

# **“Acting on Acts”**

## ***‘Breakfast and the Bible’/‘Supper with the Scriptures’***

### **Acts 1:6-11**

The Acts of the Apostles is unique in the Bible. It’s an account of the exciting events which followed the resurrection of Jesus and the genesis of the first communities of his followers. Acts starts with the return of Jesus to heaven (the Ascension), continues with the coming of God’s Holy Spirit (Pentecost) upon the first believers, and goes on to describe how those first followers of Jesus were equipped to continue his work on earth and to take that message far away from Jerusalem and into Europe.

The author of Acts is widely thought to be St. Luke, who also wrote the Gospel that bears his name. Although he probably never met Jesus face-to-face, Luke gathered together the eyewitness accounts of those who did and has faithfully passed them on to us. But he did witness the miraculous growth and work of the first Christians and this too we can read, thanks to his hard work.

In the prologue to Acts (vss 1-5), Luke has already given us a clue as to what will happen next because he refers to the day when Jesus was ‘taken up to heaven’. Luke briefly refers to this at the end of his gospel, where we read that Jesus’ final act towards the disciples was to bless them (Luke 24:50) and in the following verse that, “While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven.” In Acts 1:6-11 Luke gives a little more detail about what happened on that day.

#### **The future: curiosity from the disciples (6-7)**

Jesus has spent forty days with the disciples since his resurrection (1:3). Forty is a symbolic number in the Bible. For example:

- Noah was in the ark for forty days waiting faithfully for the flood-waters to die down;
- Moses spent forty days on Mount Sinai receiving the ten commandments and all the laws for Israel;
- the Israelites spent forty years in the desert before God decided that they were ready to enter the Promised Land;
- Elijah spent forty days in the desert being refreshed and waiting to hear God’s ‘small voice’;
- Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness at the beginning of his earthly ministry being tested by the Devil.
- So the number forty is often associated with times of testing, teaching and discerning. Those forty days with Jesus after his resurrection must have been precious times indeed. Luke tells us that the main point of Jesus’ teaching was to speak of the coming of God’s kingdom.

The coming Kingdom of God was Jesus’ very first message when he started his earthly ministry – see, for example, Matthew 4:17, Mark 1:15, Luke 4:43 and John 3:5. And now, at the very end of his earthly ministry, he wants to leave his followers in no doubt that God’s kingdom will come in all its fullness one day, and that their work for God will be helping to prepare for that day.

Naturally enough, the disciples are curious to know when this ‘day’ will come (6). The ‘Day of the Lord’ is referred to many times in the Hebrew scriptures (our Old Testament) and it seems that it is tied in to the restoration of Jerusalem and the establishment of the worship of the one true God among all the nations of the world (e.g. Zechariah 14). But the assumption of the Jews of Jesus’ day had become narrowed so that it was focussed

on Israel being once more restored to a sovereign power with its own king. This had been the case when David and then Solomon were on the throne, Israel's greatest kings, some 1000 years before. The situation in Jesus' day was a far cry from this since their land – the land promised them by God – was ruled by the Romans. Jesus does not answer them in the way they were hoping!

Quite apart from anything else, God's plan for a new Israel was to be for faithful men and women of all nations to worship him as King, and not just the Jews. Though there are verses in the Old Testament pointing to this (e.g. Joel 2:28-32), the Jews of Jesus' day had lost sight of this fact. Even the disciples were not ready to hear it. After the coming of the Holy Spirit the penny would begin to drop (Acts 2:17-21)! But even then, there would be a struggle to accept that God was planning to include non-Jews in the plans for his kingdom (Acts 11:1-18).

Now Jesus reminds the disciples that they have no right to know when God's 'day' will come (7). The Father alone has the authority to set and reveal such information. Jesus has already referred to this fact in his own preaching; in Matthew 24:36 and 42, Jesus makes it quite clear that no one can guess the date and time of that day. So, incidentally, anyone who claims that the world will end on a given day or a given year is in clear conflict with scripture and should not be believed! Jesus tells us that we should be ready all the time so that we will not be taken by surprise.

