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The Early Chapters Of Acts

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We would like to look into the first chapters of Acts. This book falls quite naturally into two parts. In the first twelve chapters, Jerusalem is the center, and Peter is the main leader, and most of the believers are Jews. In the latter half of the book, Antioch is the center of missionary activity. Paul is the central figure, and the Gentiles are the chief beneficiaries of the gospel. During the first five or six years, the gospel was not carried very far, but before Luke finishes his story, the gospel has spread over the Roman Empire and made converts in Caesar's household.

Acts is the first chapter in the history of Christianity. The gospel of Luke was written to tell what Jesus began to do and teach until He was taken up, while in Acts, Luke continues the story of Christ's activity from heaven. In Acts, the story of the resurrection, the commission, the promise of the Holy Spirit, and the ascension are repeated; with the addition, that before the ascension, the disciples inquired if it was the time for Him to restore the kingdom to Israel. They still hoped that in some way He would deliver Israel from the Roman yoke, and make them a free nation again. Their Lord does not correct them, except to say that times and seasons belong to God, and that when the Holy Spirit came upon them, they were to be His witnesses among all nations beginning at Jerusalem. They will soon learn that they are to be suffering witnesses instead of sitting on earthly thrones and exercising authority.

THE TEN DAYS' INTERIM

On returning from Olivet, the place of ascension, the eleven apostles stay together in an upper room. They are soon joined by certain women, including Mary, the mother of Jesus, and His brethren. In this upper room, or in the temple as some think, these believers to the number of one hundred and twenty, with one accord, continue in prayer and supplication. In these days of waiting, Peter, who has been reflecting on past events and finding in a psalm of David reference to Judas, whose office another was to take, suggests that the vacancy be filled at once. They nominate two men and call upon the Lord to direct in casting lots. The lot fell upon Matthias, and he was numbered with the eleven apostles. "The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord" (Prov. 16:33).

THE DAY OF PENTECOST

1. The strange phenomena. While the one hundred and twenty were all with one accord in one place, some strange things happened. All of a sudden they heard something, they saw something, and they felt something. They heard a sound like a mighty wind rushing into the house. It was not wind, but sounded like wind. They saw cloven tongues like fire, and a tongue of fire sat upon each of them. They were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in for-

eign tongues as the Spirit empowered. When all this was noised abroad, a great crowd rushed to the temple and were amazed to hear these Galileans were speaking in various languages so that wherever a man was from, he heard these Galileans speak in his own language.

2. The attempted explanation. Some were so amazed that they could only ask, "What does all this mean?" Others came up with the answer that these Galileans were drunk.

3. Peter's sermon. Peter has the correct answer and gives it both negatively and positively. He dismisses the idea of drunkenness by saying that it was too early in the day for that. 9:00 A.M. was too early to be drunk, especially since the Jews were in the habit of fasting until after that hour on a feast day, 9:00 being an hour of prayer.

Peter finds the explanation in a prophecy of Joel 2:28ff. A part of the prophecy of Joel had not been fulfilled, but a beginning had been made. The new era had begun in which God's Spirit would multiply witnesses, and "whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved." Peter tells them that the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth had been fully accredited. He had been approved of God among them by miracles and wonders and signs which were known to everyone.

Peter says that the death of Jesus was in the divine plan; it was according to God's determinate counsel and foreknowledge. Nevertheless, they had taken Him and by wicked hands had crucified and slain Him. They were guilty of murder, although accomplishing the divine purpose. Their wickedness was in their motive: they hated Jesus without a cause. The death of Christ had been determined back in eternity, and God controlled the wickedness of men to bring about His death. God is not the causative force in the sins of men, but He is the directing force. Men are rebellious, but they are not out from under the control of God. God's decrees are not the necessitating cause of the sins of men, but the foredetermined and prescribed boundings and directings of men's sinful acts.

The slaying of Jesus Christ by the Sanhedrin through Pilate was an act of the nation, and every Jew was guilty when it was made known to him, unless he disavowed and condemned it.

In his sermon, Peter emphasizes the resurrection of Christ. He says, "You killed Him, but God raised Him up." He finds proof of the resurrection in Psalm 16:10: "For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption." The apostle points out that David, in this Psalm, could not have been speaking of himself, for he is dead and buried and his grave is with us until this day. David is speaking as a prophet, knowing that God had

promised with an oath that of the fruit of his loins He would raise up Christ to sit on his throne. Seeing all this beforehand, David spake of the resurrection of Christ. Peter claims that Jesus of Nazareth fits the picture and that God has raised Him up and exalted Him, and that from His place in glory, He had poured forth what they have seen and heard. In the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus, God had fulfilled His promise to David that Christ should sit on the throne.

The effect of Peter's sermon is electrical. His arrow hit the mark. His hearers were convicted of their awful mistake. They were pierced to the heart and cried out, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" By their very question, they plead guilty to the murder of their Messiah. Their eyes are now opened to the wickedness of their previous attitude towards Jesus. They are hurt beyond words to describe. Just think of their predicament! They have crucified their own Messiah, thinking He was an imposter. And now they see their mistake. They cannot deny their guilt, and so with bleeding hearts that want to know if there is any way out of their trouble.

