

ACTS

TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

Luke is the author of Luke's Gospel and the book of Acts. Today's verses provide the bridge between the two volumes.

In Luke 24:46–47, Jesus summarizes the purpose of God. Notice that verse 46 is a good summary of the Gospel of Luke – the suffering, the death and resurrection of the Christ. Verse 47 is a good summary of Acts – that same gospel being preached to the ends of the earth. Notice that verse 47 is as much the purpose of God as verse 46; the broadcast of the gospel, mission and evangelism is at the very heart of God's ongoing purpose until His Son returns.

Acts 1:8 is a similar verse to Luke 24:47. It sets the pattern for the unfolding narrative of Acts. The Holy Spirit will come on the church to empower it for witness in ever-widening circles until the gospel reaches the ends of the earth.

This tells us that Luke's purpose, under God, in writing Acts is to show the triumphant progress of the gospel, through Judea, into Samaria, throughout Asia, into Europe and finally to Rome. However, this is not triumphalism, for the gospel messenger will be opposed, tortured, imprisoned and martyred. There will be opposition from the

outside religious and commercial interests and even dissension within the church, yet the gospel will progress and people will come to Christ. God buries His messengers but not His message.

Luke, in the original Greek, concludes his account in Acts 28:31 with the word 'unhinderedly'. The march of the gospel is ongoing; it has not yet ceased.

The book of Acts provides the church of the twenty-first century with its mandate – and your mandate for today. You have the Holy Spirit. He will empower you today for witness to Christ in a lost world.

'All hope in ministry lies in the Spirit of God operating on the spirit of men.'
C.H. Spurgeon.¹

REFLECTION

Think of the people you contact and of your witness to them. How can it be more effective? Do you think we make Luke 24:47 of lesser importance than Luke 24:46? What effect does this have on the church?

The opening two verses are very similar to Luke's introduction to his Gospel (Luke 1:1–4). Both verses are addressed to Theophilus, and Acts takes up where the Gospel left off – that is, with the resurrection of Jesus.

In verses 4 to 8, Luke records Jesus' final words to His disciples before He ascends to His Father. The disciples' question in verse 6 is a natural one. As resurrected Messiah, will Jesus now bring down the curtain of history, restore Israel to her rightful place and reign over all creation? Jesus makes it clear that before this happens there is more to be done, but it is not merely human work, it is Spirit-empowered witness.

So they are to wait (v. 4) and they will receive power (v. 8). This is the gift of God to His people of which John was speaking (v. 5) – the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The effect of this baptism is that the Holy Spirit will enable the church in its witness. Your witness today is one part of a two-part witness. You witness. But as you do, the Holy Spirit also witnesses with you (see John 15:26,27).

Jesus then ascends to the right hand of the Father (v. 9). The proof of this, says Peter, is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:32,33). The disciples are reminded that just as Jesus has gone up, so He will come down. These heavenly messengers, similar to those

who announced the resurrection (Luke 24:4), also now remind the church that there is a limited time to work, until Jesus returns (vv. 10,11).

Jesus spoke of His ascension in Luke 22:69. His resurrection was the means to His ascension, and His ascension means His total exaltation to the right hand of God, where He intercedes for us (Rom. 8:34). He now occupies the highest place (Phil. 2:9), He bestows gifts to His people (Eph. 4:11), and from the place of exaltation He will return in triumph to bring in the new heaven and the new earth.

It is little wonder that Paul encourages us to set our hearts and minds on the things above where Christ is seated at God's right hand (Col. 3:1–3).

REFLECTION

Think of the ways that Christ's ascension can be a source of blessing for you. What is He doing at the Father's right hand? What do you think the ascension meant to the Lord Jesus? What are you to be doing with the gifts He has given you until He returns?

After the final separation of Jesus from His disciples, now numbering about one hundred and twenty (Acts 1 v. 15), one would expect gloom to set in. But no, we find the Christians going about their business. They return to Jerusalem where Jesus tells them they are to wait for the gift of God (Acts 1 v. 4) and they set themselves to pray earnestly (v. 14).

