

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

by

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CHAPTER TWO

THE ASCENSION, WAITING FOR THE SPIRIT AND REORGANIZATION (Acts 1:9-26)

These opening paragraphs of the Acts deal with some of the most momentous subjects which the human soul has to consider. There are no more important historical facts in the world than those of the resurrection and ascension of Christ. If Christ be not risen from the dead and has ascended on high, as the Scriptures declare, then there can be no doubt that he is what he claimed to be, the Son of God. The most important fact recorded in this passage is that of the ascension of Christ. If Christ has not risen our faith is vain; if Christ has not ascended we have no intercessor at the throne of God. The statements are so clear and the evidence so well attested that no careful student of the facts has reason to doubt the record.

THE ASCENSION OF JESUS

If an uninspired writer had been telling of the ascension of Jesus he would have drawn it out into a long and beautifully pictured story. He would have described the surroundings at length. He would have told of all who were there and the words which they spoke. He would have elaborated upon the anxiety, the fears, the hopes and surprise of the disciples. The fact of Christ's ascension is merely mentioned by Mark, recorded in one verse in Luke and in three verses in The Acts. It is remarkable that this great event is narrated so briefly. Yet we are told all that we need to know. So well is it related that we have abundant proof as to the fact. It is beautiful in its simplicity and strong in its brevity.

1. The place chosen. Bethany, where Jesus led His disciples before the ascension, was but a short distance from Jerusalem. It was there that Christ had often rested and enjoyed fellowship with His disciples. It was there that Lazarus, whom Jesus loved, lived. It was beside the tomb of Lazarus that Jesus had said: **"I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live"** (John 11:25). It is difficult for us to conceive of any place where it would have been easier for the disciples to part with Jesus, and where in parting the certainty of a reunion would have been more strongly impressed upon them.

2. The proof offered.

(1) The disciples had just heard Jesus speak.

They had walked together and talked together about the future work of the kingdom. He had directed them concerning the plan which they were to follow when he should be no longer with them in bearing witness to his personality and His Gospel. No deceiver or impersonator could have possibly deceived those men who knew Him so well.

(2) They had just heard Him pray. It was while He blessed them that He was taken from them up into heaven: **“And it came to pass, while he blessed them, he was parted from them, and carried up into heaven”** (Luke 24:51). No one could pray as He, and pronounce such a benediction upon them as He could do.

(3) They saw Him go up. There was no screen or dark room to hide His maneuvers. From their immediate presence and while still talking He began to ascend.

(4) It was broad daylight. Apparitions are sometimes thought to come and go under the cover of darkness. But they cannot deceive men or operate successfully in daylight in immediate proximity to a group of watchful witnesses who are well acquainted with the surroundings.

(5) There were many witnesses. There is an intimation that all of the one hundred and twenty disciples were there to witness the ascension of Jesus. They must have surrounded Him and have been able to view the scene from every angle.

(6) They saw the heavenly messengers: **“And while they looked stedfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel”** (Acts 1:10). These men, who were sent to tell the disciples what had taken place and what was to follow, are usually represented as angels. Perhaps they were angels in the form of men. It is possible that they were men, departed saints, as Moses and Elijah. It is useless for us to speculate. All that we can do is to leave it where the Scripture record leaves it.

(7) They heard the heavenly messengers. These men did not speak in mutterings or by means of raps and taps, but they said in plain language: **“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”** (Acts 1:11). Thus the disciples in full possession of, and having an opportunity to use, all of their senses were convinced that their Lord had finished His work and testimony on earth and had gone back to His heavenly abode. They were to enjoy His bodily presence and fellowship no more upon earth but they had the assurance that He would still be with them to lead them, inspire them, instruct them, and comfort them by His SPIRIT.

3. The return to Jerusalem.

(1) They were told that it was useless for them to continue looking toward Heaven. We need not wonder that they stood gazing toward Heaven. Even though they did not expect His immediate return it was natural for them to continue to look in that direction. When a loved one takes a voyage on the sea, after the ship has left the shore and disappeared in the distance leaving nothing but the trackless sea behind, the friends may stand upon the dock in silence and look eagerly toward the distant horizon. Where the eye cannot follow the heart can.

(2) They were told that Jesus would return. The last act of the Lord on earth had been unveiled before them. He would return in like manner as He had gone. He would come unexpectedly. They therefore did not know the time and need not wait in Bethany or about Olivet.

When our Lord does come again he will come suddenly and unannounced: **“But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up”** (II Peter 3:10).

The patience of God’s people will be tried long and severely before that time: **“Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain”** (James 5:7).

He shall come in power and glory: **“When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory . . . Jesus saith unto him, Thou hast said: nevertheless I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven”** (Matt. 25:31; 26:64).

Every eye shall see Him: **“Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him. Even so, Amen”** (Revelation 1:7).

