

Ascension Scripture Readings with Notes

Key Psalm

Psalm 23/24

- 1 The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof, the world, and all that dwell therein.
- 2 He hath founded it upon the seas, and upon the rivers hath He prepared it.
- 3 Who shall ascend into the mountain of the Lord? Or who shall stand in His holy place?
- 4 He that is innocent in hands and pure in heart, who hath not received his soul in vain, and hath not sworn deceitfully to his neighbour.
- 5 Such a one shall receive a blessing from the Lord, and mercy from God his Saviour.
- 6 This is the generation of them that seek the Lord, of them that seek the face of the God of Jacob.
- 7 Lift up your gates, O ye princes; and be ye lifted up, ye everlasting gates, and the King of Glory shall enter in.
- 8 Who is this King of Glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in war.
- 9 Lift up your gates, O ye princes; and be ye lifted up, ye everlasting gates, and the King of Glory shall enter in.
- 10 Who is this King of Glory? The Lord of hosts, He is the King of Glory.

This is the key text of the Ascension. The hymns draw from it extensively and the teachings and hymnography won't make sense if we don't understand the Psalm.

The first part (vv. 1–2) discusses creation. The Lord created everything (the fullness of the earth) without fighting against primordial chaos as common in ANE myths. Water (the seas and rivers) was an image of chaos (and often considered a primordial deities). God does not fight against them, rather he establishes the earth and they serve as foundations.

The central portion (vv. 3–6) establishes who may ascend to God. This is not the warrior motif that one might expect, not some demigod like Herakles, but rather one who is innocent and pure, who keeps his word and guards his soul. In essence one who is humble and lives faithfully. This person (and people/generation) the Lord is pleased to bless and extend mercy to. “Ask, and it will be given you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives. He who seeks finds. To him who knocks it will be opened” (Matthew 7.7–8). In a Christological reading of the Psalms, Christ, who took on humanity in the incarnation, fully embodied these virtues. He always sought the will of his Father and lived a pure life; he is the blessed man Psalm 1 describes. Be we who are in Christ, united to him by Baptism and the Eucharist may also receive the mercy of God. And indeed this language of ascending the mount of the Lord is processional language, which we participate in every time we come to church.

The climax of the Psalm (vv. 7–10) describes the King of Glory. He is strong and mighty. As this Psalm was recently used at Pascha, we saw Christ entered into the realm of death and defeated it. He rescued those from Hades crying aloud for the gatekeepers of Hades open the gates and they cowered out of fear at his visage and voice (cf. Job 38.17–18 LXX). Now in the Ascension, the hymnology has the holy bodiless

powers crying “Who is this King of Glory?” in astonishment. A human is enthroned on the right hand of God in power; even for the angels this is an ineffable mystery.

Vespers

Isaiah 2.2–3

Thus saith the Lord: In the last days the mountain of the Lord shall be manifest, and the house of God shall be on the summits of the mountains, and it shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall come to it. And many peoples shall go and say: Come, let us ascend to the mountain of the Lord, and to the house of the God of Jacob; and He will tell us His way, and we will walk in it.

Note the parallels to St Matthew Gospel where Jesus commands his disciples to spread the Gospel throughout the world. This is enabled through the Ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit in power at Pentecost. The Ascension is not Christ leaving us, but bringing us up into heaven with himself. “Lo, I am with you always to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28.20)

Isaiah 62.10–63.3, 7–9

Thus saith the Lord: Go ye, pass through My gates, make ready My pathway and make a way for My people, and cast the stones out of the way; lift up a standard for the nations. For behold, the Lord hath proclaimed to the end of the earth: Say ye to the daughter of Zion: Behold, thy Savior is come, having His reward with Him and His work before His countenance. And He shall call them a holy people, redeemed of the Lord; and thou shalt be called a city sought out, and not forsaken. Who is this that is come from Edom, with red garments from Bosor, so fair in His apparel? He crieth with mighty strength: I speak of righteousness and saving judgment. Wherefore are Thy garments red, and Thy raiment as if fresh from a trodden winepress? I am full of trodden grape, I have trodden the winepress utterly alone, and of the nations there is not a man with Me. I remembered the mercy of the Lord, I shall recall the virtues of the Lord, the praises of the Lord in all things wherein He recompenseth us. The Lord is a good judge to the house of Israel; He dealeth with us according to His mercy, and according to the multitude of His righteousness. And He said: Are ye not My people? They are My children, and they shall not set Me at nought; and He became for them salvation out of all their affliction. Not an ambassador, nor an Angel, but the

Lord Himself saved them, because He loved them and spared them; He Himself redeemed them, and took them up, and lifted them up for all the days of eternity.

