*"
    - His death initially shattered that expectation, but now here he is alive and well! Hope has returned! Will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?
- ❖ Right here the disciples were on the verge of making a crucial mistake when it comes to balancing the biblical view of the kingdom of God. There are two common mistakes that people make. Both fail to maintain the balance of orthodoxy, to keep the tension. One mistake is to **politicize** the kingdom of God. I'm calling that the mistake of the **activist**. The other is to **privatize** the kingdom. That's the mistake of the **pietist**.
  - ▶ The activist dreams of establishing heaven on earth. He wants to see kingdom values reflected in society at large. But the pietist only dreams of heavenly bliss. He has little hope for earth, little concern for kingdom values to be expressed by society at large.
- ❖ **Both sides err in that they fail to balance the Bible's teaching that, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the kingdom of God is 'already but not-yet'.** On one hand, it is already here, already established, already restored. So there are societal implications.
  - ▶ But on the other, the kingdom is not-yet here, not-yet established, not-yet restored, and therefore kingdom values will always be in clash with secular ones. Any hope for a Christian nation must be tempered by this 'not-yet' reality.

- ❖ As I studied our passage and in particular the account of Jesus' ascension into heaven, I was surprised as to how relevant the Ascension is to how we understand our responsibility on earth as disciples. And yet this is such a neglected aspect of Christian teaching. We hear sermons and have lectures on the Incarnation, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, and the Second Coming. *But when was the last time we ever talked about his Ascension?*
  - ▶ **I am convinced the Ascension is the necessary corrective to the equal error of either politicizing or privatizing the Christian faith.** I hope to show you that, through his Ascension, Jesus offers a third way to live out the faith.

### **Correcting the Mistake of the Activist**

- ❖ Let's first consider how the Ascension corrects the mistake of the activist – those who try to politicize the kingdom of God. They have an expectation of transforming society itself to reflect and promote kingdom values. Their goal is a more Christianized nation.
  - ▶ And in the modern American context, this sentiment can be found across political aisles. The Liberal Progressives of the Civil Rights era (60s–70s) along with the Social Conservatives that made up the Moral Majority (70s–80s) had one thing in common – they all wanted to see kingdom values institutionalized politically.
- ❖ In our generation, those within the church prone to this mistake are Christians who are particularly concerned with renewing our cities and tackling social injustices. Those with a great concern for the plight of the homeless or victims of human trafficking. Believers who want to do something about the lack of good public education or affordable housing.
  - ▶ But I'm also thinking of those Christians who are dismayed by the removal of prayer from public schools, by the sexual and moral revolutions taking place in our culture. Those who are appalled by what is happening to the institutions of family and marriage and by our culture's complicity in the death of countless unborn children.
    - These two groups of Christians might live in different neighborhoods. They might dress differently and vote differently. But both are trying to wake up and warn the church against a careless indifference to societal problems and to the opportunities we have to transform our society for the kingdom of God.
- ❖ In no way am I condemning their actions or dismissing their concerns. I'm all for them. So I'm not saying that all Christians who have these concerns have made the mistake of politicizing the kingdom. But I am saying, if anything, they're prone to it. It's a temptation.
  - ▶ I believe we're all prone to err one way or the other. But for those of you who identify with the Christian activist, it's important to recognize this temptation. It may not change how you invest your money or free time pursuing the aims of social activism, but I hope this awareness will adjust your motivations and expectations.
- ❖ *What does the Ascension have to say to the Christian activist?* **The Ascension says Jesus has gone into heaven and has not yet returned. Thus his kingdom on earth is not yet.** So any ambition to transform society to better reflect and promote kingdom values needs to be tempered by this fact that King Jesus is not here – at least not yet.

- ❖ Yes, we believe any society that abides by Christian values, that conforms to the will of God, will experience greater human flourishing. So we are to pray for his kingdom to come and his will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.
  - ▶ But the point is that we should not despair and imagine the kingdom to have failed if our society continues in moral decline or becomes progressively more secular. Some Christians are so devastated that our country has forgotten its Christian roots and abandoned its Christian values. But what they need to learn is the significance of Jesus' ascension.
  
- ❖ It's the same lesson he taught his disciples. He could've just disappeared and never come back. But then the disciples would likely sit around waiting for the next appearance, waiting for Jesus to take out the Romans and establish the kingdom.
  - ▶ So he ascends bodily, literally, to get his message across: The King has left the building (the earth). So the kingdom that you're expecting is not yet here. Don't fret over it. The activist is heavy on the 'already' but light on the 'not-yet', so he has to keep reminding himself the kingdom is not-yet.
  
- ❖ But notice that Jesus doesn't reject their expectations for a restored kingdom. He doesn't deny the fact that one day kingdom values will be perfectly reflected and celebrated in all the earth. But he does do two things in reply in vv7-8.
  