And those who despise and crucify Him shall wail because of Him. If we love Him while He is away, we shall welcome Him when He returns. Upon our love for Him now depends our joy in Him then. He ceases not to plead with men through His disciples, saying **“now is the accepted time.”** We need have no fears as to the future, whatever may be His time of coming, if we live in faith in, and fellowship with, and service of, our Lord Jesus Christ.

(3) They worshipped Him: **“And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy”** (Luke 24:52).

The disciples had no doubt that Jesus who ascended was the Lord of glory. They worshipped Him is an evidence that they believed Him to be the Son of God. They were fully convinced that He whom His enemies had tried to destroy, whom they had crucified and buried, was He who had risen. He was greater than man. He could defy the wicked devices of men. He could break the bars of death. He could win the world to Himself. They were ready to worship Him as God and witness for Him as the Son of God.

Jesus came displaying His love, He went away proclaiming His love. He disappeared in the act of giving. He was pouring out His blessing upon the disciples. At His birth He appeared as Saviour; at His death He prayed, **“Father forgive them”**; at His ascension He lifted up His hands and blessed them. Mary disappeared in the act of receiving. She was a mere woman to be helped in her declining years; she was a sinner who as others needed to be saved. She bowed the knee and called upon the Lord in prayer as did the other disciples.

It is well for us, who have greater evidence than they, if we put all doubts away from our hearts and say with Peter when we are tempted to turn away from Christ: **“Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God”** (John 6:68-69).

(4) He sat on the right hand of God: **“So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God”** (Mark 16:19).

We are not left in doubt as to where Jesus went when He was taken up and a cloud received Him out of their sight. Mark tells us that he **“sat down on the right hand of God.”**

This fact was revealed to Mark at least, and it is likely that the other disciples knew it. They knew He was there looking down upon them, and in the midst of their trials they were strengthened by the thought. It was not long after this until Heaven was opened for one of them. The first Christian martyr, as his life went out at the hands of a persecuting mob, was sustained and soothed by the Lord in Heaven, and he was permitted to see Him standing at the right hand of God.

(5) They returned with great joy: **“And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy”** (Luke 24:52).

If we were not told differently, we might think of the disciples returning to Jerusalem with downcast faces, scarcely able to keep back the tears, and with a sense of loneliness which could hardly be repressed. They were not downcast. They were full of joy. They had not forgotten the rage of the rulers against their MASTER. They were fully aware of the hatred which might soon break out again against them. But they were filled with joy because their faith had been confirmed. They were sure that Christ would win the world. They knew that Jesus had more power than the rulers. They knew that even the grave could not silence His testimony. Just as a missionary full of faith, goes out to a dark, heathen land today, with a countenance lighted up with joy and a heart that is filled with love and a trust that is certain of victory, so the disciples of Jesus returned to Jerusalem with great joy to wait until Jesus should endue them with power and send them forth to witness to His Almighty power and His saving love.

WAITING FOR THE HOLY SPIRIT

1. They were obedient to the command of Jesus before He ascended. He had told them not to depart from Jerusalem but to wait for the promise of the Father. He had assured them that they would be baptized in the Holy Spirit not many days hence.

2. They waited in faith. The fact that they waited proved that they believed that the SPIRIT would come as had been promised. They were ready to accept the task of witnessing to the world and trying to win men to Christ. Since their mind had been opened they understood Scripture better and no doubt knew that a great ingathering had been promised as the first-fruits of the work of the Christian church.

The Christian worker is never ready for God's service until he has learned to obey the commands of God and until he has come to believe in the power of God and the promises of God.

3. They waited in a hallowed place: **"And when they were come in, they went up into an upper room"** (1:13a).

We have reason to suppose that this "*upper room*" was the same upper room where the disciples had partaken of the last Passover and the first Lord's Supper with Jesus. This was to them a memorial room. Around it there clustered hallowed and blessed memories. The room where a loved one has passed to his reward, or where some solemn event has occurred, is for us a hallowed spot. As they met in this upper room where they had met with Jesus and where they had listened to His touching discourses and heard His earnest prayers, they could easily imagine that they could hear Him speaking to them still, and they could hear Him pleading with the Father, and their meditations, worship and prayers would seem more solemn.

4. They waited in consecrated company: **"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. These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren"** (1:13b-14).

The disciples would all feel it a privilege to have with them Mary the mother of Jesus, and the brethren of Jesus. A few consecrated souls in a company of disciples, who are known to be near to God in their worship and their prayers have a striking, solemnizing effect upon the whole company. The apostles were sneered and scoffed at before, they would still be persecuted by the world; but in the company of the disciples they would henceforth be honored and most deeply respected. The mother of Jesus would always be looked upon as most blessed *among* women. What a wonderful privilege to meet with such a company day after day for Scripture study, worship and prayer! What a joy such fellowship would bring to every earnest soul!

5. They waited with a united purpose: **"These all continued with one accord"** (1:14).

There was ideal harmony and unity of purpose among them. They were striving to do just what Jesus had told them to do. They longed for the power that should be theirs when the Holy Spirit came upon them. They rejoiced in the study of the Scriptures with the new light which Christ had given them to understand it. They were ready to begin to witness for Christ at the earliest moment that they should be permitted to do so by the Spirit.