Our Lord passes through the gates as the Psalms declare. In so doing, he redeems his people. But this also signifies judgment; the Lord is terrifying to his enemies, the devils, and the unfaithful who align with them (63.4–6). Yet the “the Lord is a good judge to the house of Israel” that is those are faithful, “for he deals with us according to his mercy.” His righteousness is mercy toward us and our righteousness. The Lord himself, God of God yet who became man, saved us. Not an angel, not some envoy, but God himself became our Saviour and liberated us from the oppression of demons.

Verse 9 is used in the Proskomedie serves while cutting a cross in the underside of the lamb.

Deacon: Crucify, master.

Priest: At thee crucified, O Christ, tyranny was laid low and the power of the enemy was trampled underfoot. Glory to thee, for neither an angel nor a man, but the Lord himself hath saved us.

Zechariah 14.1, 4, 8–11

Thus saith the Lord: Behold, the day of the Lord cometh, and His feet shall stand in that day on the Mount of Olives, which lieth opposite Jerusalem on the side whence is the dawning of the sun. And in that day living water shall come forth out of Jerusalem; half of it toward the former sea, and half of it toward the latter sea; and so shall it be in summer and spring. And the Lord shall be king over all the earth; in that day there shall be one Lord, and His Name one, compassing all the earth, and the wilderness from Gabaah unto Remmon, to the south of Jerusalem. And He shall be exalted and shall remain in that place, from the gate of Benjamin to the place of the first gate, to the gate of Gomor, and to the tower of Anameel, and to the gate of the corners, as far as the king’s winepresses. They shall dwell therein; and there shall be no more anything accursed, and Jerusalem shall dwell securely.

Zechariah envisions the kingship of the Lord extending over all the world starting from the Mount of Olives.

Another Scripture Passage

Daniel 7.9–14

I kept watching
until thrones were set
and the Ancient of Days sat
and his clothing was white like snow,
and the hair of his head was like pure wool;
his throne was a flame of fire;
its wheels were burning fire.
A stream of fire drew in before him.
A thousand thousands were serving him,
and ten thousand times ten thousand
stood attending him.
A court sat in judgment,
and books were opened.

...

I was watching in the night visions,
and lo, as it were a Son of Man
coming with the clouds of heaven.
And he came to the Ancient of Days
and was presented to him.
And to him was given the dominion
and the honor and the kingship,
and all peoples, tribes, languages,
shall be subject to him.
His authority is an everlasting authority,
which will not pass away,
and his kingship will not be destroyed.

There is a lot here, but note that the Son of Man came to the Ancient of Days. When Christ in his trial before the Sanhedrin states that they will see him as the Son of Man sitting in power with the Father (Matthew 26.64, Mark 14.62, Luke 22.69–70), this is the passage he is referring to.

Orthros

Prokeimenon: Psalm 46.6 & 2 / 47.5 & 1

God hath ascended in jubilation, the Lord with the voice of the trumpet.
Clap your hands, all ye nations; shout unto God with a voice of rejoicing.

Psalm 46

For the End: A Psalm Concerning the Sons of Kore.

2 Clap your hands, all ye nations; shout unto God with a voice of rejoicing,
3 For the Lord Most High is terrible, a great King over all the earth.
4 He hath subdued peoples under us, and nations under our feet.
5 He hath chosen us for His inheritance, the beauty of Jacob, which He loved.
6 God is gone up in jubilation, the Lord with the voice of the trumpet.
7 O chant unto our God, chant ye; chant unto our King, chant ye.
8 For God is king of all the earth, O chant ye with understanding.
9 God is king over the nations, God sitteth upon His holy throne.
10 The princes of the peoples are gathered together with the God of Abraham; for God's mighty ones of the earth are greatly exalted.

The Orthros Prokeimenon compliments the themes with of the Gospel passage. The prokeimenon should call to mind the entire Psalm. Here God is presented as a king, subduing his (and our) enemies and raising his people to be the mighty ones of the earth who are lifted up/magnified with him.