Peter seems now to be the acknowledged leader and spokesman for the group. He sees, in the betrayal of Christ by Judas and the selection of a replacement for him among the apostles, a fulfilment of Psalm 69:25 and Psalm 109:8. To qualify for selection, a man must have been with the apostles from the time John was baptizing up to the ascension of Jesus, and his central task is to be a witness to the resurrection. Two men are proposed, prayer is offered for guidance, lots are cast and Matthias is added to the eleven apostles.

Why does Luke include this detail? Why not move from the ascension straight to Pentecost? After all, Matthias is not mentioned again in the book. Judas's betrayal was a major failure of leadership that needs to be acknowledged and rectified. Luke tells us in some detail of the failure of Judas because he is providing a 'warts and all' coverage of the history of the church. He does not idealize the church; he recognizes the hypocrisy of Ananias

and Sapphira in chapter 5, the bickering of the widows in chapter 6, Peter's behaviour in chapter 10, and even Paul's impatience with John Mark in chapter 15.

'The best of men are men at best.' We are to recognize our own frailty, and Luke shows the church facing up to the need to renew its leadership following the apostasy of one of the apostles. Damage had been done and restoration was required. The church did not then, and must not today, try to simply cover its sin; sin needs to be acknowledged and dealt with.

In an atmosphere of prayer, Peter sets out the necessary criteria, the lot is cast and Matthias is the choice. The apostolate is now complete once more and its key function (v. 22) is to witness to the reality of Christ's resurrection.

'See what the apostles were ordained to; not a secular dignity and dominion ... but to preach Christ and the power of His resurrection.' Matthew Henry on Acts 1:22.²

REFLECTION

In what ways does the early church provide a model for us concerning leadership selection? In what ways does Judas serve as a warning to you? See verse 17.

Pentecost (meaning ‘fifty’) was one of the three great festivals of Judaism. Fifty days after the completion of the barley harvest, it was a time to give thanks to God for the completion of the harvest. Later, it came to commemorate the giving of the Law to Moses at Mount Sinai. The festival was all about fulfilment, completion and finality. It is most fitting, then, that the Holy Spirit should be poured out on the church at this festival. His coming is the evidence that Christ is risen and has ascended to God’s right hand; His work is now complete.

The coming of the Spirit is associated with the sound of wind (v. 2; cf. John 3:8) and the sight of fire (v. 3; cf. Exod. 3:2). The effect is that the 120 were filled with the Holy Spirit (v. 4; cf. Jer. 31:33, which anticipates this day) and they speak in tongues, so that the different language groups of verses 9 to 11 hear them disclosing the wonders of God in their own language. Luke records the range of responses – ‘bewilderment’ (v. 6), ‘Utterly amazed’ (v. 7), ‘Amazed and perplexed’ (v. 12), and mockery (v. 13).

We may argue about tongues here, but note that the recipients did not speak in inarticulate sounds. The word ‘tongue’ in verse 6 translates the original word ‘dialect’ and is in parallel with verse

11, where the word used is ‘*glossa*’ or tongue. The ideas are parallel – the ‘tongue’ here is a dialect; here are people speaking in dialects without having attended language school.

The focus of these verses is that God has come to live within His people, and the immediate effect of this is the reversal of the scrambling of languages that occurred with the building of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11). The Holy Spirit has come upon the church, and He enables effective witness. He is the Spirit, after all, who Jesus said would empower for witness (Acts 1:8).

Matthew Henry says the significance of this event ‘is to dignify and so to distinguish these men as messengers from heaven and therefore like Moses at the bush, the crowd will turn aside and see this great sight.’³

REFLECTION

How do you think the Holy Spirit helps you in your witness? What do you think wind, fire and tongues might symbolize about the Holy Spirit’s ministry?