

Preview of Acts

The Book of Acts is the second volume of a two-part history written by Luke. He refers to his former treatise (the Book of Luke) as an account of all that Jesus began to do and teach. Acts is a record of Jesus' continuing work in the church through the Holy Spirit. The full title of the book is the Acts of the Apostles, but perhaps the book could more properly be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit.

This book is our only link between the Gospels and the Epistles. It is the sequel to the Gospels and the introduction to the Epistles. The Epistles take for granted many facts known to us only from the Book of Acts. It is, however, not a complete history of the Apostolic Era. Many more things happened (the Epistles refer to some of them) that are not recorded. But we do have a sufficient record to give us a picture of the birth and development of the church. The facts recorded were divinely selected to give us the impression God intended us to have of this period.

Acts contains many lessons and examples for the church today. We must be careful, however, that we do not bypass the teachings of the Epistles in an effort to duplicate the experience of the early church. The Book of Acts, after all, represents a transitional period immediately following the close of the Old Testament.

The account of the spread of the Gospel from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the world (1:8) gives us an overall outline of Acts.

- I. Chapters 1 through 7 —Jerusalem
 - A. The church established
 - B. The Jewish period
- II. II. Chapters 8 through 12 —Judea and Samaria
 - A. The church scattered
 - B. The transitional period
- III. III. Chapters 13 through 28—the uttermost parts
 - A. The church extended
 - B. The Gentile period

Lesson 1 5 August, 2018

Jesus' Ascension

Lesson Scope: Acts 1

References in brackets refer to Acts 1 unless otherwise specified

Lesson Focus

The Book of Acts begins with a salutation to Theophilus, who had also been the recipient of the Gospel according to Luke. The writer briefly reviewed the forty days following Jesus' resurrection but quickly moved to the events and teachings surrounding the ascension. Jesus had infallibly shown the disciples that He was risen. Now He focused on preparing them to lead out in the founding of the New Testament church. The kingdom He was establishing (Acts 1) was global and spiritual rather than local and political. Christ had spoken of His death and resurrection various times before it occurred. Yet He rose in a moment of triumph to which there were no eyewitnesses. His ascension, however, came almost unannounced but witnessed by all the disciples. In a way it was similar to the mysterious appearances and disappearances of the last forty days, yet this time instead of passing through a door, He had passed into heaven. Jesus returned to the Father at the conclusion of His earthly ministry. His ascension prepared the way for God's continuing work with His people.

Especially note these three principles associated with the ascension. First, Jesus' ascension shows us the nature of His present kingdom. Jesus had told Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). His ascension underscored this truth. He did not rebuke His disciples for asking, "Wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" (1:6). Rather, He refocused their thinking by saying "It is not for you to know the times or the seasons . . . but . . . ye shall be witnesses unto me."

Secondly, Jesus' ascension left His followers with a work to do. For one long moment the disciples stood gazing into the skies. Then two heavenly messengers met them and brought them to their senses. From that point forward, they were continuously occupied in the Lord's work.

Thirdly, Jesus' ascension points forward to His second coming. This gives us hope for the future and adds urgency to our work.

The ascension is largely disregarded as an important event in Christian history. Yet, considering its importance to Christ's ongoing work today, we do well to observe Ascension Day and thank God for the blessings that can be ours because of the ascension.

Lesson Aim: To show the significance of Jesus' ascension.

Theme Verse: **Hebrews 4:14.** Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession.

Lesson Text

“He Shewed Himself Alive”

Acts 1:1-8

¹ (KJV) The former treatise have I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, ² Until the day in which he was taken up, after that he through the Holy Ghost had given commandments unto the apostles whom he had chosen: ³ 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:

⁴ And, being assembled together with *them*, commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father, which, *saith he*, ye have heard of me. ⁵ For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence. ⁶ When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?

⁷ And he said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power. ⁸ But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.

“He Was Taken Up”

Acts 1:9-12

⁹ (KJV) And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight. ¹⁰ And while they looked stedfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel; ¹¹ Which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why

stand ye gazing up into heaven? 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. ¹² Then returned they unto Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is from Jerusalem a sabbath day's journey.

“A Witness . . . of His Resurrection”

Acts 1:13-16

¹³ (KJV) And when they were come in, they went up into an upper room, where abode both Peter, and James, and John, and Andrew, Philip, and Thomas, Bartholomew, and Matthew, James *the son* of Alphaeus, and Simon Zelotes, and Judas *the brother* of James. ¹⁴ These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren. ¹⁵ And in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples, and said, (the number of names together were about an hundred and twenty,) ¹⁶ Men *and* brethren, this scripture must needs have been fulfilled, which the Holy Ghost by the mouth of David spake before concerning Judas, which was guide to them that took Jesus.

