

The Acts of the Apostles

*“The multitude of
them that believed
were of one heart
and of one soul: . . .
And with great
power gave the
apostles witness of
the resurrection of
the Lord Jesus:
and great grace
was upon
them all.”
—Acts 4:32,33*

ALL WHO SINCERELY SEEK

to understand God’s great plan for man’s salvation and ultimate blessing should also have a yearning to know more about the Holy Scriptures. It is in the inspired Word of God that we find the keys to our appreciation of the Creator’s loving purposes for his human family. With this in view, it is appropriate that we present

from time to time in the pages of *The Dawn* an overview of various books of the Bible, such as we will herein consider.

The full name of the fifth book in the New Testament is, “The Acts of the Apostles,” although it is usually referred to simply as “The Book of Acts,” or “Acts.” As its name implies, it is, for the most part, a chronicle of activities in which the apostles of Christ played an active part. Like the four gospels, Acts is largely historical in character, but interwoven

with its record of events in the Early Church are some of the most important doctrinal and devotional lessons to be found anywhere in the Bible.

This book was written by Luke, and opens with these words, “The former treatise [The Gospel of Luke] . . . of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, Until the day in which he was taken up, after that he through the Holy Spirit had given commandments unto the apostles whom he had chosen.” (Acts 1:1,2) The first chapter of Acts is a transition from the life of Christ to the era of the apostles, for it records Jesus’ last appearance to them, and his commission for the service they were to render in his name after he left them.—vss. 4-11

Verse eight of the first chapter records a promise given by the resurrected Jesus. He stated that the Holy Spirit would soon come upon the apostles, and that in the power, and by the authority, of the Spirit they were to be his “witnesses . . . in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.”

The second chapter records the fulfillment of the promise Jesus made to send the Holy Spirit. In the *King James Version*, the expression “Holy Ghost” is often used. This is a mistranslation. It was designed by the translators to give the impression that the Holy Spirit is a person, but this is contrary to the teachings of the Bible. The Holy Spirit is simply the holy power, or influence, of God, sent forth to accomplish whatever his purposes may be.

It came upon the waiting disciples at Jerusalem in a miraculous manner, to establish their faith and confidence in Jesus as the Messiah. He had left them, and even though they had been convinced of

his resurrection from the dead, they would have been in a difficult position to represent him without this definite evidence of his return to the heavenly courts. Thus, in fulfillment of his promise, he sent the Holy Spirit to rest upon them.

This wonderful experience occurred “when the day of Pentecost was fully come.” (Acts 2:1) Pentecost was one of the special feast and assembly days of the Jews, and many thousands of them visited Jerusalem each year for the occasion. This meant that there were Israelites in the city at the time from many countries, speaking the language of the country in which they lived.

This afforded a wonderful opportunity for the Lord to demonstrate that his favor was upon the disciples, by miraculously empowering them to speak to their kinsmen from the various countries in their own native tongues. Thus one of the manifestations of the Holy Spirit at that time was the ability to “speak with tongues”—that is, other languages. (vss. 4-8) It was a very practical demonstration of divine power, and accomplished God’s design to give all the scattered natural descendants of Abraham who were gathered there a witness concerning the Messiahship of Jesus.

The enemies of Jesus were now opposed to his followers, and charged that they were intoxicated. The Apostle Peter quickly and energetically refuted this charge, and in one of the most eloquent sermons ever preached, he explained to his hearers the true significance of what was taking place. He established the fact of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, and showed it to be in fulfillment of Psalm 16:10, where Jesus is prophetically represented as saying to his

God, “Thou wilt not leave my soul in hell, neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.”—Acts 2:27

The account states that the people were “pricked in their heart” by Peter’s sermon, especially by the forthright manner in which he charged the nation with the crucifixion of Jesus. They asked what they could do under the circumstances, and he called upon them to “Repent, and be baptized . . . in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (vss. 36-38) Three thousand responded to Peter’s message that day, and were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.—vs. 41

“TIMES OF RESTITUTION”

The third chapter records another marvelous sermon by Peter, preached a short time after Pentecost. The setting was quite different from that in which he delivered his Pentecostal sermon. Together with John, Peter had gone to the Temple at the hour of prayer. At the gate of the Temple called “Beautiful,” he saw a man who was unable to walk from the time of his birth. In the name of Jesus, Peter healed the man, enabling him to walk, even to the point of “leaping.”—Acts 3:1-8

The crowd was curious, and Peter took advantage of the occasion to explain to them that this miracle had been performed in the name of, and by the power of, the resurrected Christ, the one whom they had crucified. Then he added, “Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence [face] of the Lord; And he shall send

Jesus Christ, which before was preached unto you: Whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began.”—Acts 3:19-21

The lesson is plain, based upon the miracle of healing the man who had been unable to walk. Peter is saying, in effect, that following the Second Coming of Christ, miracles of this sort will become universal, that there are to be times of “restitution,” or restoration, of all things. Then he adds that this glorious Gospel, or good news, had been spoken by the mouth of all God’s holy prophets.

