

THE TRIUMPHS OF THE GOSPEL

Study 1

INTRODUCTION - WAITING FOR POWER

Read

Acts 1

The book of Acts records for us the beginning of Christianity. It is an interesting and fascinating story. It tells of the activities of men. Many of them were just ordinary people, yet at one stage in the story they are described as the men who **"turned the world upside-down."** (Acts 17: 6) It is quite clear that we do not read all that was done in early Christian days. But we read enough to realise that what the Holy Spirit wanted us to know, the great doctor, Luke, recorded.

Luke was a careful historian. Begin your study by reading with our passage **Luke 1: 1-4**. Notice here how he tells of his care to trace accurately the events in the life of the Lord Jesus, which he recorded. **Acts 1: 1-3** has about it the same diligence. In fact, these verses are very important as a link between the Gospels and the events of the Early Church days. **Verse 1** mentions the things that Jesus began both to do and to teach. This covers the days of His public ministry. We must notice how important this is because those men who were to follow would be continuing the work and teaching of Jesus. Luke wants to make sure that we understand that the Lord Jesus laid the foundation of Christianity, in His life and death and resurrection. Notice that **"He . . . presented Himself alive."** (verse 3) Every one of the early Apostles witnessed the fact that Jesus was alive. This was one requirement of being an Apostle. (verses 21-22)

We notice also that they were chosen - men picked for the vital job of witnessing to the world. (verse 8) God used men that He could trust to relate the facts from 'first-hand' experience. He always works this way.

There are several important points that we must learn from the events recorded in this chapter.

1. The ASCENSION of the LORD JESUS.

This marked the end of the presence of the Lord Jesus on earth. As they were talking together the miracle happened, **"He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight".** (verse 9) Always remember that Jesus went back to Heaven as a man. We can be glad of this. We have a living Saviour in Heaven. One study you **must** do in Acts - find out how many times the resurrection and ascension are referred to. Make a list for reference.

2. The disciples were told to WAIT in Jerusalem.

They had a wonderful promise to look forward to. Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would come. This would give them power to witness. They would not be lonely or weak. The Lord Jesus would still be with them through His Spirit. (verse 8) **Verse 5** describes this experience as the **"baptism"** with, or in the Holy Spirit. We shall think of this

when we study the events of Pentecost in **chapter 2**. They were waiting for power to witness. It was quite a wonderful gathering - the nucleus of the Church which was to come into being. **Verse 14** tells us something very important, **"These all continued with one accord in prayer."** This tells us that the Early Church was a praying Church. Again go through the book and note the times prayer is mentioned. There were great possibilities of progress and blessing because the early disciples prayed together.

3. The COMING AGAIN of the LORD JESUS was foretold.

As the disciples were gazing after the figure of Jesus disappearing through the clouds, the men in white gave them the promise. **"This same Jesus"** - the One whom they loved, followed and served, would come again in **"like manner as you saw Him go"** verse 11. It could well have been, that a cloud of depression would have descended on these men if this promise had not been given. They were losing a great Master and Friend. How sad if they never saw Him again! This promise to them, and to us brings hope for the future. The Lord Jesus is coming again. **Revelation 1: 7** tells us that He is coming in the clouds and every eye shall see Him.. But before then, **1 Thessalonians 4: 13-18** tells us that He is coming again for all those who belong to Him. So it was that the early Christians were cheered by the promise of His coming.

4. We notice as we close our study, that the waiting days were days of PREPARATION for the early Apostles.

They needed this time of quiet. No doubt they were able to read the Old Testament Scriptures and relate them to what they had lived through with the Lord Jesus Christ. Here is study number three for you. Go through the book and notice the Old Testament references in it. This will impress you with the knowledge that these early Christians had of their Scriptures. We need this today, as we have the whole of God's revelation. It will make us equipped to witness for our Master. So early Christians were found in quiet preparation in the presence of God as they waited for the coming of the Spirit.