Acts 1:20-26

²⁰ (KJV) For it is written in the book of Psalms, Let his habitation be desolate, and let no man dwell therein: and his bishoprick let another take. ²¹ Wherefore of these men which have companied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, ²² 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. ²³ And they appointed two, Joseph called Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias. ²⁴ And they prayed, and said, Thou, Lord, which knowest the hearts of all *men*, shew whether of these two thou hast chosen, ²⁵ That he may take part of this ministry and apostleship, from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place. ²⁶ And they gave forth their lots; and the lot fell upon Matthias; and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.

Questions for Study

“He Shewed Himself Alive”

1. In What ways did Christ relate differently these forty days than during His three-year ministry?

2. What did Jesus teach about the kingdom of God (1:3) during this period?
3. What can we learn from Jesus' command to wait?
“He Was Taken Up”
4. What is the significance of Jesus ascending while the disciples beheld?
5. What does Christ's ascension teach us about His second coming?
“A Witness . . . of His Resurrection”
6. With what were the disciples occupied while they waited at Jerusalem?
7. How did they determine the need for an ordination at this time?
8. What guiding principles for our ordination proceedings do we find in this passage?

Analysing the Passage

Theophilus remains one of the obscure characters of the Biblical record. The meaning of his name, “the beloved of God,” suggests that the Book of Acts, as well as Luke, is intended for all believers. Jesus used the forty days prior to His ascension to confirm the reality of His resurrection (1:3), to teach more about the nature of His kingdom (1:6-7), and to help His disciples to anticipate the coming of the Holy Spirit (1:4-5, 8). His commands for the time following the ascension were twofold: first wait (1:4), then witness (1:8). They “continued with one accord in prayer and supplication” (1:14). Jesus had left them, yet they could still communicate with Him through this avenue. These days united them as they waited for the promised Holy Ghost. Another avenue of communication with God was the Old Testament Scriptures. Here they found direction to ordain one to fill the vacancy left by Judas's failure. Through faith and prayer, the Scriptures, and Holy Spirit guidance, the work of Christ would go on even though He was no longer physically present.

Principles and Applications

“He Shewed Himself Alive”

I. Jesus' ascension marked the completion of His earthly ministry (1:1-2). Jesus had given sufficient teaching for the disciples to proceed without His physical presence. His death and resurrection completed God's

plan of salvation for man. He could now most effectively continue His work at the Father's right hand.

2. Jesus' resurrection was fully established before His ascension (1:3). The "many infallible proofs" include the witness of the angels beside the empty tomb and Christ's appearance to Mary Magdalene, to two on the road to Emmaus, and to the assembled disciples including Thomas. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:6 that at one time He was seen of more than five hundred brethren. Though nail prints were in His hands and His side bore the mark of the spear, His ability to enter closed doors clearly pointed to the heavenly nature of Christ's resurrected body.

3. Jesus' ascension opened the way for the baptism of the Holy Spirit (1:4-5). The Holy Spirit dwelt in Christ. Therefore, His presence was with the disciples in the person of Christ so long as Christ was here (John 16:7). When Christ ascended, a vacancy developed. That vacancy would be filled by the presence of the Spirit in the life of each believer. This outpouring fulfils "the promise of the Father" given in Joel 2:28-32.

4. With Jesus' ascension, a new phase of God's kingdom on earth was unveiled (1:6-8). Though the hopes of many were in the Messiah setting up a political kingdom ruling the nation of Israel, the disciples here came to rest with this final assurance of Jesus that the power of His kingdom is a spiritual power. Rather than covet positions of power, they were instructed to be witnesses, that is, to fill places of service in the New Testament Church Age.

"He Was Taken Up"

5. Jesus' ascension took Him back to His Father in heaven (1:9). He "made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant. . . . Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him" (Philippians 2:7, 9). His position was confirmed by Stephen, who saw Christ in His present place (7:56).

6. Jesus' ascension provides the pattern for His return (1:11). It will be "this same Jesus," and He will "come in like manner." Both events are sudden and unannounced—"In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye" (1 Corinthians 15:52). Both involve clouds—"Behold, he cometh with clouds" (Revelation 1:7). Both are witnessed in the plain sight of men—"Every eye shall see him" (Revelation 1:7). The knowledge of His

return provides us with ample motivation for the actions required (1:8) to occupy till He comes.

