

## II. Final Preparation for the Kingdom

From the moment Jesus entered upon His earthly ministry, His gospel – conveyed in both word and deed – was centered in the truth that the long-awaited kingdom of heaven was at last at hand. And because this kingdom differed so radically from Israel’s traditional understanding and expectation, Jesus everywhere accompanied His proclamation and demonstration of the kingdom’s in-breaking with a call to repentance and faith (cf. Matthew 4:12-17; Mark 1:14-15). A kingdom that is spiritual in its essence must be perceived with spiritual eyes; left to their natural “sight,” the sons of Israel would find themselves missing it (Luke 4:14-27).

This effort at altering Israel’s perspective and understanding began with John, the Isaianic forerunner commissioned by Yahweh to prepare the minds and hearts of the covenant people to recognize and receive their Messiah. In accordance with the word of the prophet, John’s work was to “*clear the way for Yahweh in the wilderness and make smooth in the desert a highway for Israel’s God.*” His was a ministry of repentance by which Israel’s convictions were to be refashioned and their expectations and hope redirected (Luke 3:1-9). In this way he would prepare a smooth and level path for the Lord’s promised theophany – His revelation of His full glory in His messianic Servant. Yahweh would cause His theophanic light to arise among the sons of Israel, but in order that it should ultimately shine upon all mankind (Isaiah 40:1-5).

The “Sunrise from on high” had indeed visited Israel, illumining the path of peace (ref. Luke 1:76-79), but Simeon’s woeful prophecy was also fulfilled: The One sent by Yahweh as His glory in the midst of His people and the lamp to their feet had become for them a sign to be opposed – a stone over which they stumbled (Luke 2:25-34; cf. Isaiah 8:14-15; Romans 9:32ff).

Israel refused to walk in the light of the Lord’s Christ, but their blind repudiation would not annul the Spirit’s word that that light would shine beyond Israel to illumine the Gentiles (again, Luke 2:32, cf. Matthew 4:12-17 with Isaiah 9:1-2, also Isaiah 42:1-7, 49:1-6, 59:20-60:3). As Isaiah predicted, the Davidic Servant had become a snare and trap to both houses of Israel, but He would nonetheless become a sanctuary for all those who held to the Lord’s testimony that life and security for David’s house are in *Immanuel* (Isaiah 7:1-9:7). Far from negating the Lord’s promise, Israel’s unbelief served its fulfillment. This was already evident in the betrayal and crucifixion of the Righteous One: Judas and the sons of Israel had become Christ’s murderers, putting Him to death by the hands of godless men, but in accordance with God’s predetermined plan and foreknowledge (cf. Matthew 26:20-25; John 13:18; Acts 2:22-23, 3:12-18).

### A. The King’s Commission (1:1-14)

Now the Prince of Life had come forth from the grave, through His resurrection manifesting Himself to be the Son of God with all authority and power. And having attested His triumph to His disciples over a period of forty days, Jesus was ready to ascend to His Father and take His throne in glory and absolute dominion at the Father’s right hand. In the Spirit, David had witnessed Yahweh’s future ordination and coronation of His Son (“*You are My Son; today I have begotten You...*”) and heard His pledge to give to Him all the nations of the earth as His inheritance and everlasting possession (Psalm 2:1-8). Jesus was ascending to take His throne as sovereign King, but His rule over all the earth depended upon another work of divine power.

1. God's prophetic promise regarding His Son's universal dominion would be realized, but not through conventional conquest. From His enthronement "*far above all rule and authority and power and dominion,*" Jesus would indeed establish His rule and build His kingdom by bringing all the nations under His lordship, but He would do so through the sword of His Spirit, not the sword of physical conquest (Isaiah 32; Ezekiel 36, 37; Zechariah 4; etc.). Again, in accordance with David's prophetic word, the messianic King would cause men to be a free-will offering in the day of His power; they would "volunteer freely" because of the King-Priest's renewing and transforming power exercised through His Spirit sent from His throne (Psalm 110:1-4; cf. Zechariah 6:9-13).

Jesus was now ascending to His Father to be enthroned as the True David (Acts 2:22ff) and inherit His kingdom. His redeeming work had secured that kingdom and His right to rule over it, but, before He could take possession of it, it needed to be made suitable for Him. *God had appointed His Son to be King over the everlasting kingdom of the new creation, and that inheritance awaited the renewing work of the Spirit of creation.*

Thus Jesus' declaration of His departure was everywhere attended with His promise of the coming of His Spirit. He was going to His Father, yet He wouldn't leave His people as orphans; He would come to them again, but this time in the person of His Spirit (John 14:1-29, 15:26, 16:13-15). In His absence, the Holy Spirit was to be Jesus' presence, word and power in the earth; the One through whom He would establish and extend His kingdom in the earth and administer His rule.