It is interesting to notice that 120 gathered together with one accord at Jerusalem. Peter takes a prominent part in things - a leader among the Apostles. (verse 15) They chose an Apostle to replace Judas while they waited. (verse 26) Notice this action and think about it. These men and women were a weak and failing band. Remember that not many weeks before, they had seen Jesus crucified. Some had forsaken Him - Peter had denied Him. Yet, through the Holy Spirit, they are to form the beginning of the Christian Church and testimony. God's grace is sufficient to make use of the weakest and simplest believer if he yields to Him. Compare **1 Corinthians 1: 26-31**.

Study 2

PENTECOST - POWER FROM ON HIGH

Read

Acts 2

The coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost marked a tremendous event in God's calendar. It was a unique incident, just as the birth of the Lord Jesus was, and would never be repeated. Because the Lord Jesus had gone back to Heaven the Holy Spirit was essential, if God's presence was to be known on earth. Read **John 16: 5-15** to confirm this. The time chosen was significant. Pentecost was one of the three great Jewish feasts - 'feasts of the Lord' - when all males were to appear before God at His appointed place (**Deuteronomy 16: 16-17**). Therefore, there would be a tremendous gathering of people there. (Note **Acts 2: 9-11**) God plans His work carefully - this is always evident.

Notice the details of the coming of the Spirit in **verses 1-4**. There were three indications that the Holy Spirit had arrived. The SOUND of a rushing wind filled the house. Then there was the SIGN of the tongues of fire sitting upon each one of them. With these two factors we notice in **verse 4** the SPEECH of the disciples. The fact that they were all filled was seen in that they all spoke in other tongues as the Spirit gave them the ability. Remember that these were the men who had very recently showed great cowardice in their attitude to the Lord Jesus. Now they become bold, filled with "**power from on high.**" (**Luke 24: 49**) These three factors about the coming of the Holy Spirit speak of life, purity and enabling to witness. Always remember that it was the Holy Spirit that came - full of the purity of God.

There was a great stir in Jerusalem. The change in these people, some of them well known in the city, made an immediate impact on the people. **Verses 5-13** indicate their reactions. There was perplexity and amazement. (**verse 12**) Why were they so confounded? Because they heard in their own tongue, "**the wonderful works of God.**" (**verse 11**) It is important that the first evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit in our world was the dynamic witness of Spirit-filled believers. No wonder the crowd said, "**Whatever could this mean?**" Some mocked, but many were seriously affected. We must learn here that it is only through the power of the Holy Spirit that we can be effective witnesses for God. Look through Acts and notice the other places where people spoke in 'tongues'.

In **verses 14-21** we have Peter's explanation. He referred to the Old Testament - "**But this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel.**" God had promised that He would pour out His Spirit upon all flesh. Read this prophecy carefully. You will notice fulfilled and unfulfilled prophecy in it. **Verses 19-20** have yet to be fulfilled when the "**Day of the Lord**" comes. But, very wonderfully, at Pentecost, the great promise of God was fulfilled - His Spirit came. This began a new age for this world and especially for believers in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Here is another study you must do in the Acts. Make a list of all the references to the Holy Spirit. You will find that the book concerns His person and work. Someone has called Luke's record 'The Acts of the Holy Spirit'. Would you agree with this?

Now we have the first sermon found in Acts, preached by Peter. He was not slow to give the application of the events of the day. Read **verses 22-36** carefully. Notice he preached to "**men of Israel.**" (**verse 22**) **Romans 1: 16** tells us that the gospel was "**For the Jew first.**" We can be thankful that it did not stop there, but it certainly began there. Look back to **Acts 1: 8** and you will find the scope of the Apostles' witness - "**Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.**" This pattern was followed, as we shall see. Peter's preaching was absolutely Christ centred. Just look at a few of the facts. Jesus was a Man "**attested by God.**" (**verse 22**) In other words, He was all that a man should be for God. He was crucified by wicked hands, yet this was God's plan. (**verse 23**) Death could not hold Him. (**verse 24**) Here Peter appeals to the Psalms. The resurrection had to happen; because the Lord Jesus was sinless, He could not be held by death. **Verse 36** tells of His wonderful triumph. Peter was forceful and fearless in the delivery of his message. It was a tremendous challenge to the people of Israel.