- ❖ First, in v7 he says that knowing when this great day will arrive should not be their concern. All you need to know is that the Father has fixed a date for the kingdom to be restored. With that you can be sure it'll happen, and it won't depend on your efforts.
  - ▶ *Do you see how this changes the activist's motivation for pursuing social reform?* No longer are we trying to restore the kingdom ourselves, to usher it in, to bring heaven down to earth. Instead, our activism is pursued in confidence that the same Jesus who ascended to heaven is the same Jesus who will return and bring heaven down with him. The Father has fixed a date. Don't fret. It's going to happen.
  
- ❖ The second thing Jesus does in reply, in v8, is to bring up the promised Holy Spirit. His point is that, in the sense that the kingdom of God is already here, it is spiritual in nature. It's not a kingdom defined by geography and borders. The already-kingdom of God is defined by relationship, one between a king and his subjects. The already-kingdom is God's kingly rule in the lives of the redeemed who have received the Spirit's presence and power.
  - ▶ So even if our society completely rejects all kingdom values, even if Christianity is completely marginalized to the fringes, we need not fret. The kingdom of God will not have lost a step. In the world we will have tribulation, but take heart; Jesus has overcome the world (Jn. 16:33).
  
- ❖ So whatever is happening in the news or whatever is being debated in Washington will not deter the kingdom's advance. It will progressively advance through the mission of the Church until the day her Bridegroom returns. This is what the activist needs to keep in mind.

## Correcting the Mistake of the Pietist

- ❖ What about the pietist? What is his mistake and what does the Ascension have to say to him? Well contrary to the activist, the pietist is light on the ‘already’ and heavy on the ‘not-yet’.
  - ▶ And if you’re too heavy on the not-yet aspect of the kingdom, you’ll tend to see little hope or value in transforming the world. The pietist would advise the church to back off and focus on worshiping and waiting for Jesus in private. There is a tendency here to privatize the kingdom, to privative the faith.
  
- ❖ And as before, this sentiment is held by both conservatives and progressives. Among conservative Christians, there is a popular take on end-times theology which basically says society is going to hell in a hand-basket *and fast*. So the Christian responsibility is to resist culture, to remain pure, remain patient, and wait for Jesus to come back *to get us out of here!*
  - ▶ This is a theology that assumes the world, along with society and culture, is all going to burn and be destroyed. You can see why there is little motivation to transform it. It’s like arranging deck chairs on the Titanic. *Why bother?* They’d rather focus on personal devotions, personal piety, and personal evangelism. All the while keeping an eye to the sky in anticipation of Jesus’ return.
  
- ❖ There are other Christians, on the other side of an ideological spectrum, who have little interest in the end-times. Yet they share in common an attitude of indifference whenever Christian values are constricted to the private realm and barred from public discussion or policy. There is a form of pietism that says, “*Faith is for the personal life or even the afterlife but not the public life.*” Don’t expect your kingdom values to have any place at the table when we’re debating or shaping public policy.
  - ▶ Again these people might live in different zip codes, read different newspapers, and watch different cable news channels, yet both groups would discourage Christians from thinking they can transform society and culture to reflect kingdom values. One side says it’s useless. The other says it’s inappropriate. But both agree that your focus should be on worshiping and waiting for Jesus in private.
  
- ❖ *What does the Ascension have to say to the Christian pietist?* To the activist, the Ascension says Jesus has gone into heaven. **But to the pietist, the Ascension says this same Jesus will not forever stay in heaven.** This Jesus is coming back one day, and not just to scoop up Christians and bring them back into the clouds. No, the bodily-resurrected Jesus is coming back to fully establish a earthly kingdom and sit on a earthly throne. Jesus is not coming back to start all over, burn everything up, and make all new things. No, he says he’s coming back to make all things new (Rev. 21:5).
  
- ❖ In Acts 1:9, the disciples see Jesus literally ascend up into the sky until a cloud took him out of their view. And it says in v10, “*And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in whites robes [that is Luke’s way of saying they’re angels], and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven?”*”

- ▶ In other words, what are you guys doing staring off into heaven? Keep your eyes on the mission that Jesus has given you here on earth. When pietism taken to its extreme – when one’s faith gets so privatized and one’s focus gets so otherworldly – it actually does make a person “*so heavenly-minded that they’re of no earthly-good*”.
- ❖ I normally dislike that phrase, since I believe it’s biblical and healthy for Christians to think often of heaven and to contemplate their future hope. But I recognize it is possible to take it too far. Sometimes when you read the news, you get depressed. You see the trend lines of culture, and you’re deeply troubled. A deep desire for Jesus’ return stirs in you. But you start to wonder why is he taking so long. Why does he tarry?
  - ▶ Before long, a good desire can sour into impatience, and then you find yourself gazing up into heaven with a restlessness that takes your eyes off your earthly duty. If you find yourself in that state, you need these angelic words to ring in your ear, “*Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven?*” There is a job to do. There is a mission to engage. That is what the Ascension has to say to the pietist.
- ❖ Some are looking to earth for political power while others are looking to heaven for a pie in the sky, but both need to consider the significance of the Ascension because it acts as a corrective against either politicizing or privatizing the Christian faith.

