

How it Happened

Text:

Acts 1:1-8

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, 2 until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. 3 He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. 4 And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me; 5 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

6 So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" 7 He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

Introduction:

In our first study of the Acts of the Apostles we asked the question: "what shall we call it?" Our goal was to determine what Luke wanted us to learn from reading this second volume of his two volume work. We saw that the way he had structured the book was the key to answering that question as the book is the story of how the command that Jesus gave his followers before ascending into heaven to take the good news of salvation from Jerusalem to the ends to the earth was carried out by his followers. We divided the book into six sections each ending with a progress report. We saw how the preaching of the gospel began in Jerusalem, progressed into Judea and Samaria, was carried throughout the

provinces of the Roman Empire and finally how it was being freely preached and people were responding to it in Rome, the Capital City of the Empire.

This is a very brief summary of an amazing story, the partial story of the first 30 years of the existence of the Christian movement. As we read Luke's account we cannot help but be amazed at what happens. I would also remind you that one of the reasons this book exists is to instruct us in carrying out the mission of Christ in our own time. The command has not changed. As the first followers of Christ were to take the good news of salvation to all nations in the first century, so we are called to do the same in the 21st. What can we learn from Acts that will help us understand and carry out our calling? This is the primary question we should be asking ourselves as we work our way through this book.

It is in light of this question that I want us to again survey the entire book; this time through asking a different question. Last time we asked the question: "what is it?" this time I want us to ask the question: "how did it happen?" The way Luke tells the story is not by telling us everything that happened (that would have been impossible), but by giving us representative incidents that show us the way in which the first Apostles and evangelists proclaimed the good news and what happened as they did. There are many variables in these accounts. For example sometimes the message is announced to large crowds as when Peter preached on the day of Pentecost, and sometimes it is told to one person at a time as when Phillip goes to the Ethiopian Eunuch. The way the message is presented also varies. Paul's sermon to the Jews in the Synagogue in Antioch in Pisidia in chapter 13 is not at all like his sermon to the philosophers of the Areopagus in chapter 17, although the objective is the same in both cases, to preach Christ and to bring his audience to faith in Him.

It is not, however, on the variables that I want us to focus today, but on the universals. The question I want us to try to answer is: "Is there a consistent pattern in the way the gospel advanced in the book of Acts?" As we survey this book and look at the various accounts of the progress of the gospel as it makes its way from Jerusalem to Rome are there things which are consistently done or consistently happen that are essential to what happened? Over the many years

that I have studied and taught this book and tried to learn from it and be guided by it, I have found at least five things that consistently characterize the progress of the gospel in Luke's account. These five things help explain the gospel's rapid progress in the first thirty years of the existence of the Church. I want us to briefly review them today in the hope that they may serve as a guide as we study the individual accounts one by one, and inspire us as we seek to proclaim the message of Christ in our own time.

Here then are five constants in the advance of the Gospel:

I. By the Proclamation of Witnesses

Jesus' command to his disciples was: "ye shall be witnesses of me". They had been with him, had heard his teachings, and most of all they had been witnesses to his resurrection. They knew that he was alive and that he had power to save. Their job was now to tell others. To bear witness is simply to tell what you know; what you have experienced. Sometimes our idea of preaching keeps us from understanding exactly what is going on, but in Acts preaching is bearing witness. Sometimes it is formal and developed as in Stephen sermon to the Synagogue of the Freedmen in chapter seven, sometimes it is short and very informal as in Paul's answer to the Philippian jailer in chapter 16, but it is always bearing witness to Christ. This is God's way of getting the good news to the world. He uses people who have experienced his salvation to bear witness to those who have not.

II. By the Power of the Holy Spirit

The second universal is the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus tells his followers to wait in Jerusalem until they receive the promise of the Father. Then he tells them: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit is come upon you." The third alternative title to the book of Acts that I did not have time to discuss last week is: "The Acts of the Holy Spirit". Several have seriously suggested that this should be

the title of the book because all that is good that happens in the book happens by the power of the Holy Spirit.

This is a theme in Luke that begins in the Gospel. The Gospel of Luke has more than twice as many references to the Holy Spirit than Matthew and Mark. He especially insists on the fact that Jesus accomplished his work through the power of the Holy Spirit. Then when he comes to Acts, the Apostles and other witnesses are to accomplish their work in the same way. They are not to do anything on their own. They are to bear witness, and that witness is to be borne in the power of the Holy Spirit. We will notice this over and over again as we study the various witness accounts in the book. God's word to Zerubabel in Zechariah 4:6 "not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts" would be a perfect subtitle for *The Acts of the Apostles*.

