

“After the Resurrection”
Psalm 24
April 1, 2018

INTRODUCTION:

There are five great events in God’s plan to restore his world after the tragic fall brought on by the sin of Adam, all five having to do with the redemptive work of Jesus. The five are the incarnation, the crucifixion, the resurrection of Jesus, the ascension and the return of Jesus. If we were to rate these five by the emphasis given to them in the American Protestant Church (not the emphasis given to them in the Bible), I think we would all agree that top billing goes to the incarnation that we celebrate at Christmas. In second place, I would put our Easter celebration of the resurrection of Jesus, the event we are celebrating today. Probably in third place would be the crucifixion, remembered on Good Friday before Easter. Next I would put the second coming of Jesus, which, if for no other reason, is focused upon because of questions about its timing.

While there may be some dispute about the emphasis given to some of these events, I think there would be no dispute about the one given least emphasis. How many Christians know that there is a church holiday called “Ascension Day,” celebrated 40 days after Easter every year, which always puts it on a Thursday. I would like for us to look at the ascension of Jesus today for the simple reason that it deepens our understanding of the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus was raised not merely as vindication of his innocence, but in order that he might ascend to the throne in heaven where he reigns even now.

Psalm 24 is commonly regarded as a psalm about the ascension of Christ into heaven, mostly because of the last four verses. I would like for us to look at it by going first to the end of the psalm where that ascension is mentioned, and then return to the first part of the psalm which describes the results of the ascension.

I. The Victorious Entry (v. 7-10)

Many psalms have both an historical reference and a future fulfillment in the ministry of Christ, and this is clearly one of those. King David wrote this psalm in all likelihood on the occasion of moving the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6). That’s when he danced before the Lord as the Ark, which was the very presence of God, was placed in the tent. Jesus taught that these psalms all speak of him (Luke 24). When we understand that he is the presence of God, it is easy to see how this psalm speaks of his enthronement in heaven. As we say in the Apostle’s Creed, “He ascended into heaven and is

seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.” That seat, the Bible tells us, is a throne from which he rules.

So verses 7-10 of our psalm tell us something no human has witnessed—the arrival of Jesus in heaven after his resurrection. We have abundant eyewitness testimony to the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. You can read those eyewitness testimonies in the four Gospels. We also have eyewitness testimony to Jesus’ ascension into heaven. Luke tells us that the apostles all saw Jesus ascend (Acts 1:9). But none of them, nor any other human, witnessed his arrival in heaven.

The arrival is described in the form of a dialogue between the gates of heaven and the angels of heaven. The angels speak first, telling the gates to lift up their heads that the King of glory may come in. When humans are told to hold their heads high, it means to be filled with confidence and a healthy pride. It is the opposite of being downcast, in which the dejected head is lowered. A person holds their head high at a moment of triumph. The gates of heaven are personified and informed of the fact that it is time to rejoice at a triumph. Gates see many pass through them, and these gates are no exception. They had witnessed the mission of many angels going forth at the command of God in various efforts to restore this very broken and fallen world. The gates had witnessed the angel Gabriel going with his astounding announcement that a virgin would be with child. And they had witnessed the even more astounding departure of the Son of God some 34 years prior to this, leaving the glories of heaven for a life of suffering and poverty. In many ways, all of this going and coming witnessed by these gates had the smell of defeat about them. But now it would seem something different is about to happen.

The gates respond with a question. **“Who is this King of glory?”** The answer is given: **“The Lord, strong and mighty; the Lord, mighty in battle!”** It is none other than the Son of God, the very same one the gates had seen leave over three decades before this. He left to take the form of a weak baby, to live a life of weakness and to die a shameful death. But he has been raised from the dead and is now returning as a conquering warrior. The book of Revelation says that the blood of battle is still on him as he passes through these gates, but he is returning victorious. His mission was to restore what was broken in this fallen world, to crush Satan and break his tyranny over the earth, to end death and to make all things new. He returns to heaven as a victorious conqueror in every part of his mission.