### Commencing the Mission of the Disciple

- ❖ But there is a bigger purpose the Ascension serves. **It not only corrects the mistakes of the activist and the pietist. It commences the mission of the disciple.**
  - ▶ In Luke’s gospel, his first book to Theophilus, it ends with Jesus’ ascension. So in this second book, he could’ve skipped this part. It’s a bit redundant. He could’ve started off with chapter 2, with Pentecost. But there is good reason to retell the Ascension.
- ❖ Because it’s not just a fitting conclusion to the gospel story, to all that Jesus accomplished in his life. **The Ascension is the perfect introduction to this story** – the story of what Jesus is continuing to accomplish now through the lives of his followers.
  - ▶ It’s on the basis of the Ascension that we are sent out into the world on a mission. It’s spelled out for us in v8. “*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.*”
- ❖ Jesus was speaking here of a restoration for Israel but not a restoration of its national sovereignty. Rather, a restoration of its mission (vocation). In the Old Testament, Israel was commissioned to be “*a light for the nations that [God’s] salvation may reach to the end of the earth*” (Isa. 49:6).
  - ▶ And now it is through disciples of Jesus, who have been baptized by his Spirit, that Israel’s mission will carry forth into a new age, the age of the Church. The goal is the same: To bring the light of God’s salvation to the nations, to the end of the earth.

- ❖ The rest of the book of Acts shows how it happened. First in Jerusalem (chapters 2-7), then in all Judea and Samaria (chapters 8-12), and then to the end of the earth (chapters 13-28). But at the end of the book, it ends without a clear conclusion to the story. We, as readers, are left with an implied challenge to pick up where it left off and continue the mission as witnesses.
- ❖ Now the task of witnessing clearly involves a verbal witness. We are to speak of what we have seen and experienced of the Risen Christ. We are to proclaim a message of repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name to all nations (Lk. 24:47). We are to call sinners to turn to the One who died for sins and rose again that all who trust in him may have eternal life.
  - ▶ But the mission of a witness goes beyond just speaking. We can witness to the radical generosity of Christ through deeds of radical generosity towards the poor and homeless in our community. We can witness to God's unyielding commitment to justice by exposing and fighting the unjust victimization of society's weak and helpless. We can witness to the covenantal love between Christ and his Church by strengthening our own marriages while preserving the institution for society.
    - Our mission as witnesses for Christ involves the totality of our lives, not just our words and what we say.
- ❖ My whole point is that it's on the basis of the Ascension that we are sent out on this mission. The Ascension is literally the crowning moment of Jesus' life and ministry. In his ascension, we're told that he was seated at the Father's right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion (Eph. 1:20-21). That is when God highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name (Phil. 2:7).
  - ▶ In other words, the Ascension is about Jesus' ascension to his throne to sit as king of the kingdom. With that in mind, think about what it means for our mission as his witnesses.
- ❖ I like how one writer puts it, "*There is all the difference in the world between going out on mission with the motive of helping Christ to become King, and going out because the [One who is already crowned] King has sent you.*"<sup>2</sup>
  - ▶ In other words, when Christ commissions us to go and make disciples of all nations, it makes all the difference to know that he has ascended, that he is sitting on his throne, and all authority in heaven and on earth as been given to him (Mt. 28:18).
- ❖ All authority in all of heaven and all of earth belongs to Jesus, and he has sent us out on mission with that authority and with the power of his own Spirit! *How can you justify a private faith?* It would be as if the President gave you authority to wield his executive power in all the land, and yet you only use it to make your cable provider show Rockets games. How selfish is that?

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<sup>2</sup> Bruce Milne, *Acts: Witness to Him*, 43.

- ❖ That's the point. The pietist who tries to privatize the kingdom is being selfish. If you've been given such power and authority to witness on behalf of the King of kings, how can you restrict it to simply serve your private and personal realm?
  - ▶ The kingdom of God is not restricted to heaven. Since the Incarnation, the kingdom has been at hand. It has been (and still is) breaking into this world. The kingdom is public and has public implications that we must advocate for.
  
- ❖ But at the same time, we must beware the mistake of the activist who tries to politicize this kingdom and spread it by weapons of the flesh (2 Cor. 10:4). The kingdom of God does not spread by soldier or sword. Neither does it spread by elections or legislation. The kingdom spreads by the Spirit-empowered witness of Spirit-filled Christians in word and in deed.
  
- ❖ Friends, if you don't already know, ask God to show you which way you tend to err – either making the mistake of the activist or the pietist. And then be willing to listen and obey when he challenges you to be more balanced.
  - ▶ For some of you that might be a challenge to be more public with your faith. To extend it beyond the private realm, so that your Christianity begins to make an actual difference in the community around you. *What would that look like for you?*
    - Or God may need to temper the expectations some of you have in taking on the world and transforming it for Jesus. Perhaps his challenge is for you to pursue the contemplative, to deepen your personal devotion and piety. What would that look like in your life?
  
- ❖ No matter how he's challenging you, keep this in mind: **Because of the Ascension, God's kingdom is already. And because of the Ascension, God's kingdom is not-yet.** That's a biblical mystery and paradox we have to keep in careful balance.