There was a dramatic response to Peter's preaching. The people repented as they were "**cut to the heart.**" (**verse 37**) The challenge hit home and it was not long before 3,000 people had turned to the Lord Jesus Christ. It is good to notice the simplicity of the beginnings of the Early Church. Those who "**received his word**" were baptised. (**verse 41**) Then they "**continued together.**" **Verse 42** teaches something of the character of these gatherings. They continued in the teaching of the Apostles, fellowship with each other, remembering the Lord Jesus by the breaking of bread and prayers. Where you find a Church today that engages in these things, you may be sure that the New Testament pattern is being followed. You could do well to be there.

The chapter ends with a picture of the joy and unity of the early Christians. The Lord was working - "**adding to the Church daily those who were being saved.**" (**verse 47**) He is still doing this today.

Study 3

THE NAME OF JESUS

Read

Acts 3 & 4

On different occasions in the book of Acts you will notice that there were miracles, just as there were in the life of the Lord Jesus. Perhaps you wonder why these took place - why they were necessary. We can be sure that all the miraculous events are not recorded either in the Gospels or in the Acts of the Apostles. In our study we can learn that miracles were recorded as signs of the new age which God was bringing in. Remember that the presence of the Holy Spirit on earth meant the introduction of a new era, with new vital power. We can say that the early disciples, who were filled with the Holy Spirit, became new men and women. This is the 'driving force' of Christianity.

We shall look first at the MAN and the MIRACLE.

This man was a lame beggar. It was not uncommon to find beggars of various description at the gate of the Temple. Each time Peter and John went to prayer, they would see these poor social outcasts. However, this day was different. As

this lame man looked to Peter and John, they stopped. **“Look at us”**, they said. Can you blame the man for expecting alms? But the two Apostles had no money to give. **(verse 6)** They had that which was so much better. **“In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth,”** they said, **“Rise up and walk”**. **(verse 6)** It was a command with a ring of authority about it. The miracle came when this life-long cripple arose and walked. Note **verse 8** very carefully - **“So he, leaping up, stood and walked; and entered the Temple with them - walking, leaping and praising God.”** When God does something, He does it well. This is an important lesson for us all to learn. Just pause here and reflect how sin cripples our lives - we are unable to walk in God's ways. But when Christ takes control, He enables us to walk, just like the man at the Beautiful Gate. You would find it a profitable study to look up what Paul says in his letters about a Christian's walk.

Now we look at the **MEANS** by which he was made to walk. **“In the Name of Jesus”**, **verse 6**.

Verses 11-26 give Peter's comments on the event. He explains what it means and also the context in which it happened. Especially notice that Peter emphasised the fact that the Lord Jesus was alive. He was not slow to drive home the crime of the Nation in crucifying the Lord. **(verses 13-15)** But God had done the reverse of what they desired. They wanted to be rid of Christ, but God glorified Him. Now Peter says quite clearly that it was **“through faith in His name”** that the man was healed. **(verse 16)** This is an important claim. Look through Acts carefully and find the references to the Name of Jesus in the book. You will find it interesting. Here physical healing, came to this beggar. It reminds us of the number of times the Lord Jesus gave healing as men believed in Him. Notice that **“perfect soundness”** was given to the man. It was exactly what he needed. Great blessings come to us too through the power of the name of Jesus. His name tells us what He is; it reminds us of His wonderful character and power. We need to appreciate this. It is quite wonderful how Peter uses the occasion to call these people to repentance. He tells of God's willingness to forgive them and bless them. **(verses 17-26)**

