

Ascension of Our Lord

God's Right Hand

Acts 1:1-11; Luke 24:44-53

Ascension of Our Lord

Analysis by Lori A. Cornell

44[Jesus said to the eleven and those with them,] "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled."45Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, 46and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, 47and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48You are witnesses of these things. 49And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." 50Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. 51While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. 52And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; 53and they were continually in the temple blessing God.



Ascension of Christ – Pietro della Vecchia

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I am not a big fan of “harmonizing” texts. But because the author of Luke is also the author of Acts I have taken license to put the pieces together here, to create a more complete picture of the challenge and promise of the Ascension.

DIAGNOSIS: Left-Hand When Necessary

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Impatient for Change

To wait is to delay action. “Stay here in the city,” Jesus said to his disciples. They knew they were waiting for “the promise of the Father” (Acts 1:4), “to receive power from on high” (Luke 24:49). But would they know this promise or power when it came? Luke tells us the gift of the Spirit was unmistakable. But the time of Jesus’ Ascension is this weird in-between time: 10 days where the disciples had no idea what exactly they would experience. So they had to wait. And waiting is a whole lot less pleasant than opening the gift. Delaying action can make you question your assignment: Were they capable of whatever ministry

Jesus had in mind for them? Waiting can also make you impatient. Jesus had clearly said that the disciples were going to remain in the dark about some things, including when and how the kingdom of Israel would be restored (Acts 1:6-7). But who wants to remain in the dark about the things they have been told to wait for? Having Jesus leave them behind had to have been disorienting enough. Now the only action they were expected to take was to delay action.

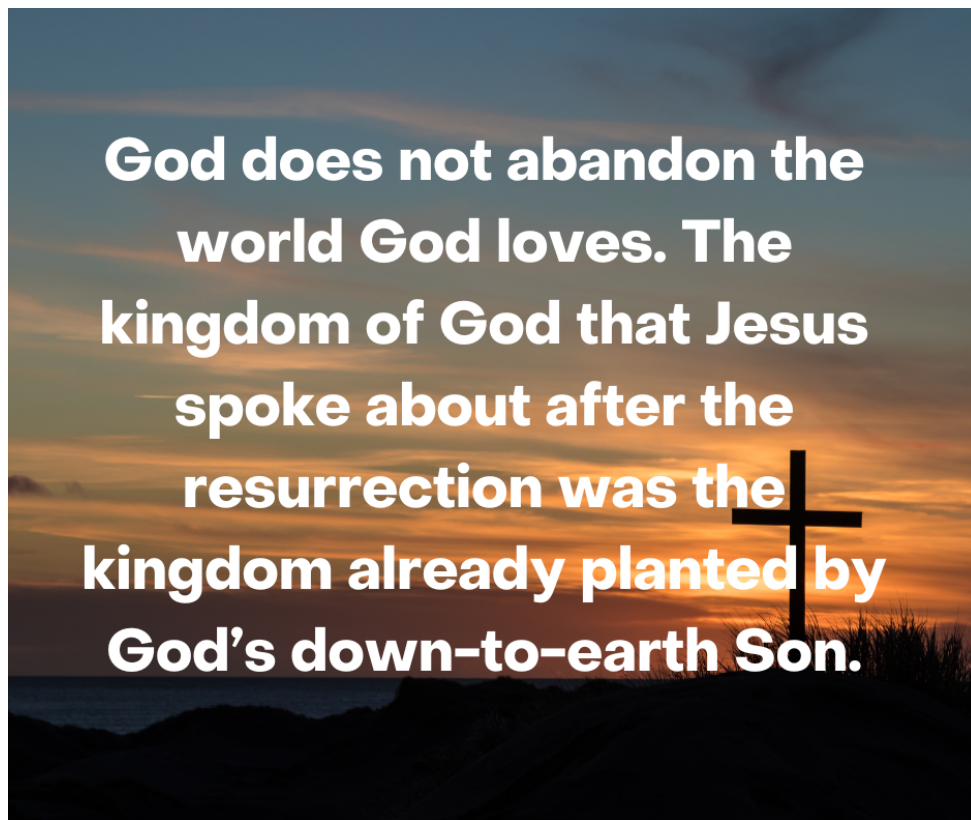
Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Ain't Nothing Gonna Change

Imagine you've been waiting a long time for the world to change. But you continue to live under an oppressive Roman regime and a religious leadership that encourages the crucifixion of those who preach love, forgiveness, and grace. Imagine that the only clear evidence you have of that change has come in the form of a man named Jesus, who has crucified but also, amazingly, has been raised from the dead to give you a 40-day crash course in carrying out his mission. Forty mind-bending and jaw-dropping days of hope in which your expectations of the world and God were turned upside-down. Now, imagine that this Jesus has just disappeared into the sky.