### **The future: commands from Jesus (8)**

Verse 8 starts 'But you...' as if to jolt the disciples out of their fantasizing about guessing when God's kingdom would come in its fullness on the earth. The kingdom of God should be our priority as followers of Jesus but that expresses itself in working on his behalf to help it come in when God decides. And how will that happen when the disciples have so far shown themselves to be pretty inept at doing Jesus' work and understanding his priorities? Answer: in the power of the Holy Spirit. This should not have come as a great surprise, since Jesus had referred to his Holy Spirit several times at the Last Supper. John's gospel records that Jesus has promised to send 'another Counsellor...the Spirit of truth' (John 14:16-17), who will teach them and remind them of Jesus' teaching (John 14:26), and show the world where it has departed from God's standards (John 16:8-11).

Ten days later, on the Day of Pentecost, this was to be fulfilled (Acts 2:1-21). Only then will the disciples be able to continue Jesus' work by becoming his witnesses. Judea was the country in which they were living. Samaria was the land to the north, in which Jesus himself had travelled and ministered. And the ends of the earth would, to them, have meant the Roman Empire. But, as we know, the teachings of Jesus have indeed gone out to the whole world.

### **Jesus is taken up (9-11)**

There is a great mystery about exactly what happened at 'the Ascension' as we term it. It seems to have involved Jesus moving in an upwards direction, of clouds coming down, and of angels sent to explain what has happened. Beyond that, it is pointless to speculate! It is far better to ponder why it happened than how it happened.

The Ascension is, in one sense, the reverse of Christmas. That first Christmas, Jesus left his kingly throne in heaven and humbled himself to be a vulnerable baby, born in poverty. At the Ascension, the risen Jesus was taken back to heaven where he was reunited with his rightful throne. St. Paul explains this eloquently in Philippians 2: 8-9: "And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name...". Not only that, but the way in which Luke

describes the ‘taking up’ of Jesus has several resonances with Daniel’s vision of God’s chosen one approaching the throne of the ‘Ancient of Days’ – his name for God: “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed” (Dan. 7:13-14).

In Luke’s account, it is therefore significant that Jesus is hidden by a cloud. The cloud is, in scripture, associated with the earthly manifestation of the glory of God. For example, we find it when Moses ascends Mount Sinai to meet with God, in the pillar of cloud which led the Israelites across the desert, when Solomon dedicates the Temple and God’s glory fills it, and when Jesus is transfigured in the presence of three of his disciples.

At the Ascension, the disciples are transfixed as they gaze into the cloud, perhaps hoping that Jesus will reappear and all will be explained! But they are disturbed in their thoughts by two angelic figures who seem to tell them off for day-dreaming! Jesus has given them their orders – they are to await the coming of the power from on high, and then go and witness near and far. As for Jesus, he will return but only when the news of God’s kingdom has gone out to the whole world. And then he will come in the same manner as he has left. This could be a reference to Jesus’ own description of the end times: “At that time, men will see the Son of Man *coming in a cloud* with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (Luke 21:27-28 – my italics).

As well as the Ascension being the re-entry of Jesus into heaven, it also has a great significance for us as his followers. On the night before he died, Jesus told his disciples, “I tell you the truth: It is for your own good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you” (John 16:7). So it seems that the coming of the Holy Spirit will not happen until Jesus leaves the earth to return to heaven. The two things are inextricably linked. Whereas the earthly Jesus, even in risen form, was limited to being in one place at one time on earth, the Holy Spirit of Jesus will be able to be in all places at once.

Thus the stage is set for the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Meanwhile, in the intervening ten days, the disciples begin a round-the-clock prayer meeting (Acts 1:14) and attend to the important matter of selecting a new member of ‘The Twelve’ to replace Judas. But more of that in the next handout.

The ‘mechanics’ of the Ascension of Jesus are ultimately beyond our understanding. But the reason for it is clear in Scripture and the exalted Christ, enthroned in heaven as our King, is most certainly worthy of our praise and adoration! As it was for Charles Wesley, who wrote:

Hail the day that sees him rise, *Alleluia!*  
to his throne above the skies. *Alleluia!*  
Christ, the Lamb for sinners given, *Alleluia!*  
enters now the highest heaven. *Alleluia!*

Lord, though parted from our sight, *Alleluia!*  
far above the starry height, *Alleluia!*  
grant our hearts may thither rise, *Alleluia!*  
seeking thee above the skies. *Alleluia!*