The event caused a great stir. People MARVELLED that such things should happen. From the high priests' and rulers' point of view, they felt they must stop the course of the Apostles. **Chapter 4: 1-22** shows that while they marvelled at what happened **(verses 15-16)** they decided to oppose it. Here is the first indication of persecution for those who were Christians. The Apostles were imprisoned. Yet notice **(verse 4)** many more believed and **“the number of the men came to be about five thousand”**. As you read through Acts you will learn that persecution only served to spread the work of God. We see here that the voices of the witnesses for Christ could not be silenced. In **verses 8-12** Peter gives a clear witness to the saving power of the Lord. He emphasised the power in **“the name”**. **Chapter 4: 12** is a key verse in the Early Church witness concerning the meaning of salvation in Christ. It is a great 'gospel verse'. Make sure you know it by heart.

All the authorities could do was to threaten the Apostles. The answer they received is vital: **“We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.”** **(verse 20)** This was the spirit of Early Church witness.

We close our study with a look at the **MOVEMENT** of the Holy Spirit among those who were witnessing for Christ.

There is great joy even amidst opposition. The atmosphere of **verses 23-36** is one of triumph and enthusiasm. It was as they were praying and also praising God that the Holy Spirit's power surged through the house. **(verse 31)** It was shaken and they were empowered. Out they went again to give their witness to the resurrection. You must study this passage carefully - it is full of meaning. It tells us of the spirit of love and power that was found in the Early Church. As Christians, we need to pray that this may be seen today. It is so easy to say that because these were early days, the power was different. This is not true. The Holy Spirit has not changed. The power to witness for our Lord is essentially the same. Where there are Christians who are willing to pray and allow the Holy Spirit to take control the same results are possible. This is a tremendous challenge to us today. We see that willingness to be faithful brings fullness of the Spirit. It should be so with us.

Study 4

PERILS AND PROBLEMS



Acts 5 & 6

Not very long after Pentecost, troubles began to appear for the early Christians. We have already said that behind the events of the Early Church we are conscious of the unseen hand of God at work. Much good resulted from the hidden power of the Holy Spirit. But also we are made conscious of another unseen power - the power of Satan and Evil. The devil is never happy to see God's work progress. Such a tremendous evidence of God's power must have really shaken Satan's domain. It was not long before he began to work. His work is seen in two ways:

1. He attacked from without. Every attempt to stop the testimony of the Early Church by persecution or opposition was evidence of Satanic power.

2. He also attacked from within. If Satan could not win by outside opposition, He made it his business to stir up strife and trouble among the Christians themselves. Sad to say, during the centuries this has often proved to be a more powerful weapon than persecution. It would be a good exercise for you to look through Acts and make a record of these two means Satan uses to spoil God's work.

We notice first the hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira. This is a most frightening event. If you read **chapter 4: 36-37** you will see what a wonderful spirit of sharing was evident in the Early Church. People who had property sold it and came with the money to the Apostles so that all could share. There was much love and unselfishness among them. They cared for each other. We could do with this spirit among Christians today. Remember how important sharing and caring are in Church Fellowship.

In **Chapter 5** two people seemed to miss the spirit of this. They sold their land, but only gave part of the money to the Lord. The sin was not in their withholding the remainder but where they were wrong was in their deception. Notice how the actions are described. **“Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?”** **(verse 3)** **“You have not lied to men, but to God.”** **(verse 4)** **“How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord?”** **(verse 9)** Ananias and Sapphira died instantly. Perhaps we ask why? It is clear that there was an atmosphere

which convinced people that God was working with these people and His presence was felt. Two facts emerge:-

1. **"Great fear came upon all the Church" (verses 11-13)**
- people were afraid to join.
2. The power of God was active, **"believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women." (verse 14)**

We need to learn the vital lesson that God is holy. We dare not be hypocrites when we deal with Him. He knows our motives and we cannot deceive Him.
Look at **Hebrews 4: 12-13**.

