

October 4, 2009

Acts 1: Promise of Holy Spirit

Purpose: To remind us that the power of the Spirit is given so that we may be witnesses.

Key Bible reference: Acts 1.1-14

Key Verse: Acts 1.8

Biblical Interpretation

After the Crucifixion, the disciples were afraid to be seen in public. They huddled together behind locked doors, afraid, not knowing what to do. When the news came to them that Jesus had been resurrected, that he was alive and on earth, it sounded too good to be true; and at first they did not believe it (Luke 24:11). But then Jesus appeared among them, and they saw for themselves. It was really true! Jesus was alive!

Just as startling as the Resurrection, perhaps, was the fact that Jesus had come back to his disciples, to those same men who had forsaken him in his time of trial. Though they had given up on him, Jesus had not given up on them. He still had plans to use them in his mission.

"Stay here in the city," Jesus told his disciples, "Until you have been clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49; compare Acts 1:4). "You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now" (Acts 1:5).

At this point, Jesus' followers had no idea what this outpouring of the Holy Spirit would mean in their lives. Their first thought was a rekindling of the old hopes and dreams so common among the Jews of their day. "Lord," they asked, "is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6).

This was a common question among devout Jews in Jesus' day. For when they talked about

God establishing his kingdom on earth, what they meant was that God would restore Israel to the religious and political glory that it had known in the days of David and Solomon. They thought that in "that day" all the nations would recognize the Lord God as their God, Jerusalem as their center of worship, and the Jewish high priest as their spiritual leader. Faithful Jews could not imagine a more noble task for the Messiah to perform.

Because the disciples still had this understanding of the Messiah and of God's reign, they thought in terms of Israel's restoration when Jesus promised that they would be "clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49). At long last Jesus was about to make his move!

But Jesus quickly dismissed those ideas and turned the disciples' thoughts toward their role as apostles. "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The very ones who had abandoned Jesus were going to tell his story to the world!

Acts 1:1-3. The very first words of Acts tell us that this book is the sequel to another: the Gospel of Luke, which is also addressed to "Theophilus" (see Luke 1:3). Indeed, these first verses of Acts are a summary of the entire Gospel of Luke.

There has been much discussion as to who Theophilus may have been. Since this name means "lover of God," some interpreters have suggested that this is just Luke's way of addressing any reader who may love God. On the other hand, the name Theophilus was quite common at the time of the writing of this Gospel. Therefore it is quite possible that Luke was addressing his book to a particular reader by that name. Furthermore, Luke is usually very careful in his use of titles; and in Luke 1:3 he calls Theophilus "most excellent"—a form of address normally employed for Romans of the lower aristocracy (the "equestrians"). This suggests that Luke and Acts are indeed addressed to a particular reader named Theophilus. Unfortunately, his name is all we really know about him.

In any case, this does not mean that the book was intended to be read only by Theophilus himself. In ancient times it was customary to address a book to a distinguished reader, or even to a patron, and to use that address as validation for the book itself. (Some of the "apologies" that Christians in the second century wrote in defense of their faith were addressed to the emperors even though the authors probably never expected that the emperors themselves would read these writings. Likewise, even in the sixteenth century, John Calvin addressed his famous Institutes to King Francis of France, thus making it clear that he did not intend for his book to be subversive of the government.)

So although the Book of Acts is addressed to Theophilus and most likely Theophilus himself was a member of the lower Roman aristocracy, in fact it probably was also intended for others who wished to know the continuation of the story Luke had told in his Gospel.

Both the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts begin with a prologue that follows the conventions of good writing in the first century. This shows that the author was rather well educated and that Christianity was beginning to make inroads into the middle and higher echelons of culture and society. Indeed, many of the issues with which Acts deals are precisely those arising out of the process whereby Christianity ceased to be a small Jewish sect and found a place for itself in the wider world.

If you compare several versions of the Bible, you may note that some translate the end of Acts 1:1 in the general sense of "taught from the beginning"; while others say, "began to teach." It is possible to translate the original Greek in both ways.

