

By far, the most common view within the church (at least for the last 1,700 years) is that Jesus is currently reigning on His heavenly throne and establishing His Kingdom through His people. While there are many reasons why various schools of interpretation all hold this common assumption about the Messiah's present heavenly reign, their interpretation of Psalm 110 references in the NT is often an anchor to which their assumptions about the Kingdom of God are tethered. The rule of thumb within any seminary class on the Psalms is that you cannot take theology from the Psalms – rather, they are to be viewed as inspirational and devotional. However, the Psalms – primarily the Psalms of David – are *the single most theologically referenced material in the New Testament*. They were not only the primary reference point for Messianic expectation, but also how they should interpret the *unexpected ascension and delay of Jesus*. Immediately after the forty days of instruction 'concerning the Kingdom of God' (cf. Acts 1:3) and the ascension of Jesus, the primary accreditation of the identity of Jesus voiced by the Apostles was the writings of David concerning the Messiah.

Psalm 110 is the most referenced Psalm in the NT. Verse 1 alone is referenced 18 times directly, several more indirectly. So, clearly the way this Psalm is viewed will have a major sway with your interpretation of NT theology. The Psalm records a prophetic conversation between Yahweh and David's "Lord" (Heb. 'adonai'). The two figures are not difficult to identify, the writers of the NT clearly understood them to be the Father and the Messiah.

The Psalm begins with the Father telling the Messiah to wait at His right hand until the time when He made His enemies a footstool for Him. Later in the same conversation the referenced period of time is called the **day of His (the Messiah's) wrath** and the **day of His (the Messiah's) power**. So, until this appointed day the Messiah was called up to the Father's right hand **to wait**.

¹ A Psalm of David. The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at My right hand Until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet." (Psa 110:1 NASB)

This seemingly small detail from the Psalms has been swallowed up in tradition. Almost universally seen as a shorthand reference to the present-heavenly reign of Jesus, the common New Testament reference to Jesus 'at the right hand' of the Father is a presumed mention of the authority which He now exerts to expand His Kingdom and crush His enemies.

The assumption of a present militant stance of Jesus against every adversary and foe has led to a distorted view of many New Testament passages, the present mission of the Church, but of infinitely more importance a distorted view of the heart of God. Within this view, the day of His wrath and the day of His power must be now.

Moreover, this distortion not only perverts our view of God's heart towards the rebellious, but also towards His creation as a whole. The spiritualized re-interpretation of God's 'kingdom' has led to a very confused understanding of God's end game. God's assumed desire to rule and reign over a spiritual Kingdom has always led to the logical conclusion historically that He is interested in the 'spiritual realm' while opposed to 'earthly realm'. God created the earth, but is eager to destroy it and take as many as possible to His spiritual Kingdom. The necessity to re-interpret Scripture – especially the promises from the Old Testament – in a spiritual/allegorical manner was the trademark of several heretical sects in the early church. Within the early church, this was called Gnosticism. Today we call it normal.

Without question, the day of the Lord is coming! It is coming soon. However, a misunderstanding of this present age when the mercy of God is being offered to all who repent and believe brings great confusion regarding the mission of the Church now. Simply put, we will imitate what we believe God to be doing. If God is laboring to take over the earth, then we will take over the earth. If God is exalting the righteous and punishing the wicked, then we will exalt ourselves and try to implement punishment/justice for those who sin against us. However, if God is mercifully waiting and extending mercy to those who sin against Him, then it seems logical that He would call us to do the same. Thus, the standard of Christian conduct is not to arbitrarily love your neighbor, turn the other cheek, or to somehow act humbly. Rather it is simple imitation of the one sitting at the right hand of the Majesty...waiting. (*cf. Phil. 2*)

In contrast to this we find within the modern church that the most common hermeneutic is **inauguralism**. That is, to presuppose when reading the Scriptures that the Kingdom of God (*and thus the day of wrath/day of power*) have been inaugurated by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in some spiritual sense (*i.e. 'already, but not yet'*). While it isn't the aim of this article to fully explain the various factors which have lead the modern church to this assumption (*in direct contrast to the early church who still viewed the coming of the Kingdom of God as wholly future*), I want to at least point out some of the confusion which ensues from this deviation from the witness of the early church.