Karl Barth called the time between the Ascension and Pentecost "a significant pause." But I have to wonder if it felt more like dreams dashed. Jesus was gone again, and the disciples were left waiting in a recently-hostile Jerusalem alone. If you are supposed to "wait and pray," for what do you pray? Luke tells us that they worshiped, but only a few verses before this he says that "in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering" (Luke 24:41). If that change actually came, could they—the disciples—actually be a part of it?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Left-Handed Justice

When we can't see God, we are vulnerable to fear and cynicism. Fear that God doesn't keep his promises. Cynicism that changing the world is too big a project even for God. Like a child just beginning to learn "object permanence," we imagine that when we can't see God, God must not be there. What we miss is that the God who was just in the room (in Jesus) has already changed us and the world around us. We miss that even our waiting is altered by Christ's death, resurrection, and commissioning of the church. We miss that we have a calling—even as we wait. We miss hope. And life without hope is Christless.



From Canva

PROGNOSIS: Right-Hand Always Necessary

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): God's Human, Right-Hand Intercession

The hope that comes with the resurrection of Jesus is that the

“God whom we cannot see” is, in Christ, just as good as Jesus in the flesh. Forty days of crash-course-seminary instruction taught the disciples that. God does not abandon the world God loves. The kingdom of God that Jesus spoke about after the resurrection was the kingdom already planted by God’s down-to-earth Son. A Son who had now ascended to sit at the right hand of the Father (Acts 2:33). And from God’s right hand, Jesus would fulfill his promise to deliver power from on high. The Jesus who first ascended to the cross and descended to the dead, had now ascended to heaven to bring his promises full circle in the form of the Spirit at Pentecost.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Could the World Be about to Turn?

Luke explains in Acts (1:5) that the “power from on high” Jesus promises will be the very Holy Spirit that descended on him at his own baptism. The disciples will be “baptized” with the Holy Spirit. That had to be a lot for the disciples to take in. But Jesus had been raised from the dead; he had already delivered on the promise of resurrection. And waiting for the Holy Spirit for ten days was hope-filled, which made the wait easier.

So it is for us: We wait in hope. We die to our old self daily, and rise in Christ. We mark ourselves with the cross, and we expect God will be active in and through us each day. We even take time out of life’s busyness to recall all that Jesus taught us, and “worship God with great joy.” We pray fervently to the God who delivers on his promises. And, in those moments where in our joy we are disbelieving, we pray: “Come, Lord Jesus.” And, “Come, Holy Spirit.” And he does.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Expecting the Change from the Inside Out

Because Christ had risen and walked with the disciples for 40

days, the time between Ascension and Pentecost was finally a time of hope-filled waiting. Jesus had planted resurrection faith in them, and Jesus would deliver his promised Holy Spirit. That left them with ten days in which they could rest in those promises—in prayer and thanksgiving, in reflection and fellowship.

This pattern—prayer, thanksgiving, reflection, and fellowship—is a pattern the early church assumed and that we continue to this day. We pause “significantly,” and turn ourselves first to the one who is the source of our life. And then, having been gathered and enlightened by the Holy Spirit, we are sent. The world that Jesus “turned upside down,” is changed first in us. We seek out Christ’s promises, we examine and repent of who we have been, we are fed on the one who offers his whole self to us, and we look away from our own selfish impulses and see the needs of our neighbor. Indeed, the world is about to change: from the inside of us and our community of faith, rippling out to the ends of the earth.

Fifth Sunday of Easter

The Great Reversal

Acts 7:55-60

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Analysis by Steven E. Albertin

55But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56Look, he said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" 57But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. 58Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died.



The Martyrdom of St Stephen – Annibale Carracci
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Annibale_Carracci

When the good news of this message sweeps us off our feet and captivates our hearts, we believe the impossible: that God loves us and will vindicate us even as we are crushed by the deadly cycle of getting back and getting even.

DIAGNOSIS: The Deadly Cycle of Payback

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Getting Back and Getting Even

Who among us has not found themselves the victim of an unjust attack? A punch in the stomach, betrayed by a friend, falsely accused, pulverized by the mob's misguided anger ... and, (as we see in today's reading), stoned to death for just confessing our faith. We cry: "It's not fair!"