Mark 16.9–20

Now when Christ rose early on the first day of the week, Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom He had cast out seven demons. She went and told those who had been with Him, as they mourned and wept. But when they heard that He was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it. After this He appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country. And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them. Afterward He appeared to the eleven themselves as they sat at table; and He upbraided them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who saw Him after He had risen. And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: in My Name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover." So then the Lord Jesus, after

He had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that attended it. Amen.

The longer ending of St Mark's Gospel explains the Ascension as Jesus sitting at the right hand of God. This enthronement of Christ enabled the apostles to boldly preach the Gospel, as Christ does not abandon us but gives the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Divine Liturgy

Prokeimenon: Psalm 56.8 & 12 / 57.7 & 11

Be Thou exalted above the heavens, O God, and let Thy glory be over all the earth. My heart is ready, O God.

Psalm 56

For the End: Destroy not. By David; for a Pillar Inscription. When He Fled from the Presence of Saul to the Cave.

- 2 Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me, for my soul trusted in Thee.
 - 3 And in the shadow of Thy wings will I hope, until iniquity shall pass away.
 - 4 I will cry unto God the Most High, unto God my benefactor.
 - 5 He hath sent out of heaven and saved me, He hath given over to reproach them that were trampling me down.
 - 6 God hath sent forth His mercy and His truth, and hath delivered my soul from the midst of lions' cubs; I lay me down to sleep as one troubled.
 - 7 As for the sons of men, their teeth are weapons and arrows, and their tongue a sharp sword.
 - 8 Be Thou exalted above the heavens, O God, and Thy glory above all the earth.
 - 9 They have prepared a snare for my feet, and bowed down my soul.
 - 10 They have dug a pit before my face and have fallen into it themselves.
 - 11 Ready is my heart, O God, ready is my heart; I will sing and chant in my glory.
 - 12 Awake, O my glory; awake, O psaltery and harp; I myself will awake at dawn.
 - 13 I will confess Thee among the peoples, O Lord, I will chant unto Thee among the nations.
 - 14 For magnified even unto the heavens is Thy mercy, and Thy truth even unto the clouds.
 - 15 Be Thou exalted above the heavens, O God, and Thy glory above all the earth.
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This Psalm relates the works of the Lord for us. He saves us from our enemies and is magnified to the heavens and exalted (lifted up) above the heavens.

Acts 1.1–12

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when He was taken up, after He had given commandment through the Holy Spirit to the Apostles whom He had chosen. To them He presented Himself alive after His passion by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days, and speaking of the kingdom of God. And while staying with them He charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, He said, “You heard from Me; for John baptized with water, but before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” So when they had come together, they asked Him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them, “It is not for you to know the times or seasons which the Father has fixed by His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.” And when he had said these things, as they were looking, he was taken up, and a cloud received him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as He went, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, and said: “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was received up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you behold him going into heaven.” Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath’s journey off.

St John Chrysostom writes:

This is another indication that he ascended to heaven. Not fire, as in the case of Elijah, nor a fiery chariot, but “a cloud took him.” This was a symbol of heaven, according to the words of the prophet, “who makes the clouds his chariot,” [Psalm 104.3 (103.4 LXX)] meaning the Father himself. Because of this he says, “on a cloud,” implying, “in the symbol of the divine power,” for no other power could dwell upon a cloud. Listen again to what another prophet says: “The Lord is riding upon a swift cloud.” [Isaiah 19.1]

Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles 2

This cloud language is all over the Scriptures (Exodus 13.21–22, 2 Kingdoms (Samuel) 22.11–12, 2 Chronicles (Supplements) 5.13–14, Psalm 17.12–13 [Psalm 18.10–11], Nahum 1.3, Jeremiah 4.13, Ezekiel 1.4, Daniel 7.13, Matthew 26.64, Luke 9.34–35, 1 Thessalonians 4.17, Apocalypse 1.7, 11.12 14.14–16). God is frequently depicted riding on a cloud. (“The Rider of Clouds” was an epithet of Baal, but the Scriptures set the record straight.) Not only do the wind and waves obey Christ, but the cloud shows him to be the Most High God.

