

INTRODUCTION

There is no broader scope of man's history than that which considers one's spiritual relationship to his Creator. "In the beginning" (Gen. 1:1), Jehovah brought the universe into existence, made a physical earth suited for man's habitation, placed man in the Garden, gave him a companion for life and allowed him dominion over his environment. In this idyllic home, Adam was only a "little lower than the angels" (Psa. 8:5) and enjoyed a full spiritual fellowship with God. In his elevated place of honor as a free moral creature, Adam was to continue in fellowship so long as he walked in harmony with the law of his Creator, restraining his hand only from "the fruit of knowledge of good and evil" (Gen. 2:17).

It is sad, but true, that man did not restrain himself. Adam and Eve, through Satan's temptation, fell into sin. Having been free to choose, Adam chose evil rather than good. Having a moral ability that knew not to sin, Adam now learned experientially about the consequences of and punishment for sin. Driven from the Garden and from fellowship with God, Adam and Eve experienced the punishment of death. They died (spiritually) when they sinned in that they were separated from God (Isa. 59:1, 2). They began to die (physically) since they were prohibited from the Tree of Life and their bodies eventually returned to the dust (Gen. 3:19; Jas. 2:26). From that day forward, every descendant of these first parents, with the exception of Jesus Christ, has sinned (Rom. 3:23) and dies (Rom. 6:23). This is true, not because of enforced hereditary depravity, but because we make the same choice as Adam. Free will is both our crowning glory and the source of our spiritual grief. We come no closer to our potential as the offspring of God than when we willingly and lovingly

choose to obey him. But we are pitiful, indeed, when we allow Satan to dominate our lives. Make no mistake, however. Sin is not forced, genetic or inherent. As with Adam and all of humankind, sin is by choice and deed. Man is held accountable only for his own sin (Ezek. 18:4, 20), not the sins of Adam or others. Sin is a “transgression of the law” (1 Jn. 3:4), comprehended through “lust of the flesh, lust of the eye and the pride of life” (Gen. 3:6; Matt. 4:1-11; 1 Jn. 2:15-17). The history of man is that, though not mandated to sin, we do sin. Sin, being universal, brings spiritual death to all. Likewise, denied access to the Tree of Life, all continue to die physically. With Paul, we may cry, “O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” (Rom. 7:24). His answer is, in the same passage, “I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Yes, the history of man is the history of our failure to obey God. But God is love (1 Jn. 4:8) and he loved us while we were disobedient (v. 9; Rom. 5:6). Thus, in the same book that recorded the origin of sin is also revealed the first promise that God will redeem us. This promise of salvation through the “seed of woman” (Gen. 3:15) is the beginning of a plan, a scheme of redemption, that God developed over centuries. The “seed of woman” is none other than Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:16-16), also of the seed of Abraham (Gen. 12:3, *et al.*) and David (2 Sam. 7:12ff). Our hope of eternal redemption is Jesus Christ.

Luke’s History of Redemption’s Fulfillment

It is in the “Acts of the Apostles” that the full story of redemption is preached in its entirety for the first time. We are told that ancient prophets and heavenly angels (1 Pet. 1:9-12) had long desired to learn of the divine wisdom to be exercised in the salvation of the human race. Kept from their view, it was revealed through apostolic preaching (1 Cor. 2:6-10; Eph. 3:8-10). Though the epistles (Romans, Ephesians, Colossians, Hebrews, etc.) supply the exegetical and doctrinal basis for salvation, the Acts provides the historical record of its proclamation. It is through the carefully gathered material of Luke

that we see the Pentecostal thousands in Jerusalem as they hear truth about the crucifixion, resurrection and coronation of Messiah. It is through his pen that we learn of Peter entering the house of Cornelius to speak of salvation to Gentiles for the very first time. It is Luke that undoubtedly learned firsthand from Paul, then passed it on to us, the joys and perils of the three journeys that spread the knowledge of the gospel (“good news”) to the world. He occupies a unique place in biblical history by bringing into focus that pregnant moment in time when salvation was offered (Gal. 4:4). In the person and work of Jesus, peace replaced the enmity between God and man (Eph. 2:14-22) and fellowship was restored. What we lost in Adam, we regained in Christ. We are indebted to Luke for his efforts in tracing the story of the cross from Jerusalem to Rome, from Peter and the Twelve (chs. 1-12) to Paul (chs. 13-28), from Jew to Gentile.

