

## BIBLE SERIES: "EXPLORING OUR AWESOME BIBLE"

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### ACTS 1 - INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF ACTS; REPLACING JUDAS ISCARIOT



We now come to the fifth part of the Bible (the Old Testament has three sections and the New Testament has four – Gospels, Acts, Epistles and Revelation). So this is the *second section* of the New Testament--the Book of Acts.

Acts, therefore, is actually the second book written by Luke, the first being his Gospel. In the first book he covers Church history begun with the birth of John the Baptist until the resurrection of Christ and the second book covers the first period of Church history.

As Barclay brings out, "Acts is the second chapter of a continued story. First, it is the second volume which Luke had sent to Theophilus. In the first volume, his Gospel, Luke had told the story of the life of Jesus upon earth. Now he goes on to tell the story of the Christian Church. Secondly, Acts is the second volume of a story which has no end. The Gospel was only the story of what Jesus began to do and to teach" (*Daily Study Bible*).

It is interesting how Luke carefully prepares this two-part series of the life of Jesus and the Church He founded - each book would fill about the same amount in a papyrus roll and each covers roughly the same number of years – 33 for the life of Jesus and 33 years of church history.

Luke begins, "The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which He was taken up, after He through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen, to whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to *the kingdom of God*. And being assembled together with them, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, which, He said, 'you have heard from Me; for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now'" (Acts 1:1-5).

Unfortunately, not much is known about Theophilus, which means "lover of God" and was a Greek name. He probably was a wealthy Church member who helped finance these two works. It was common at that time among the Greek and Roman writers to dedicate their work to a distinguished

person. Even today, most books are dedicated to someone who is found at the beginning of the book.

Now, the book of Acts had to be written after Paul was under house arrest in Rome since it is recorded in the final chapter of Acts. So the date of its writing would be around A. D. 64. Luke emphasizes that the Church would continue with the work Christ begun and then would follow the "acts" or exploits of the apostles and others in the Church as God's spirit works in them.

Luke, a physician by trade, wants to carefully present the evidence for Jesus' resurrection and all the miracles that the apostle's performed as they were filled with the Holy Spirit. He documents that Jesus did not appear to a few for a couple of days, but actually to many people for over a month (1 Cor. 15:5-8) and there are ten appearances during those forty days, one in which He was seen by five hundred people! When Luke states there were many "infallible proofs," he means they were beyond a shadow of a doubt. Luke knew many eyewitnesses that had seen the resurrected Jesus.

In fact, Luke is such a rigorous historian that William Ramsay, an atheist professor from Oxford, set out to prove Luke's account contained many errors and myths. He spent 20 years in his quest, yet, after all those years, he admitted defeat and surprised the world by becoming a Christian. He wrote a classic book on Paul called *St. Paul the Traveler and the Roman Citizen*.

Ramsay states, "Luke is a historian of the first rank, not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy, he is possessed of the true historic sense...In short, this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians" (*The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament*, 1953, p. 80).

Notice now what the resurrected Christ spoke mostly about to His apostles – the kingdom of God. He reminded them the reason to spread the Gospel to the entire world was to announce the coming kingdom of God and to prepare a people for that coming kingdom. This is what we are still doing today. As Jesus had prophesied, "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come" (Mt. 24:14).

In this regard, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* notes, "What is meant by this term [the kingdom of God]? God has always ruled over the world and especially in Israel. However, a time is coming, commonly called the Millennium, when God will burst into human history in a spectacular way to establish His rule on earth. This is what is meant by the term 'kingdom of God.' Though this topic was the subject of much of the Lord's teaching and preaching before the Cross, He saw fit to discuss it further during His 40 days of post-resurrection ministry."

So, they were all to meet in Jerusalem and wait for the soon-coming power of the Holy Spirit. It was noteworthy that Jesus was resurrected as the wave sheaf offering was being presented to God that Saturday evening after He was buried, and it began the countdown for the fifty days until Pentecost. Jesus Christ, the firstfruit of those resurrected, would send the Holy Spirit to those who would become the spiritual firstfruits of God's harvest. It was vital for all of them to be gathered together in Jerusalem to keep the Feast of Pentecost – the Feast of the Firstfruits (Ex. 23:16).

Now, since Jesus had been speaking to them about the coming kingdom of God, it was natural for them to want to know exactly *when* that would occur. We have all wanted to know the same thing, so it is important to note what Jesus answered.

"Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, 'Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?' And He said to them, 'It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.' Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.' Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey" (Acts 1:6-12).

Jesus told His disciples not to worry about when that kingdom would come to the earth, but to just concentrate on doing God's work around the world—spreading the Gospel and preparing a people for that coming kingdom. God the Father is the One who knows exactly when to bring that kingdom to the earth. Jesus did tell us, however, that we should watch world events and just as a fig tree blooms, to notice when the leaves would come out and fulfill many of the end time prophecies. As we know, there are many of them that were not fulfilled until it happened in these last sixty years.