6. They waited in prayer: **"These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren"** (1:14a).

They continued steadfastly in prayer. There was no doubt much adoration in their prayers, for we are told that they were filled with joy and were continually blessing God. As they pondered over the recent days and thought of the marvelous love of God and of Christ they could not cease to adore both the FATHER and the SON. They were, we may be assured, petitioning God for light that they might be guided aright in the present crisis and for the power that Jesus had promised.

Though Jesus had gone to sit at the right hand of God they could still commune with Him in prayer. That was not only their privilege but it is ours as well. The wonderful promises that Jesus gave to His early disciples extend to us. It is well that we continue much in prayer.

THE REORGANIZATION

During those days of waiting Peter addressed the disciples concerning the death of Judas and a plan by which his place might be filled. There were about one hundred and twenty of the disciples present at the time. This was not all of the disciples who were followers of Jesus at that time for there were at least five hundred, according to Paul in I Corinthians 15:6. They may have been studying the prophecy in the Sixty-Ninth Psalm or the One-Hundred-and-ninth Psalm. Their mind had been opened to understand these Scriptures in a way that we could not if we had not their guidance. Peter understood from prophecy that another was to take the office of Judas. It is quite possible that he did not understand the manner in which another was to be chosen to this office, and what the necessary requirements for filling it were. They thought the one who was to be chosen to succeed Judas must have kept company with Jesus and the apostles from the beginning of His public ministry, or His baptism by John, until the time of His ascension.. They thought that only such an one could witness for Jesus and His resurrection. There were apparently two men who could fill these conditions, Justus and Matthias. We are not told whether there were others who could fill these conditions, but we suppose there were not since they seemed sure that one of them must be chosen an apostle to take the place of Judas. After praying to God for guidance they cast lots and the lot fell upon Matthias. After that they considered him to be an apostle. There has been a difference of opinion among Bible students as to whether the choice of the apostles was the choice of God. It is my opinion that it was not. There are strong reasons for so believing.

1. Jesus had told them to wait for the enduement of the SPIRIT.

They were not waiting, but acting. They thought they needed to wait for the power of the SPIRIT to witness, but they seemed to think that they did not need His special guidance to reorganize. The SPIRIT is needed just as much to organize, or to choose His witnesses, as He is to direct them when chosen. Jesus had chosen the eleven apostles. He was about to endue them with power. He had not yet called forth the twelfth apostle who was to take the place of Judas.

2. Paul was chosen to be an apostle, of this there can be no doubt: **“After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles. And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time. For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me”** (I Corinthians 15:7-10).

The total number of the apostles was to be twelve. They had no successors. Therefore in the sight of God Matthias must not have been properly chosen and never a real apostle.

3. Their conception of what was necessary to constitute an apostle was apparently not correct.

They thought an apostle must have been with Jesus from the beginning of His ministry until His ascension. This was not correct. Christ had appeared to Paul after His ascension. Paul was a personal witness to the fact that Christ had risen. He had seen Him afterward. He had been taught of Jesus: **“For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you”** (I Corinthians 11:23). He had the requirements of and was truly an apostle.

4. The manner of choosing Matthias was quite possibly not according to the will of God.

They chose him by lot. We have no evidence today that the SPIRIT chooses by lot. He calls His followers by His SPIRIT and makes known to them the fact that He has called them. One of the great purposes of the Book of Acts is to demonstrate what a great power in the world a man may be who is called of God and filled with His SPIRIT as was Paul. Matthias is not heard of again in the Scripture record. Paul, though he felt himself to be the least, came to be the chief of the apostles. More of his work is recorded than of any other. He, by his example, has inspired more men to a consecrated ministry or missionary service than any other.

QUESTIONS

Acts 1:9-26

1. What is the outstanding fact recorded in this passage?
2. If Christ has risen and ascended who must He be?
3. How much space in the Bible is used to record the ascension?
4. From what place did Jesus ascend?
5. Give several reasons to show that the disciples were not deceived concerning Jesus' ascension?
6. What assurance were they given from heaven that Jesus had ascended?
7. What assurance that He would return?
8. With what spirit did the disciples return to Jerusalem?
9. Where did they go after they returned to Jerusalem?
10. What reason have we to believe that it was the same upper room where they ate the Passover?
11. Where did Jesus go when He ascended?
12. What did the disciples do which showed that they considered Jesus was the Son of God?
13. Why did the disciples choose Matthias as an apostle?
14. What had become of Judas?
15. What had Jesus told the disciples to do until they received the power of the Holy Spirit?
16. Is the Holy Spirit needed for organization as well as evangelization?
17. Were their conceptions of the requirements of an apostle correct?
18. Who was chosen of God to be an apostle later?
19. What are some of the essentials of a true witness for Christ?
20. What is necessary today that we may receive the Holy Spirit?

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