It is obvious from **chapter 5: 12-20** that Satan could not stop the blessing flowing into the Church. He now tries open hostility to the Apostles, who were put in prison. We find in these verses the conflict between the power of God and the power of Satan. The angel of the Lord delivers the Apostles from prison. Notice the command that is given to them by the angel: **"Go... stand... speak", (verse 20)** The Apostles were under God's command and they obeyed. They proved their courage to face opposition. It is good to sense the conflicting emotions in the reactions of the Rulers. They will not face the challenge of the teachings of the Apostles. **(verse 28)**

Peter is unflinching in his insistence upon their guilt. **"The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered, by hanging on a tree. Him God has exalted." (verses 30-31)** So they were ready to kill them. **(verse 33)** The counsel of Gamaliel saves them from this, but they are beaten and charged not to preach in the name of Jesus. **(verse 40)** This was as far as the opposition could go. Two great facts emerge from this sequence of events. Firstly, the Apostles knew where their priorities lay. **"We ought to obey God rather than men." (verse 29)** Learn from this that obedience is the secret of true service. This gave the Church its growth under persecution. Early Christians obeyed their God. Secondly, the Apostles persisted in spreading abroad the Good News. **(verse 42)** No wonder the devil was defeated!

Chapter 6 tells of another problem within the Church. It had to do with administration. Notice **verse 1, "then arose a murmuring against the Hebrews"** - it was a matter of discontent. This often can arise where Christians meet together and Satan can use it to his own advantage. It seemed that there was unfairness in the distribution of goods. Needy folk were being neglected. The Church gathered together and chose seven men to take responsibility. Notice the character of these men. **(verse 3)** They must be wise, of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and compassionate. You will notice the distinction between the work of the Apostles and these seven that were chosen. We call them deacons - servants of the church.

One of those chosen was Stephen. No wonder he did great things for God. Stephen was humble enough to start with the small responsibility of minding practical things in the Church. Is this not a lesson to us all? To do a work for the Lord, or to be of use to Him in our daily walk and witness, we need to have these qualities too.

Questions

Study 1

INTRODUCTION - WAITING FOR POWER

1. Give two indications from the beginning of Luke's Gospel and Acts which tell us that Luke wrote both.
2. Give one essential mark of an Apostle, without which they could not be called Apostles.
3. Why did the Apostles have to wait at Jerusalem?
4. a) What did the disciples do as they waited at Jerusalem?
b) Give two other instances, recorded in Acts, when they did the same thing.
5. Why did the early Christians need the Holy Spirit?

Study 2

PENTECOST - POWER FROM ON HIGH

1. Why was the Day of Pentecost such a suitable occasion for the coming of the Holy Spirit?
2. What did speaking in "tongues" mean to the people who listened to the Apostles speaking? **(verse 2:11)**
3. What prophecy, quoted by Peter, is still unfulfilled?
4. Give three things that Peter said about the Lord as he preached, on the Day of Pentecost.
5. What was commenced by the Lord on the Day of Pentecost and is still continuing today?

Study 3

THE NAME OF JESUS

1. Why are miracles recorded in the Book of Acts?
2. How is the condition of the cripple at the Beautiful Gate a picture of our lives?
3. Give two examples, from this study, of what can be accomplished through the **"Name of Jesus"**.
4. What good result came from the Apostles' imprisonment?
5. What difference, seen at the end of this chapter, did the Holy Spirit make in the lives of the Apostles?

Study 4

PERILS AND PROBLEMS

1. What unseen forces are at work in the events of Acts?
2. What were Annanias and Sapphira guilty of doing?
3. What effect did their death have upon the people and also upon the Church?
4. What was required of the men who were given responsibility in the Church?
5. Give one lesson you have learned from this study.