Whether a-millennial, post-millennial, or pre-millennial, most denominations would still claim some sort of inauguralism. Very few a-millennial or post-millennial groups would claim that the Kingdom is already FULLY realized since this would ultimately lead to a denial of the bodily second coming of Jesus. However, much has been written from Catholicism to Calvinism to Pentecostalism about this 'already-but-not-yet' scenario. However, since the framework for this teaching is not actually in the Bible, it has lead to countless perplexities regarding the role of the church now. As mentioned above, we generally fall into imitating God in some way or another.

One common example is in the modern expression of charismatic churches. Within the confusion of an inaugurated kingdom it has become extremely difficult to navigate how the simple commands of Jesus would lead us to approach money and storing up wealth. For many, they endure a season of storing up treasures in heaven only to have a time of breakthrough when the 'wealth of the wicked' will be brought to them. The frequent mention in the NT of the normal present expectation of suffering, mistreatment, and pain is somehow presented simultaneously with the ultimate expectation of vindication. At some point one must ask the simple question – **'Which is it???'** What do we do NOW? What do we hope for AFTER the coming of Jesus?¹

Hebrews 2 reaffirms what Psalm 110 and it's many references in the NT tell us concerning the Messianic kingdom. Quoting from both Psalm 110 (*cf. Heb. 1:13*) and Psalm 8, the author identifies Jesus as the One sitting at 'the right hand' from Psalm 110 as well as the One made 'for a little while lower than the angels' from Psalm 8. Verse 8 continues his quote from Psalm 8 stating that the Father had 'put all things in subjection under His feet'. Yet after quoting from this passage the author explains in passing what is obvious to all of the persecuted Jewish believers to whom he is writing. Namely, that this appointed time when all things would be securely under His feet had **not yet come**.

¹ I don't want to minimize the power of the Holy Spirit that has been given to us BY ANY MEANS. I simply want to attempt to place the power of the Spirit within the context and framework of the Biblical expectation of the future Kingdom. The power of the Spirit is the 'powers of the age to come' (*cf. Heb. 6:4*), given as a witness to sustain the righteous until the time of the Messiah's Kingdom. The interpretation of the Spirit's power as expanding the Kingdom or 'reign of God' now is the primary source of confusion within the charismatic movement.

¹³ ***But to which of the angels has He ever said, "SIT AT MY RIGHT HAND, UNTIL I MAKE YOUR ENEMIES A FOOTSTOOL FOR YOUR FEET"? ^{2:6} But one has testified somewhere, saying, "WHAT IS MAN, THAT YOU REMEMBER HIM? OR THE SON OF MAN, THAT YOU ARE CONCERNED ABOUT HIM? ⁷ "YOU HAVE MADE HIM FOR A LITTLE WHILE LOWER THAN THE ANGELS; YOU HAVE CROWNED HIM WITH GLORY AND HONOR, AND HAVE APPOINTED HIM OVER THE WORKS OF YOUR HANDS; ⁸ YOU HAVE PUT ALL THINGS IN SUBJECTION UNDER HIS FEET." For in subjecting all things to him, He left nothing that is not subject to him. But now we do not yet see all things subjected to him. ⁹ But we do see Him who was made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone. (Hbr 1:13-2:6-9 NASB)***

This said, we do not assume that God is inactive in the activities of temporal judgment. The fact that the Day of the Lord has not yet come doesn't affirm some sort of Christian Naturalism (*affirming the sovereignty of nature over its own processes*) – which is a prevalent view within the Western church. Volcanoes, earthquakes, tsunamis, and hurricanes are not rebellious acts of nature's corrupt sovereignty, but rather a warning to the earth that the Day of Wrath is going to come.