Note the reference to the Holy Spirit in verse 2. This binds together the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts; for in the first we see that the Spirit is behind the actions and teachings of Jesus, whereas in the second we see the continuing presence of Jesus through the action of the Spirit. This is so much the case that many interpreters have suggested that this second book should be titled "Acts of the Spirit" rather than "Acts of the Apostles."

The "forty days" of verse 3 do not have to be taken literally. "Forty days" is a phrase often employed in the Bible to indicate quite a few days.

Finally, note that when Luke seeks to summarize the teachings of Jesus in a single phrase (also in verse 3), he says that Jesus spoke "about the kingdom of God." For Luke, the kingdom or reign of God is the very core of his Gospel and of the teachings of Jesus.

Verses 4-8. This section (and the following one, on Jesus' ascension) repeats much of what appears at the end of the Gospel of Luke, sometimes expanding on it. Compare this section with Luke 24:47-49.

You may wish to pay special attention to the dialogue between Jesus and his disciples in verses 6-8. Note that the disciples' question has two elements: the time of the restoration of the Kingdom and the restoration of the Kingdom itself. Jesus tells them that they are not to ask about "the times or periods," but he does not rebuke them for asking about the Kingdom. This is significant because, as was said above, the theme of the Kingdom is central to the Gospel of Luke.

The core of this passage, and the most important point for the lesson, is that Jesus tells the disciples that the purpose of their receiving the Spirit is not that they may know "the times or periods" but that they may be witnesses. Contrary to what we may think, having the Spirit does not necessarily mean being able to tell when Jesus is coming or in how many stages the end will come. Having the Spirit allows one to be a witness.

The geographical expansion of the message, as it appears in verse 8, has often been considered an outline of the Book of Acts: beginning in Jerusalem, then to other parts of Judea, on to Samaria, and finally "to the ends of the earth." Although such an outline generally fits the Book of Acts, there is no historical reference to "the ends of the earth." On the contrary, the book ends in Rome, which is hardly the end of the earth. It may be that what Luke is suggesting here is that the work of the Spirit, begun in the Book of Acts, does not end there. Instead, it continues as the witness of the church moves on—until it reaches "the ends of the earth."

Verses 9-11. This is the story of the ascension of Jesus. There is a parallel account in Luke 24:50-52. Slight differences exist between the two accounts. On that basis some scholars have suggested that Luke and Acts were originally one book and that when they were separated, someone added the new introduction to Acts. That theory has not been generally accepted. Furthermore, the differences between the two accounts are not as great as some claim and can be reconciled with relative ease.

Perhaps the most significant difference—and one that can easily be understood, given the purpose of each of the two passages—is that in Luke the emphasis is on the actions of Jesus prior to his ascension, whereas in Acts we are told much more about the disciples themselves and about their actions after Jesus' ascension.

Verse 11 is significant; for it tells the disciples—and us—that although Jesus went to heaven and will return from heaven, we are not simply to remain looking at heaven. In other words, between Jesus' ascension and his return, there is work to be done—according to Jesus' own instructions and by the power of the Spirit. (You may note the parallelism between this passage and Luke 24:5, where the women are told that they are not to look for Jesus in the tomb.)

Verses 12-14. These verses (and the rest of Chapter 1) form the link between Jesus' ascension and Pentecost. They tell us what the disciples did immediately after Jesus' ascension.

The mount "called Olivet" (or as some other versions say, "the Mount of Olives") was a ridge more than two miles long, just outside Jerusalem. The distance that Acts gives, "a sabbath day's journey," is approximately half a mile.

The "room upstairs where they were staying" is what we traditionally call "the upper room" (based on the King James Version). It is probably the same room where the Last Supper took place (Luke 22:12).

The list of the disciples is the same that appears in Luke 6:13-16, except for some changes in order and the absence of Judas Iscariot. But added to the list are others who, together with the Eleven, "were constantly devoting themselves to prayer." Luke also makes a point of letting us know that there were women among the group, including Mary the mother of Jesus, "as well as his brothers."

These "brothers" of Jesus have been the subject of much debate. The reason for this debate is that their existence would seem to deny the traditional Roman Catholic teaching of the perpetual virginity of Mary, even after the birth of Jesus. This is why some have argued that "brothers" in fact means "cousins." To Protestants, this is a question of minor importance.