The Lord was poised to take His throne, and this implied the imminent outpouring of His Spirit. Again, Luke understood this connection and its importance, and so introduced his second account with the same promise that ended his former one: "*Behold I am sending forth the promise of My Father upon you; but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high... John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now*" (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:5).

2. Understanding the Scriptures, Luke grasped the essential role of the Holy Spirit in the establishment and fruition of Christ's kingdom.
  - a. First, for the Father to fulfill His promise to give His Son the ends of the earth for His possession, the nations must be gathered under His rule and made His subjects. But this fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant also constitutes the fulfillment of God's ancient promise to Abraham that, through his Seed, all the families of the earth would be blessed. The King's lordship over all the earth's peoples isn't about dominion as such, but dominion that brings men into His Father's blessing and secures them in that state of blessedness that flows from it.
  - b. *Luke recognized that Jesus would build His kingdom through **spiritual** conquest that destroys His enemies by ending their enmity.* Having reconciled the whole creation to His Father, the enthroned Son was going to build His kingdom by gathering the fruit of His reconciliation by means of His Spirit's renewing power. The kingdom of the new creation depends upon the Spirit's work of re-creation.

3. By emphasizing the Spirit's crucial role in inaugurating and extending the kingdom, Luke highlighted its *spiritual* nature. Jesus' kingdom is not "of this world" (John 18:36) – it shares neither the nature nor the operative principles of earthly kingdoms (cf. Luke 12:31-37 with 22:24-27). The kingdom of heaven pertains to the natural, physical creation, but not as it exists in its estrangement from God. That "kingdom" is presided over by the "prince of the power of the air," and it expresses his nature, concerns and priorities (Ephesians 2:1-2). And though Christ has triumphed over it by His cross (cf. John 12:31-32; Colossians 2:13-15; Hebrews 2:14-15), Satan's kingdom continues to operate in the present age in opposition to Him, His kingdom, and His subjects (cf. Acts 5:1-3, 26:1-18; 1 Peter 5:6-9; 1 John 5:19; Revelation 2:8-13, 12:1-12; etc.).

The kingdom of heaven is *of the Spirit*; it is a kingdom without earthly or natural counterpart and so cannot be envisioned by the natural mind (John 3:1-6). This dynamic was fundamental to Israel's unbelief: The Jews – reasoning with unspiritual minds – had come to understand the promised kingdom in terms of an exalted reproduction of the Davidic theocracy. This expectation had seeming scriptural support, for the prophets had employed the language and imagery of the theocracy to portray the future messianic kingdom. But the centuries-long anguish over the demise of David's kingdom also nurtured in the Jewish consciousness the burning hope that that kingdom would again emerge in all its former glory. By the time of Jesus' incarnation, the Jews had a theology of the kingdom that looked for a natural Messiah who, through natural conquest, would reestablish the glory and dominion of the earthly Davidic kingdom (Luke 24:13-21).

*So it was with Jesus' disciples:* Though they had come to believe that Jesus is the messianic King, they nonetheless retained an erroneous conception of His kingdom. This was the case prior to Jesus' crucifixion, and even His continued instruction concerning the kingdom and the Spirit *subsequent to His resurrection from the dead* didn't correct their understanding (1:3-5); the disciples yet remained unable to discern its true nature.

The reason is that this illumination, too, depends upon the work of the Spirit: That which is of the flesh is flesh and that which is of the Spirit is spirit; only those born of the Spirit can perceive the kingdom of heaven. Thus Luke recorded that Jesus' promise of the Spirit's imminent arrival to inaugurate the kingdom was met by the disciples' misguided question: "*Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?*" (1:6).

- a. This question, together with Jesus' response, has been used by dispensationalists in support of their view that the messianic kingdom promised to Israel in the Old Testament has been put on hold in the present "Church age" and will be ushered in as the "millennial kingdom" at Christ's return. They argue that Jesus didn't refute His disciples' understanding of the kingdom as an Israelite phenomenon; He merely told them that the time of that restoration wasn't for them to know.

While this interpretation is possible if the passage is treated in isolation, Luke's overall perspective on the kingdom of God – not to mention the perspective of the entire New Testament – doesn't allow for it. Luke's whole purpose in Acts was to show the true nature of the kingdom *in contradistinction to Jewish expectation*.

Therefore, to have him here affirming a millennial (Jewish theocratic) conception of the kingdom is to set him in sharp opposition to himself. Luke recognized that the messianic kingdom is radically different from what Israel expected, and he recorded this brief interchange, not simply to show that the disciples continued at that time to misunderstand its true nature, but, more importantly, to spotlight the fact that their misconception was to be corrected when the Spirit came upon them, fulfilling Jesus' words that He would "lead them into all truth" (John 16:12-15).

