

“Survey of the Scriptures”

Session #9 – THE BOOK OF ACTS

A two-part history was written by Luke the physician. In the first – the gospel – he recorded the life of Jesus; in the second, which we are now studying, he recorded the acts of the risen Christ by the Holy Spirit through the disciples. In this book of Acts we see Christianity in action.

Before He returned to heaven Christ promised His followers that they would receive power. They had neither worldly wealth nor political influence, but on the Day of Pentecost they received the power He promised; they were filled with the Holy Spirit.

Christ also said His disciples would be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the uttermost part of the earth. The Book of Acts is the record of how these promises were fulfilled.

As Jews, it was natural that their first testimony was to the Jewish nation. The harvest festival of Pentecost provided an excellent opportunity, as Jews from many countries were gathered at Jerusalem. The crowds listened in amazement as the apostles began to speak in the languages of neighboring countries.

Boldly they began their witness as Peter, their spokesman, addressed the assembly. He said, *“Ye men of Judea and all that dwell in Jerusalem, ye men of Israel, listen to me!”*

In his preaching, Peter told them that Jesus of Nazareth was now risen and glorified. The whole nation of Israel should know beyond shadow of a doubt that this same Jesus, Whom they had crucified, God had declared to be their Messiah and Lord.

Later, Peter and John testified to the power of the risen Christ by healing a lame man at the Beautiful Gate of the temple. This miracle gave them a further opportunity to give their message to Israel, with emphasis on the resurrection of Christ from the dead.

The message of Peter soon brought opposition from the religious and political parties who thought they’d done away with Jesus once and for all. Strongest opposition came from the Sadducees, who taught that there was no such thing as resurrection from the dead. Peter and John were arrested.

The next day they were brought before the council and asked in what power or by what name they had healed the lame man. In the power of the Spirit, Peter’s answer was calmly and clearly given. He wanted all Israel to know that the lame man was made whole by the name of Jesus Christ.

The high priest and his council could not deny that a miracle had been done. They could only threaten the apostles and forbid them to speak or teach of Jesus. But Peter, who had

once denied the Lord outside the priest's palace, was not afraid now. He must speak of the things he had seen and heard.

Day by day the number of believers in Jerusalem increased. Three thousand were added on the Day of Pentecost. After each witness multitudes gladly received the word, among them a group of priests. At this time believers were called "the people of the Way" – later to be referred to as the church.

When Peter and John were put in prison, the doors opened miraculously. Many signs and miracles accompanied the preaching of the gospel. Scores of people were healed of all manner of sickness. But Jewish opposition and persecution were steadily increasing.

Another fearless preacher was Stephen. The wisdom and spirit of his witness stirred up the wrath of synagogue teachers and they took him to court. His defense began with a quiet resume of Israel's history, but at the end he turned the tables on the council and accused them of murdering the Just One sent from God.

So great was their fury that the council took the law into their own hands. Accusing Stephen of blasphemy they threw him out of the city and stoned him to death. This was the beginning of the great persecution of believers in Jerusalem which was in part instigated by a young Pharisee named Saul.

Now the witnesses for Christ left Jerusalem and scattered to other parts of Judea. They went everywhere preaching the Word. Samaritans gladly received the gospel. The eunuch from Ethiopia heard the message in the Gaza desert. When Peter preached in Joppa, many believed.

Peter left Joppa to take the message to Cornelius, a Roman centurion stationed at Caesarea. It had taken a special vision from God to convince Peter that the gospel was for Gentiles as well as Jews and that God was no respecter of persons.

Some of the believers from Jerusalem settled at Antioch, where their witness won many Greeks to the Lord. A young church was formed. At Antioch "the people of the Way" were given a new name – they were called Christians.

Instead of Jerusalem, which had been the center of the witness to the Jews, Antioch now became headquarters of the Christians. Here the leaders met to consider the future of the church. Should they take the gospel to Romans and Greeks – to people who were not Jews? Were they to evangelize the world?

Christ promised they would be His witnesses to the uttermost part of the earth. Peter declared that it was God's purpose to grant salvation to Gentiles as well as Jews. So the gospel door was opened wide and the first two foreign missionaries appointed: generous, stable Barnabas and fiery Saul, better known as Paul.

