

Lessons from the Book of Acts

“The word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith.”
—Acts 6:7

THE FULL NAME OF THE fifth book in the New Testament is “Acts of the Apostles,” although it is usually referred to simply as “Acts,” or as our title states, “The Book of 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, especially as

related to the establishment of the early Christian church. Although Acts is largely historical in character, interwoven with its record of events are some of the most important doctrinal and devotional lessons to be found anywhere in the Bible.

The Book of Acts was written by Luke, who had previously written the Gospel account which bears his name. He refers to this as the “former treatise ... 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 opening chapter of Acts is a transition from the life of Christ into the era of the apostles. It records Jesus’ last appearance to them, and his commission for the service they were to render in his name after he ascended to heaven.—vss. 4-11

In verse eight of the first chapter, the resurrected Jesus is quoted as promising that the Holy Spirit would soon come upon the apostles. 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.” Thus was the stage set for the ensuing historical account of the experiences and Acts of the Apostles.

The second chapter records the fulfillment of the promise Jesus made concerning the bestowing of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles. In some Bible versions the expression “Holy Ghost” is used. This is a mistranslation evidently designed to give the impression that the Holy Spirit is a person. However, this is contrary to the teachings of the Bible. The Greek word translated Spirit, or in some cases Ghost, in the New Testament, is *pneuma*, which is defined by *Strong’s Greek Dictionary* as a “current of air,” “breath,” or “breeze.” There is no thought of personality attached to the word, but it rather denotes an invisible power or influence, such as is manifest by a current of air or a breeze. Thus, the Holy Spirit signifies the invisible power and influence of God, used to accomplish whatever his purposes may be.

The Holy Spirit came upon the waiting disciples at Jerusalem in a miraculous manner, in order to

further 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. Consequently, in fulfillment of his promise, he had 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. (Lev. 23:11,16) This meant that there were Israelites in the city at the time from many countries, speaking the languages of the countries in which they lived.

This afforded an excellent 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 languages. Thus, one of the manifestations of the Holy Spirit at that time was the ability of the apostles to “speak with other tongues [languages].” (Acts 2:4) This 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 position of Jesus as their Messiah.

The enemies of Jesus now opposed his chosen apostles and charged that they had become intoxicated. The Apostle Peter quickly and energetically refuted this charge. (vss. 13-19) Then, 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. There 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 many of 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 to be baptized "in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." The account states that three thousand responded to Peter's message that day and were baptized.—vss. 36-41

"TIMES OF RESTITUTION"

The third chapter of Acts records another marvelous sermon by Peter given a short time after Pentecost. The setting was quite different from that in which he delivered his previous 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 had been unable to walk from the time of his birth. "In the name of Jesus," and by the invisible power of the Holy Spirit, Peter healed the man, enabling him to walk, even to the point of "leaping, and praising God."—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 the resurrected

Christ, the one whom they had crucified. Then the apostle added, “And he [God] 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.”—vss. 20,21

The lesson here is 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, has 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. In examining the various books of the Old Testament, they are replete with prophecies which foretell of man’s eventual redemption and restoration. Now Peter confirms this, telling us in his outstanding sermon that the “times of restitution” was the theme of all God’s holy prophets.

PERSECUTION

Jesus had said to his disciples, “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. In various ways, by intimidation and by imprisonment, these opponents of the Gospel endeavored to hinder and, if possible, to destroy their work. One example of this is recorded

in the fourth chapter of Acts. In this account, recorded in verses 1-18, Peter and John were brought before the religious council of the Jews, who commanded them not to speak any more “nor teach in the name of Jesus.”

At times, there was even trouble which came from within the church’s fellowship. In Acts 5:1-11, we have the record of Ananias and Sapphira, his wife, who were evidently members of the church in Jerusalem. They sold a piece of land for the alleged purpose of contributing all of the proceeds to the church treasury. However, they falsified their promise by secretly keeping part of the money for themselves. Their dishonesty was detected by the Apostle Peter, and they both immediately died. Thus was provided a sobering lesson that honesty in all of our dealings with the Lord, the brethren, and all those with whom we have to do, is of paramount importance.

Chapter seven of Acts presents the discourse which Stephen, the first Christian martyr, delivered before the Jewish Sanhedrin when called upon to defend himself against the accusations of his Jewish enemies. Saul of Tarsus, who was a Pharisee and zealous in persecuting Christians, consented to the death of Stephen, and assisted in his slaying by guarding the clothing of those who stoned this young deacon to death.