Thus we have one of the key texts which helps to unlock the meaning of the entire Word of God. As we examine the various books of the Bible, in particular the prophecies of the Old Testament, this theme of redemption and restoration is repeated again and again. Now Peter confirms what has been said, for in this outstanding sermon he tells us that the “times of restitution” was the theme of all God’s holy prophets. Indeed, all the other writings of the New Testament also reaffirm and corroborate this fundamental teaching of God’s plan.

PERSECUTIONS AND TESTS

Jesus had said to his disciples before his death, “In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33) The apostles and others in the Early Church experienced this persecution. Unbelieving Jews and Gentiles alike were unfriendly to them through intimidation, and by imprisonment endeavored to hinder and, if possible, to destroy their work. One

example of this is recorded in the fourth chapter of Acts, verses 1-31. Such persecution was to become commonplace among the followers of the Master.

Severe tests also began to come upon the Early Church. Most people have heard about Ananias and Sapphira, his wife, who “lied . . . unto God.” Acts 5:1-11 records the circumstances in which their falsehood was detected by the Apostle Peter, and they were instantly put to death. Much soberness of mind and self-examination came to bear upon all the followers of Christ as they heard of these things.

Chapters six and seven present the account of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. In particular, we note the powerful discourse which he delivered before the Jewish Sanhedrin when called upon to defend himself against the accusations of his Jewish enemies. Saul of Tarsus was then a member of the Sanhedrin, and consented to the death of Stephen. He even assisted in the slaying by guarding the clothing of those who stoned this young deacon to death.

CONVERSION OF SAUL

Saul of Tarsus was later converted to Christianity. In chapter nine, verses one and two, we are informed that Saul, “yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, And desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem.”

Provided with this authority, Saul was on his way to Damascus when “suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: And he fell to the

earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" Upon inquiry as to who it was that thus addressed him, Saul heard the explanation, "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest."—Acts 9:3-5

Saul was quick to discern that by persecuting the disciples of Christ he was in reality opposing God, for this experience revealed to him the fact that Jesus was the promised Messiah. In answer to his question, "What wilt thou have me to do?" Saul was instructed to go to a certain home in Damascus and there he would receive his instructions.—vs. 6

From being a bitter enemy of the Early Church, Saul, who was known afterward as Paul, became an enthusiastic follower of the Master. He devoted his life to the service of the Lord and the Gospel of Christ. By divine appointment he became one of the leading apostles, his efforts being particularly toward the Gentiles. After his conversion, Jesus said of him, "he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel: For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake."—vss. 15,16

MISSIONARY JOURNEYS OF PAUL

From chapter thirteen through the end of the Book of Acts, with the sole exception of chapter fifteen, we have related the many interesting, and oftentimes trying, experiences of Paul as he traveled from place to place in the ministry of the Gospel. He was persecuted in many cruel ways. One of his journeys had Jerusalem as its destination, and he was informed by God, through the Holy Spirit, that

bonds and imprisonment awaited him there. Because of this, the brethren endeavored to dissuade him from exposing himself to this danger. Paul's wonderful spirit of devotion to his Lord is displayed in his reply, "What mean ye to weep and to break mine heart? for I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." (Acts 21:13) Later, he traveled to Rome where he again faced imprisonment, and eventually death, at the hands of the Roman Emperor Nero.

On one of his missionary journeys Paul visited Athens, and was taken by the learned men and philosophers to the Areopagus, the "Supreme Court" of Athens on Mars' Hill. He had been accused of introducing a new god. Taking a position on the side of the hill, a massive heathen temple towering over his head, Paul began his defense by commenting on the numerous idols, ascribed to various gods, which filled the valley below him. In this setting, he called his hearers' attention to one of their idols, which bore the inscription, "TO THE UNKNOWN GOD," and said, "Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you."—Acts 17:18-23

Continuing, Paul said, "God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands [a statement prompted by the imposing heathen temple on the hilltop above him]; Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things; And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; That

they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us. For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring. Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device."—Acts 17:24-29

Then, referring to the Athenians' lack of knowledge of the true God, Paul commented that in past times "this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent: Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead."—vss. 30,31

It is noteworthy that Paul uses the word "assurance" in his reference to the coming day of judgment. This indicates that the "Judgment Day" of the Scriptures is to be a blessing to mankind. If it were to be doomsday, it would not have been a cause for rejoicing if Paul had given an assurance that such a terrible time would come. When we examine the great plan of God set forth in the Bible, we find that his Judgment Day is to be a thousand years in length, and will be a time in which all mankind will be given a true knowledge of God and of his laws, and have an opportunity to obey them and live.

JEWS AND GENTILES

In the Book of Acts we are also informed of the difficult situation that arose in the Early Church

when Gentiles began to accept Christ and join the Jewish believers. When Jesus first sent his disciples into the ministry, he instructed them not to go to the Gentiles. (Matt. 10:5) Just before his ascension, however, he rescinded this restriction by telling them that they were to go into all the world. (Acts 1:8) The apostles, especially Peter, found it difficult to become reconciled to this broader outlook.