The story of Paul's conversion is recorded three times in the book of Acts. He had been chief persecutor of the Christians and was carrying out this work when halted by a vision of the risen glorified Christ. So Paul, a citizen of Rome, a student of Greek culture, and steeped in Hebrew religion, became Christ's witness to men of every nation.

Paul and Barnabas left Seleucia on the first trip which took them to Cyprus and then into Asia Minor. The gospel message was given first to the Jews at the synagogues. When the apostles met opposition from the religious Jews they turned to the Gentiles.

During the first century a crisis arose in the church. Leaders among the converted Jews began to teach that all converts must follow Judaism and keep the law, whereas others – the apostles among them – held that Christians were not under law but grace. A special conference to discuss the matter was held at Jerusalem.

Peter pointed out that the Jews themselves were unable to bear the heavy yoke of the law. How could they expect Gentiles to do so? They were all saved by grace through faith! The church agreed that Christians did not have to be Judaized, and letters to this effect were sent to groups of believers everywhere.

On his second missionary journey Paul took Silas as his companion. Later he was joined by Timothy and Luke, the author of this historical account. This time the missionaries not only met with opposition from Jewish leaders but also came face to face with paganism in all its forms.

At Philippi and Lystra the apostles met with ignorance, superstition and brutality. In Ephesus they saw the people given over to idolatry in the worship of Diana. Athens' proud philosophers opposed the gospel by the wisdom of the world. Corinth was saturated with lust, greed and immorality. But the gospel of Christ was victorious in human lives in every environment and in the face of every problem the world offered.

Paul's third missionary journey was to encourage the believers and strengthen the churches which had already been established.

Christianity continued to grow in spite of the opposition which would have cut it down. Judaizers still caused most of the trouble but at Ephesus Paul ran afoul of the metal workers' union where Christianity began to affect their lucrative business of making idols. Difficulties were also caused by pretenders or false professors who only came into the church to gain their own ends.

Many Jews in Jerusalem hated Paul and were bitterly opposed to the cause of Christ. When he returned to the city, Paul was warmly greeted by James and other elders of the church, but he was on dangerous ground. His enemies plotted against him.

With false accusations and trumped up charges these Jews soon had Paul under arrest, and they would have put him to death had it not been for the intervention of Roman guards, who took the apostle to the castle of Antonia near the temple.

From the steps of the castle Paul spoke to his fellow Jews in the Hebrew tongue. Later he appeared before the council of Pharisees and Sadducees. Paul never passed up an opportunity to witness for the Lord Jesus Christ and to defend the gospel.

To foil a plot for his murder, the Romans moved Paul to Caesarea where he was held prisoner for several years. During that time he appeared before Felix and Festus, Roman governors, and King Agrippa, the last of the Herods. Because he had appealed to Caesar, Paul was sent to Rome.

Even on the long and tiring journey to Rome Paul continued to witness for Christ. He spoke to the boatmen, to the people at their ports of call, and to the natives on the islands of Crete and Malta. At Rome Paul found many Christians waiting to welcome him.

Luke's record closes with Paul in his own house in Rome, captive yet free to teach and preach about the Lord Jesus Christ. His voice was not silenced until the time of Nero's persecution of the Christians when, according to tradition, Paul was put to death.

So we see that the young church started with a handful of believers, and yet we read in Acts that they turned the world upside down!

Summarizing the history in Acts we see that in less than 40 years the gospel was preached in Judea and Samaria, in Asia Minor, Greece, Italy and the islands of the sea. Vigorous young churches were established in many centers of the Roman Empire. Even after the fall of Jerusalem under Titus in 70 A.D., followed by the dispersion of the Jews and persecution of the believers, Christianity continued to advance.

The gospel message today is the same as it was in the first century, and Christians still face a pagan world with its intellectual pride, superstition, idolatry, brutality and immorality.

The Christian today has the same commission. We are to be witnesses of Jesus Christ at home, to those around us, and to the uttermost parts of the earth. We serve the same Master and receive power from the same Spirit. But not until we catch the vision of the early Christians and carry out our task with the same fresh vigor of faith, can we expect to see the same results as those we read in the Book of Acts.

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