

STUDY NOTES

Lesson 1: Acts 1

*Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:
Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you:
and lo, I am with you always,
even unto the end of the world.
Matthew 28:19-20*

THE MESSIAH INCOGNITO

During his earthly ministry Jesus repeatedly forbade his followers from telling others who he was. When Peter made his great confession, "Thou art the Christ, the son of the living God," Jesus ended the conversation with the admonition that he "tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man is risen from the dead." (Matt 17:9, also Luke 9:21, Mark 8:30) When Peter, James and John came down off of the mount of transfiguration where they heard the voice of the Father saying "This is my beloved Son," they were told by Jesus to tell no man of the vision they had seen. When Jesus cast out devils, the spirits proclaimed, "Thou art Christ [Messiah], the son of God. And he, rebuking them, suffered them not to speak. For they knew that he was Christ." (Luke 4:41)

Why would Jesus not announce Himself as the promised Messiah during his lifetime? In the words of Shakespeare's Hamlet, "The readiness is all." Israel at the time of the Savior's life was a little outpost in a Roman world. Rome's influence, military might and enormous power was everywhere. Had he announced himself as the Messiah, the anointed Savior of Israel, it would have triggered revolt. The expectations of the people were that Messiah—*The Anointed One*—would free them from outside political power and return them to the former days of glory when they lived as a great and free nation under King David.

The practical result of announcing himself would have been to create a political uproar and bring down the heel of Rome's boot upon the nation and the infant church before it could begin to grow. Rome had already shown itself to be utterly ruthless against any movement they felt threatened their power. In fact, the government of Rome recognized the great importance of religion to either stabilize or destabilize the areas they ruled. Therefore all religions in the Roman Empire were officially designated either *religio licita* (an authorized religion) or *religio illicita* (a forbidden religion)¹.

¹ P. 219, The Expositor's Bible Commentary; The Acts of the Apostles, by Richard N. Longenecker, 1981, Zondervan

LUKE'S PURPOSE

Luke, the author of the gospel of Luke and the "The Acts of the Apostles" was not Jewish but a gentile. Instead of being locked into a Jewish/Old Testament perspective that disdained the outside world, he was part of that outside world. He was keenly aware that though God's law and covenants had come through the incubator of the Jewish people, it was always God's purpose to move out from this beginning point to an ever widening circle of influence until the whole world was covered by the testimony of Jesus. As you read Luke's writings, it is important to remember his non-Jewish background and viewpoint, unique to the New Testament.

Luke's writing has a threefold purpose closely tied to this unique perspective. **First**, he wrote to reassure the officials of the Roman empire and other gentiles that Christianity was not a threat and its spread was not intended to challenge Rome's rule, or the rule of any earthly governing power for that matter. It should be, as Judaism was, a *religio licita*. You will notice time after time in Luke's account that he writes about how some Roman magistrate finds nothing wrong with the apostle's preaching and lets them go without legal action. In fact, many who have studied Luke's writings think that the "most excellent Theophilus" of Luke 1:3 may have been an influential official in Rome who was curious about this new movement.

Secondly, Luke emphasizes that the "kingdom of God is within you" through the ministry of the Holy Ghost. Luke wants to make clear that the transforming power of the Holy Spirit is the identifying characteristic of Christ's church and what differentiates it from the Jewish religion that preceded it. Luke begins Acts by saying that the former book (the gospel of Luke) was an exposition of "all that Jesus **began** both to do and teach." (Acts 1:1) Now, in his next work, he is going to show all that Jesus **continues** to do and to teach. Jesus is still very much present in the Book of Acts. As the Matthew 28:20 quote found at the beginning of this set of notes showed, before his death, Jesus let his disciples know that he "would be with them always." Now though, instead of being in one place at one time, Christ can be many places at once through his authorized servants who are acting as moved upon by this new force at work in the world—the Holy Spirit.

Thirdly, Luke shows us plainly what that work of the Holy Spirit is going to be. This powerful force will first of all transform the servants of God who receive it--it will make them witnesses, that is, it will make them bold and equip them with the strength and even the very words that they need, and then it will direct them where to go and what to do---it will move them out into an ungodly world in ever increasing circles of influence. Thus we see Luke move his narrative from its beginning in the city of Jerusalem, to its end in Rome itself, the center of worldly power at that time. Acts 1:8 serves as a kind of prophetic outline of how the church will grow: from Jerusalem, into all Judea, then Samaria and finally unto the "uttermost parts of the earth."