- b. Jesus was never going to recover the theocratic kingdom to Israel as the disciples imagined, *but He was restoring it in the way the Scripture declared*. God had promised to restore David's kingdom in the last days (cf. Isaiah 9-11; Jeremiah 31-33; Ezekiel 34-37; Hosea 3; Amos 9; etc.), but that restoration would transcend the former kingdom by as much as the spiritual transcends the natural.
- First, David's rebuilt kingdom would see the overthrow of the curse and the renewal and recovery of the whole created order to God. The prophet Isaiah was particularly concerned with this defining feature of the kingdom (9:1-7, 11:1-9, 35:1-10, 49:1-55:13, 65:1-25; etc.).
  - But, as the central component of this renewal, God was going to restore Adam's fallen race and regather them to Himself. Thus the Davidic Servant-Messiah would recover and rule over the two houses of Israel, but that work was to extend outward to all the earth's peoples (cf. again Isaiah 11:1-10 and 49:1-55:13 with Amos 9:11-15). When, in the fullness of the times, God raised up David's fallen tabernacle, Israel would take possession of all the nations who are called by His name (ref. Acts 15:1ff).

Jesus was indeed going to "restore the kingdom to Israel," but not in the sense that the disciples expected. Far from bringing about a recovery of the former theocracy, He was going to usher in the kingdom promised from the beginning – the kingdom of the new creation composed of sons drawn from every tribe, tongue, nation, and people. Jesus' disciples asked Him about the *timing* of the kingdom; discerning their misconception of it, Jesus answered by pointing to the kingdom's true nature, highlighting *how* it is to be inaugurated and established.

*"He did not deny outright that a restoration of Israel was coming. Indeed, Israel's true restoration had begun in John's call to repent in view of the nearness of God's kingdom, and Peter would later announce the hope of future 'times of the restoration of all things,' when Jesus the Messiah would return to earth. Nevertheless, his answer implied a twofold correction of their expectations. In the first place, they needed to understand that God's timing was none of their business. Second, and more importantly, their concept of restoration needed to be expanded to worldwide, even cosmic, dimensions. The disciples' ethnocentric focus on Israel's military-political ascendancy was far too small... They needed to see the expanding horizons of the Lord's work of rescue, repair, and restoration, embracing not only Israelites, but all peoples in a triumphant conquest of grace."* (Dennis Johnson, The Message of Acts)

4. In view of Jesus' final words promising the imminent outpouring of His Spirit, Luke turned his attention to the disciples' response. Their understanding of the kingdom was still obscured, but their Lord's response gave them confidence that these matters would be resolved when the Spirit arrived. As He had pledged to them, His Spirit would guide them into all truth. And so, having watched Jesus ascend to His Father, the community of disciples returned to Jerusalem, gathering together with one mind and purpose, waiting in patient submission and with full confidence for the coming of the promised One. *But, in waiting for His Spirit, they were waiting for their Lord's return.*
- a. Jesus pledged to His disciples the night before His self-offering that He would not leave them as orphans (John 14:18-19); though He was about to die, this wouldn't be the end of the story. He would come to them again, which pledge highlighted first the fact of His resurrection.
  - b. But Jesus' promise to again be with His people looks beyond His resurrection and the forty days spent with them subsequent to it; *it concerns the Father's design that the Son should continue with His own by means of His indwelling Spirit.* This is evident in John's Upper Room account (14:1-16:13), perhaps most pointedly in the fact that the disciples understood Jesus to be associating His returning to them with His ascent to the Father (16:16-17). For it was by His ascension that the Spirit – the One like Jesus – would come (16:7). It is also implied in Jesus' words in the Great Commission when, at the time of His ascension, He promised His disciples to be with them until the very end of the age (Matthew 28:18-20).

As noted in the introduction, Luke regarded his second account (the book of Acts) as his record of what Jesus *continued* to do and teach after He was taken into heaven (ref. 1:1-2). The entire Luke-Acts corpus concerns Jesus' words and deeds, but in the second book they are manifest, not through His bodily presence, but His spiritual presence in connection with His Spirit who indwells and empowers those who share His life and likeness.

Albeit in His Spirit, Jesus continues to be present and speak and act in the world. If the book of Acts reveals the identity, nature, and function of the Church (and it does), it focuses on an ecclesiology centered in the Spirit of Christ: Christ is present and active in His Church by His presence and activity in the Church's individual members. They are being built together into a spiritual house, but only because they are individually living stones in Him, being His sanctuary by His indwelling Spirit and, therefore the dwelling place of God Himself.

And so John's vision of the ascended and glorified Christ had Him standing in the midst of a gathering of lampstands (Revelation 1:9-2:5). Jesus interpreted these lampstands as representing individual churches that comprise His Church, and John was to understand from this symbolism that the exalted King, though enthroned at His Father's right hand, is nonetheless present in the midst of His people; He knows, sees, hears, and acts, and His Church affirms and attests this by being a praying body (1:12-14, 4:23-31, 12:1-12, etc.).