III. In Answer to Prayer

As already mentioned, Luke's Gospel is often called the Gospel of the Holy Spirit. It is also called the Gospel of prayer. As in the case of the Holy Spirit, Luke mentions prayer more than twice as often as Matthew and Mark. And as he shows Jesus accomplishing his work in the power of the Holy Spirit, so he shows how Jesus was constantly in prayer and how his work flowed out of his prayer. In the same way he will show us how God's work in Acts progresses in answer to prayer. An important example is found in one of his major themes, the opening of the door of the Gospel to the Gentiles. We briefly pointed out last week that there were three major steps in chapters 9-12 that prepare the way for the Gentile mission: the conversion of Saul of Tarsus in chapter 9, the conversion of the Roman Centurion, Cornelius in chapter 10, and The work of the Church in Antioch in chapter 13. In each case you will find that prayer is central. When the Lord speaks to Annanias to send him to Paul with his message, he says of Paul: "behold he is praying". Peter receives his orders to go to share the good news with Cornelius while he is praying on a rooftop in Joppa, and it while they were fasting and praying that the Holy Spirit told the leaders of the church in Antioch to

send Paul and Barnabas on a missionary journey to the Gentiles. Without prayer there would be no book of Acts. The witnesses seek God's guidance and protection in prayer, He gives it, and the mission advances and progresses and the churches multiply.

IV. In Response to God's Powerful Acts

The fourth thing that we consistently notice throughout the book of Acts is that God is constantly doing something that provides a powerful opportunity for the witnesses to share the Gospel. This begins on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit comes and enables the Apostles to speak languages and dialects that they had never spoken so that all who were gathered in Jerusalem from the far reaches of the empire were able to understand in their mother tongues. This miracle provided a platform for Peter to proclaim Christ risen from the dead and exalted to the right hand of the father. The result of this was that 3,000 people repented and believed the message and became the beginning of the Jerusalem Church. Another example from the end of the book would be when Paul is shipwrecked on the island of Malta on his way to Rome. After gaining the shore they light a fire to warm themselves and a viper crawls out of the burning wood and attaches itself to Paul's hand that he had been warming over the fire. The people of the island, who had gathered around, took this as an omen that he was a murderer, but when he shook the serpent off and was unharmed they then took him to be a god this gave him an opening to share the message of Christ. Over and over again this will be the pattern. God acts and his acts give an open door to his witnesses to proclaim the message of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

V. In Spite of Persecution

If we were to stop at four, you might say: "That was easy". If you did you would be wrong because there is a fifth universal that we must not omit. The Gospel advances in spite of persecution. When the message of Christ confronts the

status quo of culture it is never received without opposition. The way of Christ inevitably challenges the old ways and the old ways die hard. This was true in the ministry of Jesus. He came unto his own, but his own did not receive him. The new wine of the gospel could not be contained in the old wineskins of Judaism so he inevitably found himself in conflict with its leaders. This pattern will repeat itself over and over again in the book of Acts as the gospel makes its way from Jerusalem to Rome. In Jerusalem it will be the Jewish leaders who try to silence the witness. In Philippi it is the owners of the fortune telling girl from whom Paul and Silas cast the spirit who enables her to make money for them, and in Ephesus it will be the guild of silversmiths who fear losing business if Christ becomes greater than Diana. These are but three examples of a pattern that is consistent throughout the book.

We may now summarize that pattern as follows. God empowers his witness by the Holy Spirit to bear witness to people to whom he has led them through prayer. He then opens doors for witness through his powerful acts. People believe the message and churches are formed. These churches now find themselves in conflict with the *status quo* and are opposed and persecuted. This is how it happens in the book of Acts, and it is how the Gospel is progressing today.

In conclusion let me say that such a mission is not for the timid. It requires great confidence in God. The final element that we find in this advance is faith that acts in obedience in spite of difficult circumstances. That faith is perhaps best expressed in the words of the Apostle Paul in speaking of his trial before Caesar in II Timothy 4: 16-17: "At my first answer no man stood with me, but all *men* forsook me: *I pray God* that it may not be laid to their charge. Notwithstanding the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me; that by me the preaching might be fully known, and *that* all the Gentiles might hear: and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion."