THE EARLY APOSTLES: HUMBLE SERVANTS

If Jesus Christ was now going to continue his work in the world through the apostles and other disciples, what qualifications did they need to have? Luke lets us know in his gospel and in the first chapter of Acts. The answer is: not many.

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all record the important incident of Peter denying the Lord three times just before his crucifixion. Three denials times four writers is twelve recorded denials. These writers don't want us to miss their point here. It was not Peter's great courage that qualified him to lead the church. "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts." (Zechariah 4:6) Like many other traits, the spirit of God could supply courage if Peter would supply faith, humility and a yielded heart.

Another thing that the apostles didn't need was a detailed understanding of what God's plan for the future was. The twelve apostles were all Jews who had grown up with the ingrained cultural hope for a Messiah to come and save them from Roman domination. Jesus taught many things about the Kingdom of God. Sometimes these teachings seemed contradictory. For example, he taught that "the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21), and that "my kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). Yet he also said "Verily I say unto you, That there be some of them that stand here, which shall not taste of death, till they have seen the kingdom of God come with power" (Mark 9:1). Was the kingdom a governing power that was going to come down from heaven? Or was it just referring to the inner realms of the human heart? Was there more than one coming? Was the final coming of his kingdom going to be in their lifetimes as he seemed to imply in Mark 9?

THE ROCK OF REVELATION

As we see in the first chapter of Acts, they were curious about how these pieces of the puzzle fit together. So they asked him point blank when he was with them during his forty-day ministry. They said, "Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:7) And his rather blunt answer was "It is not for you to know . . ." (Acts 1:7) The kingdom of God wasn't going to be built by great scholars and statesmen and philosophers. It was going to be built by faithful saints who would trust God one step at a time, listening and obeying the voice of the Lord as it would come to them in personal revelation. He would know the end from the beginning, but they would not.

This is why Peter had shown his qualifications to lead the church in the great passage in Matthew 16 in which he bears his testimony. Jesus asked Peter, "And whom say ye that I am?" Peter answers, "Thou art the Christ, the son of the Living God." Jesus responds, "Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven." Why is this exchange so important? Because Peter shows by it that he has received and understood an important revelation from God. This is indeed the rock upon which priesthood

leadership must stand in God's authorized church. The apostles will not lead based on their strength or their knowledge or their wisdom and insight into the future. They will lead by the revelations of Jesus Christ through the Holy Ghost.

Without revelation, men lead based on the arm of their own flesh, and we have already seen that the gospel writers want us to know that the arm of Peter's flesh is just as liable to weakness as other men's. Peter makes no pretense of leading in any other way. He lets himself be led by the spirit step by step. As we will see more fully in the chapters ahead, it is this humble reliance on revelation rather than his own wisdom that will eventually allow Peter to be led into a paradigm shift he would never have dreamed of on his own—that of taking the gospel to the gentile world.

CALLING A NEW APOSTLE TO WITNESS OF CHRIST

Now that we see what does not qualify one for leadership in the Lord's church, we will see in Acts 1 what does enable one to serve. Acts 1:15-26 recounts the calling of a new apostle to take Judas Iscariot's place. Peter, speaking to a gathering of disciples, calls their attention to Psalm 109:8—"Let another take his bishopric [office]." This is part of a *curse prayer*—verses that invoke curses upon a wicked person who has betrayed someone. How did Peter know about this obscure little sentence buried deep in the psalms so that he could use it as scriptural justification for the calling of a new apostle?

The answer is in the last chapter of the gospel of Luke. The author records an appearance of the Lord to the remaining eleven apostles after his death. At this time he taught them saying "These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me. Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures." (Luke 24:44-45) With the Lord's help they now see many things in the Old Testament that they did not see and understand before. Jesus is leading and teaching them step by step.

As Peter and the others discuss the need to replace Judas, we see that the main qualifications stated are that the man be a follower of Jesus and be an eyewitness to his ministry. Someone who was with them from the "baptism of John unto that same day that he was taken up from us, must . . . be ordained to be a witness with us of his resurrection." (Acts 1:22) After prayer, they chose Matthias by "casting lots," probably a kind of secret ballot. When all their votes were for the same man they knew that they were all being inspired by the same source.

OUR CALLING

What do we learn from this chapter as sister saints? If the great leaders of the Bible could do their mighty works by walking in humble faith, realizing their weaknesses, depending on the spirit of God rather than the arm of flesh, and testifying with the power of the Holy Ghost to the things they had personally witnessed—can we not do the same in our own sphere of influence? This is our pattern also for standing as witnesses in a dark world.