

STUDY 1

Jesus Is Lord

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Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36).

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:9–11).

JESUS, THE LORD NOW

The acclamation and proclamation of Jesus Christ as Lord by the church is primarily a declaration of the living reality of Jesus in the present. It is the title for Jesus that tells us, as does no other so fully, that he, crucified and raised again, currently is exalted to the Father's right hand, glorified there, and is now ruling all things so that the plan of the Father will reach its glorious conclusion at the end of history. Jesus 'is not only a part of divine [*saving history*] in the past, nor just the object of future hope, but a living reality in the present—so alive that he can enter into fellowship with us now, so alive that the believer prays to him, and the Church appeals to him in worship'.¹

In contemporary evangelical (and wider Christian) culture, the ascension and exaltation of Jesus is overlooked and underplayed. For the church of the New Testament, Jesus was thought of *primarily* in terms of *presence*, not in terms of *memory*. A renewed appreciation of the exaltation of Christ Jesus is the fruit of the gift of the Holy Spirit. We have misapprehended the nature of the gift of the Spirit if we have not been attuned by him to the reality of the glory of Jesus Christ our ascended Lord, which gives rise to hearty praise and adoration; if we haven't taken confidence to proclaim the gospel of Christ in the face of the fierce antagonism that the proclamation of his Lordship precipitates; and if we haven't strengthened our resolve to live our lives in this world joyfully obedient to him who has been made, by virtue of his dying and rising, both Lord and Christ. Worship, proclamation and obedience are the appropriate attendant responses to faith that confesses, 'Jesus is Lord!'

¹ Oscar Cullman, *The Christology of the New Testament*, 2nd edn, trans. S. C. Guthrie and C. A. M. Hall, SCM, London, 1963, p. 195. (Cullmann uses the term *Heilsgeschichte* where I have placed *saving history*.)

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In the first chapter of his book, *Jesus Ascended*,² Gerrit Scott Dawson reflects on the difficulties facing him and his congregation and states that the overall verdict may be given, ‘The world is too much with us’. He quotes H. B. Swete, the author of *The Ascended Christ*:

Belief in the Ascended Christ inspires a deep sense of personal responsibility. Few things are more necessary at the present time. In a self-pleasing, self-asserting age responsibility is apt to sit very lightly on many, or to be wholly ignored. Men and women, nay, even children, claim the right to be arbiters of their own conduct . . . [I]n all classes of society the question which men put to themselves is not, ‘What is my duty?’ but, ‘How can I get the greatest enjoyment out of my life? How can I best succeed in evading its burdens?’

These comments, made by Swete in 1906, ring remarkably true into our own age. Dawson quotes George Barna:

When asked to describe the ends they live for, the top items most American Christians reported were good health, a successful career, a comfortable lifestyle and a functional family. The average Christian assumes that when we are happy, God is happy . . . a large majority of Christians contend that the true meaning of our earthly existence is simply to enjoy life and reap as much fulfilment as we can from our daily pursuits.

Recovering a proper and robust doctrine of the ascension, i.e. of the Lordship of Jesus, will reconnect us to a sense of our true identity for life in the world.

GOD MADE HIM LORD

In Revelation chapter 5, Jesus is portrayed as the Lion–Lamb who is uniquely qualified to take the scroll from the hand of the Father and to break open its seals. This vision opens up to us important elements of the Lordship of Jesus. Firstly, to take the scroll and open the seals is to be in the position of co-regent with the Father in the outworking of His plan for creation. Originally this is what humanity were created for (Gen. 1:26ff.); the great sadness of John that no one is able to be found in all of creation speaks deeply of the tragedy and evil of human and Satanic rebellion. That one is then found, miraculously and unexpectedly, hints at the action of God: this one is not merely *found*, but *provided*. The cry ‘Jesus is Lord!’ captures his status both as divine Son and as true Man.³

Secondly, he qualifies for this position through his death as an action of humble obedience; his ascension to Lordship is the crowning, not the reversing of his ‘descent’ as servant. Paul says, ‘What does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe’ (Eph. 4:9–10). Philippians 2:6ff. speaks of this, telling us of Christ Jesus, who, being in very nature God, did not grip tightly to equality with God but rather emptied himself. This self-emptying (*kenosis*) was not humiliation for him, but the fullest expression of his glory. We beheld the glory of the Father as this One emptied himself (John 1:14).

² Gerrit Scott Dawson, *Jesus Ascended*, P&R Publishing Company, Phillipsburg, 2004.

³ Oscar Cullman (*The Christology of the New Testament*) and Werner Kramer (*Christ, Lord, Son of God: Studies in Biblical Theology, no. 50*) both show how the title ‘Lord’ (*kurios*), from its Jewish and Greek backgrounds, indicated both the idea of human co-regency with God, as well as divinity itself.

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Emptying himself expressed itself finally in death on the cross. His work there was to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8), and even more—to destroy the devil himself (Heb. 2:14). The devil has set himself as the rival to God and His Christ, and ensnared humanity in this vain and wicked rebellion. To bring his destruction and to destroy his works (that is, to liberate men and women from their slavery to him), Jesus had to deal with the sins of the whole world. The lowest parts of the earth to which he descended was his identification with humanity (all of us) in the depth of evil and sin. God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us. He bore in himself the devastation of our hate, pride, lust, greed, anger, defilement—the dreadful burden which we could never take off ourselves and lay on another. Moreover, he took upon himself the relentless, sneering contempt of the demonic powers who torment the mind and heart of guilty and shameful humanity. In all this he bore the wrath of God on sin: sin is itself its worst judgement.⁴ Jesus' victory over the powers of hell and darkness came not by exertion of superior strength and violence against them, but by strength of another order, the undefeatable power of pure obedience and love to the Father, even to such a death.

