

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Acts 1 - Introduction and summary of the early chapters of The Acts

In 1965 I started a new job. A new environment! A brand new college! The advantage was that I got in at the beginning. If this is done, there is greater possibility of making progress. Today, and for the next five Sundays, our talks are to be from the early chapters of the book of Acts. We will get in at the beginning of Christianity!

The book of Acts gives us a clear and orderly outline of this beginning. Here we are, living in the year AD 2000, and the evidences of that beginning are still to be seen. The writer is Luke who has also given us the third gospel. He is the only New Testament writer who was a Gentile. In his gospel he records facts that show the Lord Jesus as a man. Luke was the fitting person to give us this historical outline of the progress of the Gospel which was to go far off to the Gentiles. Added to this are his close links with Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles.

Luke begins The Acts with a reference to his gospel. Let's think of this gospel for a while. He writes to his friend Theophilus an account of the life of the Lord Jesus. Luke had himself received, along with others, the account of eyewitnesses who had been with the Lord Jesus from the beginning. Just listen to his words to this friend, *"It seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus, that thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed"*. Luke did not leave any stone unturned to find out the facts accurately. There was nothing haphazard in his account. Notice the little expression, *'in order'*. Another translation of this is *'with method'*. He wrote with a particular point of view, it was not just a chronological account. Luke was concerned that Theophilus should be assured of the certainty of the things he had been taught. We also know that all the four Gospels were written by inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

As we think now of the Acts of the Apostles, we can be confident that it will be an accurate account. Luke writes to the same person, continuing where he had left off in his gospel. The subject of the early verses in chapter 1 is the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Everything in Christianity stands upon this truth. Take it away, and *'vain is our faith'*. Just listen to verse 3, speaking of the apostles he writes, *"To whom also He shewed Himself alive after His passion by many infallible proofs, being seen of them forty days, and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God"*. Luke had already given an account of those days. The Lord Jesus wasn't with them permanently during those 40 days, but appeared to them from time to time. The disciples were left in no doubt that He was alive. They were terrified as we might expect. However He said to them, *"Behold My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself: handle Me and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones, as ye see Me have"*. He went on to show them His hands and His feet. He even ate before them. These were just some of the infallible proofs. In the book of Acts, the resurrection of Christ is also the theme of the preaching of the apostles.

An interesting subject comes into the Lord's conversation at this time. Let's listen, *"speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God"*. The expression "kingdom of God" occurs seven times in the book of Acts. The last occasion is in chapter 28 when the Apostle Paul was a prisoner in Rome. The kingdom of God was the topic of Paul's ministry to all who came to see him. As the result of the coming of the Holy Spirit there would be people on earth from every nation who would own the rule of God in their lives. This is still true today, but this rule is not connected with material things. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans; *"The kingdom of God ...is righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit"*. Make sure that we who are Christians enjoy these things today, because they are acceptable to God.

Let's go on with Acts 1. The disciples were told not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father. This is a reference to the Holy Spirit. Maybe they would remember the words of the Lord Jesus in the Gospel of John. *"And I will pray the Father, and He shall give you another Comforter, that He may abide with you for ever"*. The time would come when the disciples would be active, but for the moment they were to wait. However, it wouldn't be long, *"not many days hence"*. The forty days were to be completed plus another ten. Then they would be baptised with the Holy Spirit. This matter of waiting is such a problem isn't it? We all like to be up and doing. To wait is a discipline we need in many differing circumstances.

In verse 6 of our chapter the disciples had a question to ask the Lord Jesus. It was something never far away from their thoughts. *"When they therefore were come together, they asked of Him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?"* The Lord's reference to the kingdom of God when speaking to them may have

brought this to their minds. However, they were thinking of a political deliverance from the Roman power. He had to tell them that it was not for them to know the times and seasons; that was in the Father's hands.

In the mean time, the apostles were to be witnesses, but not in their own strength! *"But ye will receive power after that the Holy Spirit is come upon you"*. This witness was to spread far and wide. This is one of the encouraging aspects of reading the book of Acts. What a power was available in the hands of the disciples! For the most part they were men of humble origin; neither did they possess great education. Yet in the beginning nothing could stop the progress of their testimony. Opposition to it, mainly by the Jewish leaders, failed. In the verse we are dealing with there is an outline of the direction the witness would take. It forms a table of contents to the book. Let's listen to it, *"And ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth"*. In chapter 6 we have a summary given as to the early success of the gospel in Jerusalem, *"And 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"*. These chapters are very encouraging. At the same time they are very humbling. In our day and age there seems so little response to the Gospel; and yet the power hasn't changed. How often we sing the familiar words,

*'Thy touch has still its ancient power;
No word from Thee can fruitless fall'.*

If ever there was a time when our nation was in need of the Gospel, it is now! We must search our hearts and pray for revival in our day.