Peter's reply is hopeful and to the point. He does not say there is nothing they can do. If they had been asking what meritorious works they might do to atone for their sins he would have said, "There is nothing you can do to save yourselves." He tells them there is something they need to do in view of what they had done in putting Christ to death. He says, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost." In repentance they were to change their mind, their whole attitude towards Jesus Christ. They must not only feel sorry for what they had done; they must also trust Him—look to Him for salvation. And as an expression and proof of such a change, they must be baptized in His Name. They must publicly declare their faith in Him by being baptized in His Name.

Acts 2:38 has been a battleground for centuries. Some have sought to build the whole plan of salvation on this one verse. The whole contention revolves around the preposition "eis". Does the preposition "for" look forward and mean "in order to" or does it look backward and mean "because of"? So far as the preposition is concerned, it can look either way. Its general idea means "with reference to", and the context determines what the reference is. It does not always mean "in order to". It cannot possibly have this meaning in Matt. 10:41 and 12:41. To receive a prophet in (eis) the name of a prophet is not in order to make him a prophet, but because he is a prophet. And those who repented at (eis) the preaching of Jonas, repented because of his preaching, not in order to his preaching. Repentance unto life includes faith in Jesus Christ, and this faith is publicly

declared in baptism. And since faith works by love, baptism is an act of loving obedience to the command of Christ. Moreover, when baptism makes one a target for persecution, it becomes a very good evidence of genuine faith and love. Refusal to be baptized is a mark against the one who claims to be saved by trusting in Christ. On the other hand, in this day of easy-going Christianity, baptism is not necessarily an evidence of repentance and faith.

THE BAPTISM OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Let us remark first, that Spirit baptism was not administered by the Spirit but in the Spirit. Christ was the administrator of Spirit baptism. Just as John baptized in water as the element, so Christ baptized in the Holy Spirit.

Let us next notice the several instances of Holy Spirit baptism recorded in Acts. So far as the record goes, it was never repeated in the Jerusalem church or among the Jews. It was for the purpose of attesting the Spirit's presence in conversion and Christian living. Therefore, when a new and distinct group of believers was made, the Spirit's presence was attested. Philip held a revival in Samaria and baptized the believers in water. Later Peter and John were sent by the church at Jerusalem to inspect the work at Samaria. They came and prayed for the converts of Philip that they might receive the Holy Spirit. And after the apostles laid hands on them, they received the Holy Spirit. Read Acts 8:12-17. These converts at Samaria must have been saved under Philip's preaching, for they had received the word of God. This proves that the gift of the Spirit was not the same as regeneration by the Spirit. It is not stated that they spake in tongues, but there was some kind of miraculous attestation because Simon Magus saw it and wanted power to bestow the Holy Spirit.

We next notice the conversion of Cornelius and his party. Here was another new group where the Spirit's attestation was needed. While Peter preached salvation through faith in Christ, "the Holy Spirit fell on all them which heard the Word," just as He did at Pentecost. This was before baptism in water and apart from laying on of hands. Their conversion was attested by the Holy Spirit manifesting Himself miraculously in them, so that Peter's companions were amazed because they could see that upon the Gentiles as a class (article), the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out as well as on Jewish believers at Pentecost.

The next group is the twelve disciples at Ephesus. Paul laid hands on them, and they received the gift of the Holy Spirit. All these were cases of corporate baptism to attest the conversion of different groups of believers, and

the unity of the mystical body of Christ.

And so we see that there was no uniform way or fixed time when believers received the gift of the Holy Spirit. At Pentecost and at Caesarea it was without laying on of hands. In Samaria and at Ephesus, it was by laying on of hands. At Caesarea it was before baptism, while in other instances it was after baptism.

The miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit were given for attestation in the early church. But they have never been necessary for personal faith in Christ for salvation. Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing, by the word of God. Rom. 10:17.

And my young brethren, as you go out into this cynical world, go depending upon the Holy Spirit for effective witnessing. Do not claim or try to regain the "charismata". Remember that Paul said that the graces of faith and hope and love are better than these miraculous gifts. And may faith strengthen you for the task, and love dedicate you to the task, and hope support you in the task. Mr. Webster defines a "charism" as "a grace, a miraculously given power of healing, or of speaking with tongues, or of prophesying, etc., attributed to some of the early Christians."

Those who have sought to revive the gifts of healing and speaking in tongues have not strengthened faith, but have made shipwreck of faith in innumerable instances. A few years ago, Jack Coe found himself in the toils of the law in Miami. A mother who trusted his claims brought here crippled child to him to be healed. After praying for the child, Mr. Coe urged the mother to act her faith and take the braces off the child. And when she did so, the little fellow stumbled and fell and was injured beyond recovery.

Some years ago an abortive effort to regain the gift of tongues started in California, spread to the old world, ran its course and died when its chief exponents confessed they had been hoaxed by devilish spirits. The tongues had been nothing more than gibberish, and the translations nothing but imagination.