Death could not hold him; the Father could not abandon him. In fact, the Father annulled all human verdicts on Christ by raising him from the dead, and exalting him to the highest place, glorifying him and giving him the name that is above every name (see Acts 3:13–15; Phil. 2:6–11). The stone that the builders had rejected has become the capstone. This lordship is not confined to the church: it extends over every area of creation. If there were a single area excluded from his rule, that rule would not be complete and Jesus would not be Lord. All powers and authorities—human, creational, angelic, demonic—are now in obligation to bow to him, to confess that he is Lord, glorifying God the Father by so doing. In Revelation 5 this is what is done in thunderous tones.

Now Jesus Christ is ruling all things, and bringing everything in subjection to himself: 'For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet' (1 Cor. 15:25). This he does through the proclamation of the Gospel in the world, i.e. by the power of the word. He, the King of kings and Lord of lords, leads an army of proclaimers, who follow him (Rev. 19:11–16). He is the only armed member of the army, and his one weapon is a sword which proceeds from his mouth: it is with this that he strikes down the nations, waging war and judging justly. The victory of Christ in the world is furthered only by proclamation, and that proclamation in weakness.

At the end, Jesus Christ will hand the kingdom to the Father (1 Cor. 15:24); he will be made subject to the Father who put all things under him, that the Father may be all in all. The Lordship of Jesus has an end—that end is the full glorification of the Father. The Lordship of Jesus never escapes or surpasses the essential truth of submission and obedience to the Father: this is the heart of his lordship.

ACCLAIMING, PROCLAIMING, OBEYING

The true and proper response of the church, given by the Spirit, to the Lord Jesus is that we acclaim him in his glory, proclaim him confidently in his world, and obey him

⁴ See Geoffrey C Bingham, *Christ's Cross Over Man's Abyss*, 2nd ed. (NCPI, Blackwood, 1987). See especially chapter 13 (pp. 87–96), 'What Happened Up There, To Him, The Person?' for a most penetrating study of what it was for Jesus Christ to bear our sins in his body.

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reverently in our lives personally and together. It is the Holy Spirit who opens to us the presence and the glory of Jesus Christ: it is *only* as we are in the Spirit that we can know the dimensions of his Lordship (Rev. 1:9–18).

The prime note of all Christian living is that of adoration, of joy-filled acclamation of the glory of the Lord Jesus. The worship in the book of the Revelation is thunderous! Such adoration is only possible when the *present reality* of the Lord Jesus has broken upon us. Adoration is an I–Thou activity: it involves direct address. It is not an activity of theological reflection at a distance. Adoration is dulled when the prime way we think of Jesus is in terms of memory rather than presence. In worship of the Lord, the presence of the Lord is made clearer and his people are strengthened.

As the Lord Jesus is adored in joyful acclamation among us, there are more in the audience than just him! On the one hand, we are joining with angels, archangels, all the company of heaven, and the saints throughout the ages, as well as with all creatures in earth, sky and sea as we laud him. On the other hand, our acclamation of the Lord Jesus is heard and despised by the principalities and powers, the rebel forces, demonic and human that, though defeated, still resist his lordship. Worship, in all its weakness, is effective and deadly warfare against these powers (see Ps. 8:1–3; 149:6–9).

Linked closely to acclamation is proclamation. Our proclamation of Christ is as true and as powerful as our acclamation is marked by awe and wonder. Again, in proclamation, all the principalities and powers are engaged and enraged by the word we speak. We have no other weapon against them but the worship, proclamation and obedience that is faithful to the Lord Jesus. In Acts 4, when Peter and John were commanded to no longer preach or teach in the name of Jesus, they insisted on the necessity of obedience to God. And the church gathered in prayer, asking the Father to grant boldness to his servants to speak, and to attend that word with all the saving action that is in the name of Jesus.

The Lordship of Jesus is the source of enormous confidence for the church in its mission. Though opposed at every turn by powers and principalities that seek to subvert the proclamation of the gospel, and threatened by them with trouble and death, the present reality of Jesus the Lord, and the experience of love and forgiveness from him sustain the people of God in faithful endurance. In proclaiming Jesus as Lord, the church participates in his rule.

The Lordship of Jesus also demands of the people of God obedience to him. '[E]veryone must always be conscious that he is the slave, servant of the "Lord" Jesus (2 Cor. 4:5). Recognition of the lordship of Christ refers also to the absolute claim the Lord has on our whole existence.'⁵ In the epistles, we are called to live lives worthy of the Lord, to seek to please the Lord, to live in undivided devotion to the Lord. In an age affected deeply by Romanticism, the idea of demand is unattractive: we think only those actions which flow out of desire are honourable. We may by this become servants only of what we desire. But in naming Jesus as Lord, we acknowledge that *he* has desires, i.e. demands to make upon us. Our acclamation and proclamation of Jesus as Lord has the true note when our lives are lived in obedience to him.

⁵ Cullman, *The Christology of the New Testament*, p. 231.