Likewise, miracles, healing, prophecy, etc... are called the 'powers of the age to come' (*cf. Heb. 6:1-4*) because they are simply a witness to give assurance of the coming of Jesus and the age to come. The roaring of the seas, the turbulent winds of the skies, and the shaking of the ground isn't the ultimate judgment for the wicked who lose their lives, but rather a witness to us all that we ought to repent and believe in the Son of Man. In reality, an infinitely more severe judgment awaits all who refuse to continually put their faith in the cross of the Messiah.

Within this framework both the sovereignty of God and the kindness of God are vindicated as oppression and tyranny continue on the earth only because ***He loves the tyrant and the oppressor as much as the victim.*** The fact that the Messiah's Kingdom is not established yet does not diminish the fact that God has had sovereignty over the heavens and the earth since the beginning. The 'fall'² of man did not interrupt God's sovereignty over the heavens and the earth. (*cf. 1 Chron. 29:11; Ps. 103:19; 145:11ff; Jer. 10:7ff; Dan. 4:3, 34; Jn. 19:11; Acts 17:24; Rev. 4:2ff*) Thus, the delay between the first coming of Jesus to deal with sin (*cf. Heb. 9:28*) and his second appearing for salvation at the end of this age is explained by a time of mercy that God has established in which all men – Jew and Gentile – are being called to repent.

Clarity regarding the role and posture of Jesus now gives us assurance regarding His heart towards us. It also affirms to us that the appointed day of wrath that will come.

³¹ ***because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead." (Act 17:31 NASB)***

The context within which the right hand passages are to be understood is clearly the context of Psalm 110. The place of the Messiah at the 'right hand' is clearly depicted as a place of waiting for an appointed day.

² *The Bible does not refer to the events of Gen. 2-3 as 'the Fall'. The Scripture refers to the events from man's role in the equation (i.e. rebellion) and from God's role – cursing rebellious humanity with death and frailty in hopes that all of creation might be liberated from its bondage to decay. While the language of the 'Fall' is common shorthand reference to man's rebellion in Gen. 2-3, it can minimize God's role in condemning us to futility. Nature had no part in our condemnation. God alone has all authority over his creation.*

This appointed day will be the day of the Messiah's wrath when the Father will extend His scepter from Zion (*Jerusalem*), shatter kings and chief men, and fill the nations with corpses.

¹ A Psalm of David. The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at My right hand Until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet." ² The LORD will stretch forth Your strong scepter from Zion, saying, "Rule in the midst of Your enemies." ... ⁵ The Lord is at Your right hand; He will shatter kings in the day of His wrath. ⁶ He will judge among the nations, He will fill them with corpses, He will shatter the chief men over a broad country. (Psa 110:1-2, 5-6 NASB)

Exegesis of a few New Testament 'right hand' passages:

1. The Way the Disciples Interpret the Ascension.

¹⁹ So then, when the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. (Mar 16:19 NASB)

Context:

Jesus had just spent 40 days talking with the disciples, instructing them about the kingdom. (*cf. Acts 1:3*) During this time, He explains that there would be a gap of time between His suffering and His glory or inheritance. Following the ascension, they preach repentance and forgiveness of sin. The reference point for the message of repentance and belief was that He was now at the right hand, and thus was the One whom God had appointed to bring the day of wrath.

²⁵ He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" ... ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶ He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. (Luk 24:25-26, 45-47 NIV)

⁴² "And He ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead. (Act 10:42 NASB)

2. The Way that the Gospel is Preached to the Jews

³⁴ "For it was not David who ascended into heaven, but he himself says: 'THE LORD SAID TO MY LORD, "SIT AT MY RIGHT HAND, ³⁵ UNTIL I MAKE YOUR ENEMIES A FOOTSTOOL FOR YOUR FEET."³⁶ "Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ--this Jesus whom you crucified."³⁷ Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?" (Act 2:34-37 NASB)

Context:

After the Spirit was poured out, Peter stands to give interpretation of the strange commotion that was taking place. Speaking to Jews who were assembled for the feast, many were undoubtedly at the crucifixion of Jesus. Peter repeatedly insists that Jesus is the Messiah and Lord from David's writings and then confronts them with the reality of their actions against him at the recent Passover. Both his presentation and their

response assume a common understanding that the passage was speaking about a season of mercy, followed by a day of vengeance against His enemies. Acknowledging themselves as His 'enemies' they repent and ask for mercy before the Day of Wrath comes.