When there is a significant victory, those who benefit from it love to prolong the celebration. They want it to be repeated so it can be enjoyed and relished all over again. So the dialogue is repeated all over again. We football fans understand this. Those of you who are Alabama fans, how many times did you watch the final, winning play of the National Championship game back in January? And each time you saw it, didn’t it bring a fresh round of joy? And

you Auburn fans, how many times have you seen the replay of the “Kick Six” game from 2013? Do you ever get tired of seeing that? The book of Revelation says that the heavenly celebration continues still. The twenty-four elders worship God saying, **“We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign”** (11:17). And again, the great multitude in heaven, **“like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, ‘Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns’** (19:6).

The reason for such celebration is that the victory won by this mighty warrior, the risen and ascended Jesus, is a victory shared by many. When our soldiers from World War II returned in victory, it was victory not just for them but for our entire nation. When Jesus returns victorious to his home, it is a victory for the earth and for God’s people. The psalmist speaks of these things in the first part of the psalm, and let’s look at them now.

II. Victory for the Earth (v. 1-2)

God has created a material world, and it belongs to him. It is his by right of creation and also now by right of redemption. The earth was cursed because of the sin of Adam, and we are still living with the results of that curse. But God never gives up on his creation. The ascended and reigning Lord Jesus will restore even this earth. Its fullness belongs to him. The fullness of the earth speaks of the best things the earth has. The power, the talents of people, all the money and the pleasure, all this belongs to Jesus.

The best this earth has is not here for man’s exploitation, but for God’s glory. We are here as managers and stewards, not as owners. God owns it, has reclaimed it, and will one day completely remove the curse upon it. As our famous Christmas hymn says, the second Adam will make his blessings flow as far as the curse is found.

III. Victory for God’s People (v. 3-6)

The world God has made is breathtakingly beautiful. It is staggering to imagine what it will be like when the curse is removed. The renewed earth is a wonderful gift the risen and ascended Jesus delights to share with his people. But that is not the greatest treasure awaiting us. Verses 3-6 describe an even greater gift, the gift of God’s presence. The presence of God is described as the face of God. **“Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob”** (v. 6). The face speaks of the essence of a person. If I see a photograph of you, it contains your face. If someone takes a photo of my arm, my wife might recognize it as my arm. But she would say, “That looks like my husband’s arm.” She would not say, “That’s my husband” unless the photo

showed my face. The greatest victory for God's people will be the enjoyment of face-to-face intimacy with God. It is what we were created for and will be the source of our everlasting joy.

The journey to this destination of face-to-face enjoyment of God is described in Old Testament terms. **“Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place?”** (v. 3). David is speaking of the worship of God in the Old Testament tabernacle. It was located on the high point of Jerusalem so that worshipers had to ascend the mountain to worship there. But there is a figurative sense to this as well, one that I find quite helpful. Our journey to enjoy God's presence will feel like a climb.

Expectations are important. Many Christians expect the Christian life to be a downhill coasting into glory, or at least a plateau where you don't have to work so hard. But the Bible's portrayal of our pilgrimage in this life is more akin to a long ascent. Almost two years ago, my son and I enjoyed an epic bicycle ride on the Blue Ridge Parkway, riding the entire 490 miles from south to north. On Day 1, we faced three ten mile climbs. To survive these climbs, I found it critical to maintain accurate expectations. As the road climbed into a turn, it would be easy to get your hopes up that just around that next turn in the road would be the end of the climb. Instead, it was almost always more climbing. The key, I found, was to prepare myself mentally to just keep climbing. The same is true in the Christian life, where the climbing will not end until we see Jesus face to face.

What form does the climbing take for us? Does it just mean that we are to try really hard to be nice? Verse 4 answers that question. **“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.”** It means to have a pure heart that results in clean hands. And how does that happen? It happens through right worship. That's what that next phrase is talking about. When it speaks of the lifting up of the soul to what is false, it's talking about the worship of idols. When you lift something up, you are offering it to your god, and the thing being given to this god is the soul itself. But the god is a false god, meaning that its promises are false. The local Canaanite god at this time was named Baal, a god of fertility who promised to bring rain and fertility to crops. But it was a false promise, because rain is controlled by the true God, and his name is Jesus, not Baal.