Cornelius was the first Gentile convert. The Lord granted a special privilege of grace, manifested in a vision to Cornelius, and one also to Peter. The purpose of these visions was to bring the two together so that the apostle could present the Gospel message to this devout Gentile. This information is recorded in Acts, chapters ten and eleven, and is one of the most interesting accounts related in the Bible.

In Cornelius' vision, the Lord instructed him to send men to call for Peter, who was in Joppa at the home of "Simon a tanner." The next day, as Peter was praying on the rooftop of Simon's home, he "fell into a trance." His "trance" was in reality a vision from the Lord, in which he saw a "sheet," knitted in the form of a basket, let down from heaven, filled with all sorts of "fourfooted beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air." He was bidden to "rise, kill, and eat."—Acts 10:1-13

Peter recognized these animals and the fowls as being, according to the Jewish Law, unclean, so he refused to eat. Then the Lord said to him, "What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common." (vss. 14,15) Later, led by a further providence of the Lord, Peter was brought into the house of the

Gentile, Cornelius, and he and his household accepted Christ. Then Peter realized that in his vision God had been saying to him that the time had come when Gentiles, formerly considered outside the scope of God's favor, were now to be accepted. Commenting on his impressions, Peter said, "Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him."—Acts 10:34,35

This wonderful experience did not entirely settle the issue for the Early Church. Later, a conference of brethren was held in Jerusalem at which the principal topic for discussion was the matter of Gentile believers, and how best to integrate them into local groups, which were at the time predominately Jewish. Peter was at that conference, and testified concerning his experience in connection with the conversion of Cornelius. Paul also was there and testified of the many Gentile conversions he had witnessed.—Acts 15:1-12

James, who apparently was the chairman of the conference, summed up the findings as follows: "Men and brethren, hearken unto me: Simeon [that is, Peter] hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles [a reference to Peter's testimony concerning Cornelius], to take out of them a people for his name. And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written, After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the

Lord, who doeth all these things. Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world.”—vss. 13-18

This is a very enlightening presentation of the proper order of God’s plan. The “tabernacle of David” is the ruling house of David. It had been overthrown more than six centuries earlier. The disciples believed that it was to be restored by Christ, but up to this time they did not have a clear idea of when this would be accomplished. The last time Jesus was with them they asked him, “Wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?” Jesus replied, “It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power.”—Acts 1:6,7

The outlook of the apostles was now broadening, however, and in this conference James discerned that the tabernacle of David would not be rebuilt until after “a people for his name” had been gathered out from among the Gentiles. The expression, “people for his name,” identifies these called ones as members of the God’s divine family. At first, this “high calling” was confined to the Jews, but now it was extended to the Gentiles.—Phil. 3:14; Rom. 9:23,24

When this work of selecting from the world those who are to be joint-heirs with Jesus is completed, then will come the rebuilding of the tabernacle, or house, of David in the hands of Christ and his “bride,” God’s heavenly family. Then, as James further declares, “the residue of men”—all Gentiles and Jews—will be given an opportunity to receive the blessings of the thousand-year Messianic kingdom, the same period as the aforementioned “Judgment Day.”

NO DENOMINATIONS

Since the Book of Acts records the establishment of the Early Church, beginning with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and under the guidance of the inspired apostles, it is interesting to note what did not take place. For example, there was no building of costly edifices in which to conduct religious services. There is nothing to indicate that a single meetinghouse was built under the direction of the apostles.

Several references are made to congregations of brethren which met in the home of one or another of the believers. Doubtless some of these groups, such as the one at Jerusalem, were too large to meet in homes, and no doubt assembly rooms of various types were used. So far as the records indicate, those early believers did not deem it necessary to build meetinghouses.

Another interesting fact is that there is no evidence of denominational names having been used. We are informed believers were first called “Christians” at Antioch. (Acts 11:26) This name is only used twice in the Book of Acts, and once later in a letter written by Peter. (Acts 26:28; I Pet. 4:16) The single word “church”—Greek, *ecclesia*—is almost the only name attached to the believers, who are referred to as the church of God, the church of Christ, the church at Jerusalem, at Ephesus, at Rome, in the home of Aquilla, and other similar references.

What strange departures from this simplicity have developed among Christian believers since those early days! Would it not be wise for all those who are seeking the “old paths” to return to those

simple ways and customs? (Jer. 6:16) We believe that rich spiritual blessings await those who are courageous enough to do this.

Much more could be written on these pages with regard to the Acts of the Apostles, and we have only touched briefly on a few highlights. We encourage our readers to look more fully into this vitally important account of the establishment of the Early Church. You will receive a rich blessing, as you consider this wonderful portion of God's Holy Word. May we all have the same sentiments as the psalmist, who said, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path."—Ps. 119:105 ■