“A Witness . . . of His Resurrection”

7. The ascension of Jesus helped to unite His followers (1:14). Not long before, several of these men had gone back to fishing. Each of them previously had goals to have a position of greatness in the Messiah's kingdom. Now after the ascension, we find them “all . . . with one accord” in one place. God used Peter to take the lead in the ordination proceedings.

8. After Jesus ascended, His followers relied on the Scriptures in a new way (1:16-20). We also look to the Scriptures every day. How enlightening it is to realize that here before us is a verse that answers the need of the hour! Perhaps it is a need that we were only vaguely aware of, but God had an answer ready.

9. Jesus' ascension made evident the need for continued leadership (1:21-22). The ordination of Matthias was not the choice of one man, but rather the collective effort of a group and finally the choice of God through the use of the lot. Faithful church leaders today still monitor their ranks for evidences of need in the great work of shepherding the flock of God. As congregations prayerfully consider these needs and the leaders carefully evaluate those who are nominated to fill these needs, God's blessing can be upon human effort in the ongoing Work of His kingdom.

Important Teachings

1. Jesus' ascension marked the completion of His earthly ministry. (1:1-2).

2. Jesus' resurrection was fully established before His ascension (1:3).

3. Jesus' ascension opened the way for the baptism of the Holy Spirit (1:4-5).

4. With Jesus' ascension, a new phase of God's kingdom on earth was unveiled (1:6-8).

5. Jesus' ascension took Him back to His Father in heaven (1:9).

6. Jesus' ascension provides the pattern for His return (1:11).

7. The ascension of Jesus helped to unite His followers (1:14).

8. After Jesus ascended, His followers relied on the Scriptures in a new way (1:16-20).

9. Jesus' ascension made evident the need for continued leadership (12:21-22).

10. After Jesus' ascension, His Spirit empowered His followers to witness for Him in all the earth (1:8).

11. A careful use of the lot strengthens God's work on earth (1:26).

Answers to Questions

1. In what ways did Christ relate differently during these forty days than during His three-year ministry?

He focused on preparing His disciples for when He would no longer be present. He was not always with them, simply appearing and disappearing as needed. It also seems that He did not appear to large numbers of unbelievers. We have no record that He did miracles of healing, but the fish on the coals (John 21:9) seems to have been a miracle.

2. What did Jesus teach about the kingdom of God (1:3) during this period? -

The Father alone knows the exact nature and timing of future events. His interest today is focused on the church, not on an earthly kingdom. He promised to give power to His disciples through the baptism of the Holy Ghost. Their present responsibilities would be discipleship and evangelism. It is possible for us, like the disciples, to be so caught up by future prospects that we find it difficult to discern the Lord's will for today.

3. What can we learn from Jesus' command to wait?

Jesus' command was to first wait and then witness. We must wait when our own spiritual lives need strengthening. For example, we should not skip personal devotions so we have more time to Witness.

We must wait when our personal ambitions need to be sanctified by God's higher purposes. We must also wait when we do not have clear direction for the next step.

4. What is the significance of Jesus ascending while the disciples beheld?

There could be no question about where He had gone. He did not return to make an explanation, although two heavenly messengers did speak to them. His departure riveted in the minds of the disciples His emphasis on the spiritual nature of His kingdom.

5. What does Christ's ascension teach us about His second coming?

His coming will be sudden and relatively unexpected. He will come with the clouds. He will come physically and visibly.

6. With what were the disciples occupied while they waited at Jerusalem?

Gathered in an upper room, they "continued with one accord in prayer and supplication." They spent time in Scripture reading and meditation. They chose one of their number to take the place of Judas. It is very possible that temple worship was included in their activities but that is not specifically mentioned.

7. How did they determine the need for an ordination at this time?

Judas by transgression fell, leaving a vacancy among the twelve disciples. In studying the Scriptures, Peter realized that the Holy Ghost by the mouth of David had given direction to this situation. Given the unity of the disciples on this occasion, we can be certain they took the counsel of the congregation.

8. What guiding principles for our ordination proceedings do we find in this passage?

The scene begins with a spiritual brotherhood spending time in prayer and supplication. The apostles were in charge of the proceedings. The congregation nominated qualified brethren from their own constituency. They again prayed that the Lord would reveal which of the two nominated was His choice. They used the lot to show God's choice between those who were qualified and nominated.

Summarizing the Lesson

The ascension ushered the triumphant Christ into His heavenly glory. Although the disciples felt the loss of His presence, this was not a time of mourning. Rather they felt a strong sense of duty to carry out Christ's commands and to further the work of His kingdom here on earth. With the words "This same Jesus . . . shall so come in like manner" ringing in our ears, we can unitedly Witness for our Lord as we wait for the fulfilment of the promises of future blessings in Christ.