But cloud often indicates judgment to God’s enemies; St John continues:

Now, as they watched, their conceptions were elevated. He gave them not merely a subtle hint of the nature of his second coming. For this phrase—"thus he will come"—means with the body. This is what they desired to hear. And concerning the judgment he said again that he will come in this same way upon a cloud.

Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles 2

Luke 24.36-53

At that time, Jesus, risen from the dead, stood in the midst of His disciples and said to them, "Peace be to you." But they were startled and frightened, and supposed that they saw a spirit. And He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do questionings rise in your hearts? See My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; handle Me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have." And when He had said this, He showed them His hands and His feet. And while they still disbelieved for joy, and wondered, He said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave Him a piece of broiled fish and a honeycomb, and He took it and ate before them. Then He said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you, while I was still with you, that everything written about Me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in His Name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city of Jerusalem, until you are clothed with power from on high." Then, He led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up His hands, He blessed them. While He blessed them, He was parted from them, and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped Him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple praising and blessing God. Amen.

St Bede the Venerable emphasizes the nature of obedience in receiving the blessing of Christ:

"Then he led them out to Bethany, and lifting up his hands, he blessed them." Our Redeemer appeared in the flesh to take away sins, remove what humans deserved because of the first curse, and grant believers an inheritance of everlasting blessing. He rightly concluded all that he did in the world with words of blessing. He showed that he was the very one of whom it was said, "For indeed he who gave the law will give a blessing." It is appropriate that he led those whom he blessed out to Bethany, which is interpreted "house of obedience." Contempt and pride deserved a curse, but obedience deserved a blessing. The Lord himself was made obedient to his Father even unto death, so that he might restore the lost grace of blessing to the world. He gives the blessing of heavenly life only to those who strive in the holy church to comply with the divine commands.

Homilies on the Gospels 11.15.4

Blessed Augustine writes:

You heard what came to our ears just now from the Gospel: “Lifting up his hands, he blessed them. And it happened, while he was blessing them he withdrew from them, and was carried up to heaven.” Who was carried up to heaven? The Lord Christ was. Who is the Lord Christ? He is the Lord Jesus. What is this? Are you going to separate the human from the divine and make one person of God, another of the man, so that there is no longer a trinity of three but a quaternary of four? Just as you, a human being, are soul and body, so the Lord Christ is Word, soul and body. The Word did not depart from the Father. He both came to us and did not forsake the Father. He both took flesh in the womb and continued to govern the universe. What was lifted up into heaven, if not what had been taken from earth? That is to say, the very flesh, the very body, about which he was speaking when he said to the disciples, “Feel, and see that a spirit does not have bones and flesh, as you can see that I have.” Let us believe this, brothers and sisters, and if we have difficulty in meeting the arguments of the philosophers, let us hold on to what was demonstrated in the Lord’s case without any difficulty of faith. Let them chatter, but let us believe.

Sermon 242.6.15

St Leo the Great comments:

Dearly beloved, through all this time between the resurrection of the Lord and his ascension, the providence of God thought of this, taught this and penetrated their eyes and heart. He wanted them to recognize the Lord Jesus Christ as truly risen, who was truly born, truly suffered and truly died. The manifest truth strengthened the blessed apostles and all the disciples who were frightened by his death on the cross and were doubtful of his resurrection. The result was they were not only afflicted with sadness but also were filled with “great joy” when the Lord went into the heights of heaven.

It was certainly a great and indescribable source of joy when, in the sight of the heavenly multitudes, the nature of our human race ascended over the dignity of all heavenly creatures. It passed the angelic orders and was raised beyond the heights of archangels. In its ascension, our human race did not stop at any other height until this same nature was received at the seat of the eternal Father. Our human nature, united with the divinity of the Son, was on the throne of his glory.

The ascension of Christ is our elevation. Hope for the body is also invited where the glory of the Head preceded us. Let us exult, dearly beloved, with worthy joy and be glad with a holy thanksgiving. Today we not only are established as possessors of paradise, but we have even penetrated the heights of the heavens in Christ. The indescribable grace of Christ, which we lost through the “ill will of the devil,” prepared us more fully for that glory. Incorporated within himself, the Son of God placed those whom the violent enemy threw down from the happiness of our first dwelling at the right hand of the Father. The Son of God lives and reigns with God the Father almighty and with the Holy Spirit forever and ever. Amen.

Sermon 73.3-4.16