Two chapters later in Acts, we find the record of Saul’s conversion to Christianity. This account informs us 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.” (Acts 9:1,2) 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.”—vss. 3-5

Saul was quick to discern that in 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 told to go to a certain home in Damascus, and that there he would receive his instructions. (vs. 6) From being a bitter enemy of the church, Saul, who was known afterward as Paul, became not only an enthusiastic follower of the Master, but devoted the remainder of 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.—Acts 26:15-19; Rom. 11:13

Beginning with chapter thirteen, most of the remainder of the Book of Acts is devoted to the relating of the many interesting, and ofttimes trying, experiences of Paul as he traveled from place to place in the ministry of the Gospel. On his second missionary journey Paul visited Athens and was taken by the learned men and philosophers to the Areopagus, the “Supreme Court” of Athens located on Mars hill. He was accused of introducing a new religious teaching. Facing his audience

on the hillside below, as Paul gave his defense, was a valley where numerous idols and altars attributed to various gods were located, among them being one ascribed to the "Unknown God." Calling his hearers' attention to this particular altar, Paul said, "The Being, therefore, whom you, without knowing Him, revere, Him I now proclaim to you."—Acts 17:16-23, *Weymouth New Testament*

Prompted by this setting and the imposing heathen temple on the hilltop near him, Paul continued: "GOD who made the universe and everything in it—He, being Lord of Heaven and earth, does not dwell in sanctuaries built by men. Nor is He ministered to by human hands, as though He needed anything—but He Himself gives to all men life and breath and all things. He caused to spring from one forefather people of every race, for them to live on the whole surface of the earth, and marked out for them an appointed span of life and the boundaries of their homes; that they might seek God, if perhaps they could grope for Him and find Him. Yes, though He is not far from any one of us. For it is in closest union with Him that we live and move and have our being; as in fact some of the poets in repute among yourselves have said, For we are also His offspring. Since then we are God's offspring, we ought not to imagine that His nature resembles gold or silver or marble, or anything sculptured by the art and inventive faculty of man."—vss. 24-29, *Weymouth*

Then, referring to the Athenians lack of knowledge of the true God, the apostle said that in times past, "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” to convey a positive meaning 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, there would be very little cause for “assurance” among “all men,” but rather fear and foreboding at such a prospect. However, when we examine the great plan of God set forth in the Bible, we find that the “day” of judgment 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.—Isa. 26:9; II Pet. 3:8,9,13; Rev. 20:6

Paul’s third missionary journey had Jerusalem as its final destination, and it was revealed to him by the power of the Holy Spirit that bonds and imprisonment awaited him there. His brethren in Christ endeavored to dissuade him from exposing himself to this danger, but Paul’s wonderful spirit of devotion to the 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

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 come in

among 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 told them that soon 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. Nevertheless, he was used by God to begin the Gospel ministry to the Gentiles.

Cornelius, a devout believer in the God of Israel, was the first Gentile convert, along with his family. The Lord provided a vision to Cornelius and one also to Peter, to bring the two together so that the apostle could present the Gospel message to this sincere Gentile. This account is recorded in chapter ten of Acts. Peter fell asleep on the roof of "Simon a tanner." He had a dream in which he saw a "great sheet," 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, as his dream continued, that these animals were, according to the Jewish law, unclean, so he refused to obey. Then the Lord said to him, "What God hath cleansed," should no longer be called unclean. (vss. 14,15) Later, when by a further providence of the Lord, Peter was brought into the house of Cornelius and he and his family accepted Christ, the meaning of the dream became apparent. Peter then realized that God had been saying to him that the time had come when Gentiles, formerly considered outside of God's favor, were now to be accepted. Commenting on his enlightened understanding, 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.”—vss. 34,35

This experience, wonderful as it was, did not entirely settle the issue for the whole church. Later, a conference of believers was held in Jerusalem at which the principal topic for discussion was the matter of Gentile Christians, and how best to integrate them in local groups which were at the time predominantly 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. James, who apparently was the chairman of the conference, summed up the findings as follows, “Men and brethren, hearken unto me: Simeon [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.”—Acts 15:13-18

This is a very enlightening presentation of the proper sequence of God’s plan. The “tabernacle of David” refers to the ruling house of David. It had been overthrown 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 had 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 God's divine family. At first this "high calling" had been confined to the Jews, but now it was extended to the Gentiles.—Phil. 3:14; I Pet. 2:9,10

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 ruling house, of David in the hands of Christ and his church. Then, as James further declared, "the residue of men," Jews and Gentiles alike, will be given an opportunity to receive the blessings of the kingdom. This will be the work of the millennium—the thousand-year judgment day spoken of previously.

NO EDIFICES OR DENOMINATIONS

Since the Book of Acts records the establishment of the Early Church, 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 meeting-house or church building was constructed under the direction of the apostles.

Several references are made to the “church” which met in the home of one or another of the believers. Doubtless some of the congregations, such as the one at Jerusalem, were too large to meet in homes, and probably assembly rooms of various types were used. So far as the records indicate, however, 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 that believers were first called “Christians” at Antioch. (Acts 11:26) However, the single word “church” is, by far, the name most often attached to the believers. How appropriate this is, for the Greek word translated “church” is *ekklesia*, which simply means “an assembly of Christians gathered for worship.”—*Thayer’s Greek Definitions*

What strange departures from this simplicity have developed among Christianity since those early days! Would it not be wise for all those who are seeking the Lord to return to those simple ways and customs? The Prophet Jeremiah wrote, “Thus saith the LORD, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls.” (Jer. 6:16) We believe that rich spiritual blessings await those who are courageous enough to do this. Let us learn from, and apply to ourselves, the lessons of simplicity, service, and faithfulness under severe trial, that are recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. ■