Things must be set right. The scales of justice must be balanced. The debt must be repaid. We demand our "pound of flesh." It is time to get back and get even!

Such was the response of the religious leadership and the raging mob to the testimony of Stephen. Stephen's declaration that he sees Jesus (the Son of Man) "sitting at the right hand of God" was blasphemous and insulting to these pious Jews. These are the ones who had already put Jesus to death for undermining the Word of God and the moral fiber of their godly society. God's holiness demanded justice. In the name of God, they must get back and get even. Such a wrong must be rectified. Someone must pay for this. Stephen would pay just as Jesus paid ... with his life. For Stephen it would not be on a cross but in a brutal and bloody stoning.

We too are caught up in a world dedicated to "getting back and getting even." When we feel unfairly and unjustly treated, we want the scales of justice to be balanced. Revenge becomes the name of the game. "Punching back" is righteous and justified.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Calling the Shots

The offended leadership and enraged mob could not allow Stephen to insult their religious faith with his reckless affirmation of Jesus. Convinced that they had the divine right to “call the shots,” their execution of Stephen would be justified and godly. When you believe that you have the divine right to balance the scales of justice, then even the taking of another’s life is simply setting things right.

We often feel the same way when we are unjustly wronged. We feel entitled to “call the shots” and get back and get even. We even may feel divinely authorized to exact our revenge and get our pound of flesh. Such thoughts may even have crossed the mind of Stephen. There is no evidence in the text that he did. However, such a desire to “call the shots” and play God has been the default position of every human being since Genesis 3.

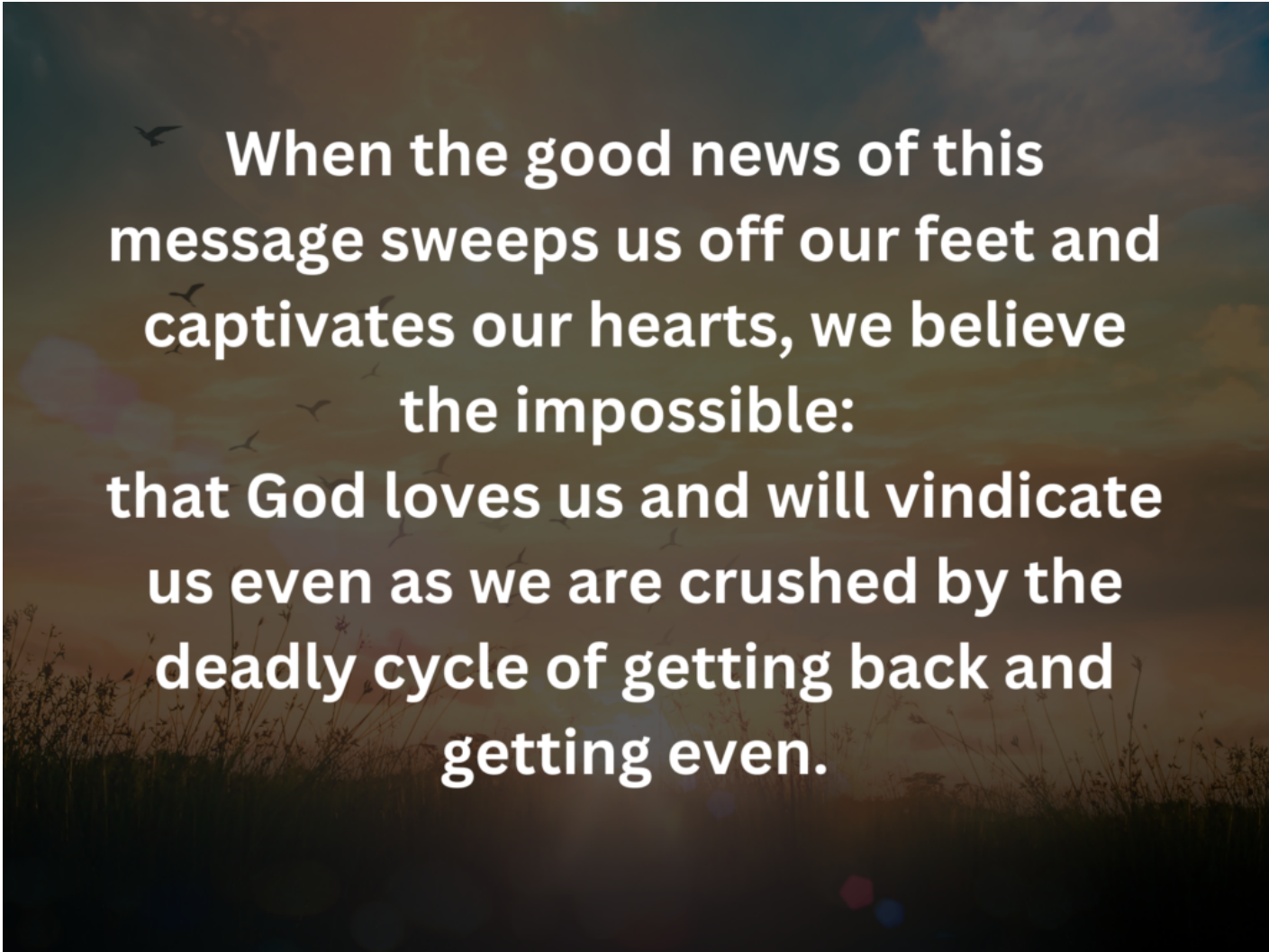
Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Trapped in the Deadly Cycle