The assumption of this psalm and of the entire Bible is that you have to worship something or someone, and that worship will always result in your lifting up your soul to that one who is worshipped. We are inveterate worshippers. The only question is whether the worship and the soul is offered to a false god or the true God.

What happens when you lift up your soul to a false god? You become false, which is what the next phrase means when it speaks of swearing deceitfully.

Our false gods no longer have names like Baal and Molech. They have names such as money, power, pleasure and success. And these gods may satisfy for a time, but it never lasts. Ronda Rousey was the female Ultimate Fighting Champion several years ago. She had won twelve matches, with most of her victories being decisive first round wins. Her rise to fame was meteoric, leading to a movie deal. But then in November of 2015 an underdog by the name of Holly Holm delivered a kick that led to instant defeat. When Rousey was recovering in the medical room after the loss, she said, “I was sitting in the corner and was like, ‘What am I anymore if I’m not this?’ Literally sitting there, thinking about killing myself. In that exact second, I’m like, ‘I’m nothing. What do I do anymore?’”

How different it is for the one who worships the risen and ascended Jesus. **“He will receive blessing from the Lord and righteousness from the God of his salvation”** (v. 5). Derek Kidner summarizes this promise like this. “This man has the smile of God upon him: he is accepted, he is helped to live an upright life, his affairs under God’s blessing will run as they should.”

To whom have you lifted up your soul today? What are you giving yourself to? To quote Ronda Rousey, “What are you if you’re not this?” What is the “this” in your life that defines you? That is what you have lifted your soul to. We are helped in lifting our soul to the true God by remembering that he is the King of glory, strong and mighty. He is the risen and ascended Jesus who is reigning even now. He has fought for your soul and he has won. This is the one who gives life and blessing to those who give themselves to him.

So here’s the application. Fight every day to give your soul afresh to this God. It will be a long climb because there are many competitors for your soul’s affection. But stay in the fight and surrender yourself afresh to this God who has loved you, fought for you and won. The other gods can bring momentary satisfaction. Only he can bring everlasting joy. Think about that. Every other god we have lifted our souls to fades and disappoints. But the reigning Jesus leads to increasing joy for all eternity, with riches never exhausted.

CONCLUSION:

Someone might be thinking, “If Jesus is on the throne now, then what is he waiting for to end the misery and suffering in this life? Why does he delay?” It is possible that he is waiting for you. If you don’t know him yet, then you have lifted up your soul to what is false and you are headed for an eternity of disappointment and suffering. But Jesus is full of mercy, and he is delaying the consummation where he will put all things right in order to give space and opportunity for others to repent of their false worship and come to him. Will you do so?

Small Group Discussion Questions
Psalm 24

1. What is your favorite part of the Easter celebration of the resurrection of Jesus?
2. The last four verses of Psalm 24 describe Jesus' arrival in heaven after his ascension. He is described as a victorious warrior returning home (with blood still on his garments according to Revelation 19:13). What are some of the victories Jesus won prior to this? Are there any feelings or desires that stir inside of you when you think of Jesus in this way?
3. When we think about the present reign of Jesus, what are some of the errors countered by this idea?
4. Let's try to make this more personal. When you think of the current reign of Jesus and of his committed and faithful love to you, as well as his promise to keep you and protect you, what should be the result in your life of believing these things? How might you have failed to believe this?
5. Jesus' victory is a victory for the earth. The earth and its fullness belong to him. Are there implications this has for a Christian environmentalism?
6. The greatest gift God has for us is face-to-face intimacy with God himself (v. 6). Do you believe that? How might your life be different if you believed that more strongly?
7. The Christian life is a pilgrimage marked by ascent, by climbing (v. 3). Do you see any implications that has for your Christian life? Or to word that differently, what troubles arise from failing to believe that?
8. Blessing is promised to the one who "does not lift up his soul to what is false" (v. 4). That is referring to idolatry. What idols pose unique and powerful temptations to you?