3. An Explanation for Present Sufferings

¹² but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, SAT DOWN AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD, ¹³ waiting from that time onward UNTIL HIS ENEMIES BE MADE A FOOTSTOOL FOR HIS FEET. (Hbr 10:12-13 NASB)

Context:

In an effort to explain the present sufferings of the people of the Messiah, the author repeatedly clarifies the order of their redemption by using various passages from the prophets and Psalms. The prior chapter ends clarifying that His first coming was to bear sins, and the second is for salvation for 'those who eagerly wait for Him'. Chapter 1 begins by explain that the time between the 'purification of sins' and 'bringing salvation' (cf. 9:28) is the time of sitting at the 'right hand of the Majesty'.

Having clarified these three stages which culminate in the Messianic salvation (*i.e. making purification, waiting, and His enemies made a footstool*) the author then uses the Messianic theology to establish them in a sound ecclesiology - sojourning. That is, we must all walk out our salvation with trembling; all the more as the Day (*i.e. the day of 'salvation' when all things are made his footstool*) is drawing closer. This establishes us with clarity regarding our present calling to persevere (cf. 10:36) unto our full inheritance.

³ ...When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, (Hbr 1:3 NASB)

²⁸ so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time for salvation without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await Him. (Hbr 9:28 NASB)

¹² but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, SAT DOWN AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD, ¹³ waiting from that time onward UNTIL HIS ENEMIES BE MADE A FOOTSTOOL FOR HIS FEET. ... ²³ Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; ²⁴ and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, ²⁵ not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near. ... ³⁰ For we know Him who said, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY." And again, "THE LORD WILL JUDGE HIS PEOPLE." ... ³² But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings, ³³ partly by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated. ³⁴ For you showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one. ³⁵ Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. ³⁶ For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised. ³⁷ FOR YET IN A VERY LITTLE WHILE, HE WHO IS COMING WILL COME, AND WILL NOT DELAY. ³⁸ BUT MY RIGHTEOUS ONE SHALL LIVE BY FAITH; AND IF HE SHRINKS BACK, MY SOUL HAS NO PLEASURE IN HIM. (Hbr 10:12-13, 23-25, 30, 32-38 NASB)

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, our view of Psalm 110 and perspective of Jesus' present role as He sits at the Father's right hand affects a great deal of our theology (view of God) and missiology (view of our mission). If NT references to Psalm 110 are taken in context to the Psalm as a whole – which fits perfectly within the worldview and theology of the earliest believers (prior to the Constantinian shift) – then we find a very opposing view to the present interpretive standard of these passages. Rather than the normative hermeneutic of Augustine and Origen³ which inherently militates against the patient heart of God towards the wicked, we find a simple theology of the patience and mercy of God in seating Christ at His right hand until the Day of His power. Until then, a measure of the Spirit is given to testify to both the mercy of God as well as the coming wrath.

Following the ascension we find around 15 references to Psalm 110 in the NT as the Apostles both called the wicked to repent (*Acts 2*) and called the righteous to persevere (*Eph. 1:20, Col. 3:1ff, Heb. 1:13, 2:8, 10:12ff*) in light of the mercy of God now, and the guarantee of the wrath to come.

³ *Augustine, like Origen before him, was highly influenced by Gnosticism. His contempt for the physical and glorification of the spiritual lead him to Manichaeism for nearly a decade before his conversion to Christianity. In Confessions, Augustine makes no apologies for his Platonic understanding of reality. Instead, he tells the story of how they were assimilated into his theology after conversion. It is rightly said that the weight of his influence within Christian theology cannot be overstated. It was in this way that the misguided perception of a few became the paradigm of the Church as a whole.*