Insulted and enraged, the mob punched back. The stones began to fly. Justice must be done. Stephen must pay. He did. Even that about-to-become-famous spectator, Saul, must have taken silent delight in this righteous execution of someone who dared to offend the holiness of God.

Our experiences confirm the same reality. We get back and get even. We put our oppressors in their place. We enjoy our “pound of flesh.” But before we know it, the tables are turned. Someone accuses us of mistreating them. They want their revenge. They must get back and get even. We are under attack.

There is no escaping this deadly cycle of getting back and getting even. We are all stuck in the muck of its seductive appeal to call the shots. We believe that God is on our side as

we get back and get even. The bloody wreckage of history reveals how much humans are unable to escape this primeval desire to play God and call the shots. No one escapes. No one gets out alive. God does not look kindly on those who think they can play God.



**When the good news of this
message sweeps us off our feet and
captivates our hearts, we believe
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PROGNOSIS: The Interruption of Mercy

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Giving Up My Rights

Stephen appears to be just another victim of the endless cycle of getting back and getting even. He was crushed by the wheels of justice, even if we think it was unfairly done. However,

there is something utterly odd in this account of the stoning of Stephen. As unjust as his execution was, he does not complain, protest, or resist. He willingly accepts his fate and then dares to forgive those who are executing him: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

His death is remarkably similar to the death of Jesus. Like Jesus, Stephen willingly accepted his deadly fate. Like Jesus, Stephen willingly asks God to "receive my spirit." Like Jesus, Stephen willingly forgives those who are killing him. Like Jesus, he willingly renounces his right to get back and get even. Like Jesus, he sacrifices himself and gives up his right to demand his due.

There is only one way to explain this amazing behavior of Stephen: the power of Jesus in his life. Jesus willingly gave up his right to justice and fair treatment. He paid. He did not seek to get his pound of flesh from those who so unfairly treated him. He did it trusting that the deadly cycle of pay back would not be the last word from his Father. When Jesus was raised on "the third day," it is clear that his faith was not in vain.

The church joyously proclaims that because of Jesus, sins are forgiven. Mercy has broken the inevitable cycle of getting back and getting even.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Trusting the Promise

Stephen trusts the promise of Jesus' death and resurrection. Therefore, Stephen swallows his pride and gives up his right to get back and get even. Because Stephen trusted that Jesus' fate would also be his, he was able to do the unthinkable: forgive his enemies.

That same kind of amazing life is ours. When the good news of this message sweeps us off our feet and captivates our hearts, we believe the impossible: that God loves us and will vindicate us even as we are crushed by the deadly cycle of getting back and getting even. Even as we are “stoned” by our enemies, we can confidently say to our heavenly Father, “Receive my spirit.”

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Interrupting the Cycle

Stephen interrupts the cycle of payback with mercy, just like his Lord. By refusing to push back, he exemplifies a new way to live. Like the one who has gone before him, he can “turn the other cheek, walk the extra mile and love his enemies.” As such he offers a glimpse of a new way of life where people are not perpetually engaged in conflict, always wanting to get back and get even and always bent on revenge.

We too can begin to live this new kind of life by interrupting the deadly cycle with mercy. It will not be easy as the world invites and taunts us join the fray and punch back. That is why those to have caught Stephen’s vision always need to pray, “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.”