The ascension of the Lord Jesus is the next great truth in this chapter. Four times the expression *"taken up"* occurs. When the forty days had expired, He was taken up into heaven. The coming of the Holy Spirit depended on this. The Apostle John records the words of the Lord to the disciples in his gospel. Their hearts were troubled. Knowing this He says, *"Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you"*. The Lord Jesus ascended to the right hand of God and the Holy Spirit came down to bear witness to Him. In Acts 1 we have another record of the actual Ascension. Just as the Lord had commissioned His disciples to be witnesses, He was taken up and a cloud received Him out of their sight. In his gospel, Luke gives us a little more information as to how He went up. As He was parted from them, He lifted up His hands and blessed them. He wasn't going to forget them. In our chapter it says that they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up. In fact, it seems that, even when He was out of sight, they just stood there, gazing up into heaven. It must have been a tremendous experience. If we had been there, we would have done the same.

Let's think now of the two men standing by them. Who were they? No doubt they were angels. It says they were clothed in white apparel. At all the great occasions in the life of the Lord Jesus, angels were present. They were there at His birth, at His temptations, in Gethsemane and at the empty tomb and, here, as He ascends back to heaven. Their message was to the point; the disciples were not to stand gazing up into heaven. There was work to be done! We must, however, think of the promise given to them. *"...this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into heaven"*. These words have given great joy to believers down through the ages. It is a wonderful hope. It refers to His coming in power and glory. Just as He left by the way of Olivet, so when He returns, His feet will again stand upon the Mount of Olives. The kingdom that the disciples were so concerned about would surely come in God's good time.

It must have been with mixed feelings that the disciples returned from Olivet to Jerusalem. The eleven disciples went up into an upper room where they continued together in prayer and supplication. There were the women also, Mary the mother of Jesus among them and His brothers. The last mention of Mary in the gospels was when she stood by the cross, being committed to the care of John, the disciple whom Jesus loved. Now, she is just another of the company waiting for the coming of the Spirit. The way Mary has been exalted has spoiled the beauty of the picture given here. She was soon to become a member of the body of Christ, just as the others. The Lord's brothers had also believed by this time.

The next thing to be done was to find a replacement for Judas who had betrayed the Lord Jesus. It might be helpful to notice that the first 12 chapters of the Acts centre on Peter and Jerusalem. And so Peter stands up in the midst of the disciples and takes the lead. It is remarkable how much understanding he now has of the Old Testament God had showed him from the scriptures that another was to take the place of Judas. However, there were certain credentials necessary. It must be one who, *"Beginning from the baptism of John, unto that same day that He was taken up from us, must one be ordained to be a witness with us of His resurrection"*. They appointed two and prayed that the Lord would show which one of the two He had chosen. It was not to be of human appointment. It may seem strange to us in our day to cast lots, but it was a method of finding the Lord's mind in Old Testament times. The lot fell upon Matthias and he was numbered along with the eleven apostles.

Let's think of chapter 2. The day of Pentecost had now arrived! This day is of the greatest importance for it is the birthday of the church. This was promised by the Lord Jesus before His death. In Matthew 16, speaking to Peter He said, "*I will build my church*". The company gathered together in Jerusalem were baptised into one body. The Holy Spirit was given and it filled all the house where they were sitting. It also says that it sat upon each of them. Not only was the whole body bonded together by the Holy Spirit, but each believer was individually a recipient of the Person of the Holy Spirit, united to Christ the Head in heaven. It was a permanent indwelling. In John 14 the Lord Jesus had said, when on earth, "*He may abide with you for ever*". He went on to say "*He dwelleth with you and shall be in you*". It had actually happened! What a wonderful day it was!

This gift brought about a remarkable change in the apostles. Just listen, "*And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance*". There would be people of many languages and dialects in Jerusalem. We are told that, "*every man heard them speak in his own language*". They were amazed and marvelled saying, "*Behold, are not all these which speak Galileans?*" Not only was this day the birthday of the church, but the time had come for the wonderful works of God to be told to all men. There were of course mockers who said, "*These men are full of new wine*". However, Peter went on to show that what they were witnessing had been foretold in the Old Testament scriptures. We still live in this unique day. The Gospel has gone out to whosoever will, without restriction. It may not be long before this day of good news ends. The coming of the Lord must be near! Make sure you have trusted the Lord Jesus Christ and possess the forgiveness of sins. To believe the gospel means that you too, will become a member of the church, the body of Christ, having part in the life of Christ the Head.

Let's think now of the early chapters of the book of Acts. Don't forget that just a little over seven weeks had passed since the Jews had crucified their Messiah. Peter's preaching on this day must have affected their conscience. Very forcefully he tells them that the One they had crucified, God had raised from the dead! I am not surprised that their response was, "*Men and brethren, what shall we do?*" However, there was a way of escape and three thousand souls found it. They repented and were baptised for the remission of sins. What wonderful mercy was shown. The work of God was seen to advance. We read that "*they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship and in breaking of bread, and in prayers*". There were encouragements but also disappointments.

A miracle accompanied the preaching of Peter in chapter 3. There was power in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. The lame man that was laid daily at the gate of the temple was made to stand and walk and leap and praise God. There was opposition to the work from the religious powers. The disciples were beaten and attempts were made to stop the preaching. But they went on, "*rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name*". Let us pray for courage in our day to do the Lord's work. We may not have much time left before the Lord Jesus comes to take His church home to heaven!

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