Notice also that these two angels told the disciples that Jesus would come back to the same place He left – the Mount of Olives, and was to be enveloped in the clouds--an important detail.

*Expositor's Commentary* notes, "More important for Luke than the description of the Ascension is its significance, and this he gives us in saying that 'a cloud hid him from their sight.' The cloud is undoubtedly meant to symbolize the *shekinah*, the visible manifestation of the divine presence and glory. Such a cloud hovered above the tabernacle in the wilderness as a visible token of the glory of God that dwelt within the tabernacle (Ex. 40:34). Such a cloud enveloped Jesus and three of his disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration as a visible sign of God's presence and his approval of his Son (Mark 9:7, 11). Something very similar is presented here: Jesus as the ascended Lord is enveloped by the *shekinah* cloud, the visible manifestation of God's presence, glory, and approval."

Regarding the statement about a "Sabbath day's journey," it was a common way to mark a certain distance, such as we do today using the Roman mile. In their case, according to Jewish tradition, it was the distance of 2,000 cubits, or about three-fourths a mile, the maximum the Mishna set for a Jew to travel on the Sabbath day.

Once they entered Jerusalem, "they went up into the upper room where they were staying: Peter, James, John, and Andrew; Philip and Thomas; Bartholomew and Matthew; James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot; and Judas the son of James. These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers" (Acts 1:13).

Note that now, Jesus' mother and brothers were part of the Church. They must have been converted

during those forty days of Jesus' appearances. Paul does mention Jesus appeared exclusively to James, the brother of Jesus (1 Cor. 15:7), and later, His other brothers, Jude (who wrote the epistle with that name), Joseph and Simon, also became members.

*The JFB Commentary* mentions, "Mary is distinguished from the other 'women,' but 'so as to exclude the idea of her having any pre-eminence over the disciples. We find her with the rest in prayer to her glorified Son' [Webster and Wilkinson]. This is the last mention of her in the New Testament. The fable of the Assumption of the Virgin [taught by the Catholic Church] has no foundation even in tradition (Alford)."

Luke continues, "And in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples (altogether the number of names was about a hundred and twenty), and said, 'Men and brethren, this Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke before by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus; for he was numbered with us and obtained a part in this ministry.' (Now this man purchased a field with the wages of iniquity; and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his entrails gushed out. And it became known to all those dwelling in Jerusalem; so that field is called in their own language, *Akel Dama*, that is, Field of Blood.) 'For it is written in the Book of Psalms: 'Let his dwelling place be desolate, and let no one live in it; and, 'Let another take his office.' 'Therefore, of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John to that day when He was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection.' And they proposed two: Joseph called Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias. And they prayed and said, 'You, O Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which of these two You have chosen to take part in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place.' And they cast their lots, and the lot fell on Matthias. And he was numbered with the eleven apostles" (Acts 1:15-26).

Some question exactly how Judas died and how he could "buy" a field when he committed suicide. *Nelson's Bible Commentary* explains, "The field that was obtained with the money Judas received for

betraying Jesus was actually purchased by the priests after Judas hanged himself (Mt. 27:6-8). Since the money legally belonged to Judas, the priests purchased the field in his name. Apparently the noose Judas used to hang himself broke and his body fell, rupturing in the middle. This is why the place was called the Field of Blood."

Now, although the twelve apostles had the same rank, Peter was the natural spokesman among them. But notice they all worked together and came to a decision based on consensus. The first order of business was finding a replacement for Judas Iscariot. They needed to be twelve, since Jesus had specified there would be twelve apostles that would rule over the twelve tribes of Israel (Mt. 19:28). Peter mentioned the replacement had to have two qualifications (1) he had to have been a disciple since the time of the baptism of John, and (2) had seen the resurrected Christ.

Interestingly, the apostles did not choose this person themselves, but, practicing godly servant leadership, as Christ had taught them, they got everyone involved in the initial process until it was time for them to intervene. So out of the brethren, two were brought before the apostles as the likeliest candidates. Apparently, both had very similar trajectories and capacities, making it very hard to decide between them. So the apostles asked God to pick between the two by casting lots and the lots fell in Matthias' favor. Once they received God's Spirit, we never see lots cast again. So now they had twelve apostles again.

Barclay has an interesting note in this regard, "We look briefly at the method of choosing someone to take Judas' place in the number of the apostles. It may seem strange to us that the method was that of casting lots. But amongst the Jews it was the natural thing to do because all the offices and duties in the Temple were settled that way. The names of the candidates were written on stones. The stones were put into a vessel and the vessel was shaken until one stone fell out; and he whose name was on that stone was elected to office." Next time, we'll cover the Pentecost event.