The Story of Luke

Much of the life of Luke is unknown: the message is greater than the man. He does not mention his own name either in the Gospel or Acts, leaving it up to Paul, his mentor and apostolic leader to place him with certainty as a fellow-worker (Phile. 24), physician (Col. 4:14), and companion, remaining with Paul until his imprisonment in Rome (2 Tim. 4:11). We know nothing of his family, his place of birth or of his conversion, save that he was not an eye-witness of Jesus (Luke 1:1-4) and that he was a Gentile. This last is learned only by inference (Col. 4:11-14) when those “of the circumcision” are named as distinct from Luke and others.

We must rely on the lowly pronoun, as used by the author, to identify his presence among the associates of Paul. The first-person “we” and “us” passages in the report (Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-21:18; 27:1-28:16) provide that evidence. The third-person pronouns indicate when Luke “traced the course” (Lk. 1:3) by information from other sources.

We find Luke among the companions of Paul for the first time at Troas during Paul's second missionary journey (Acts 16:10) as he received the vision and departed for Macedonia. He remained behind at Philippi (17:1) when Paul left for Corinth and did not rejoin the group until about seven years later when, on the return from the third journey, Paul passed through Philippi (20:5, 6) on the way to Jerusalem. Luke was with Paul at the time of his arrest in Jerusalem and, though nothing was intimated of his presence during Paul's trials before the Sanhedrin, Felix, Festus and Agrippa, he appeared again as Paul, appealing unto Caesar, sailed for Italy (27:1). Evidently, he was with Paul during most of the two years of his first imprisonment in Rome and by his side, alone, near the final days of his second imprisonment (2 Tim. 4:11).

For some unknown reason, Luke's history ends before the death of Paul, indicating an early date of composition. It seems implausible that Luke, as a historian, would pass over the death of Paul, the severe Neronian persecution of AD 64, or the destruction of the Temple (AD 70) if his writing took place after these important events. Their absence implies an earlier date, possibly AD 63.

Chronology of Acts

The date of the first chapters of Acts can be easily related to the death of Christ since Pentecost came fifty days after Passover (Acts 1:3,5; 2:1). The events that transpired with the beginning of the church took place near AD 33. This can be established from information supplied in the gospel relating the birth of Christ in the time of Caesar Augustus (Lk. 2:1), Jesus' age of thirty years when he began to teach (3:23), and the three years of his public ministry. A span of some uncertain time occurs until James was killed by Herod (12:1) near AD 44. The major part of Paul's labors, related by Luke, would have occurred between AD 44 and AD 59, the approximate time of Festus in Jerusalem, for a total of nearly fifteen years. Of this time, Luke recorded that Paul was in Corinth a year and six months, plus "yet many days" (18:11-18). He was in Ephesus the greater part of

three years (19:8, 10; 20:31), in prison in Caesarea for two years (24:27), on a long and arduous journey by ship to Rome and imprisoned there for two years (28:30). The remaining years would have been spent in the three journeys recorded by Luke.

Historical Accuracy

Critics of the Bible love to look for mistakes which permit their skepticism to pass judgment on the veracity of Scripture. Such critics of the past have fastened on the language of Luke to impugn his accuracy. He has been accused at various times of being mistaken in terminology regarding military, religious and civil titles (13:7; 13:50; 14:13; *et al.*), locations of cities (13:13; 14:6; *et al.*), medical (28:3ff) and nautical terms (ch 27). In each and every instance, his knowledge has passed the acid test and put his critics to rout.

Additionally, the harmony of The Acts in doctrine with the epistles as it relates to such matters as the Lord's supper (Acts 20:7), elders (14:23), the Holy Spirit (ch. 2, *et al.*), and salvation terms (Acts 2:38, cf. Matt. 28:18-20), etc., lends credibility to his observations. A divine hand has provided us with documents of considerable more value than that of the secular historian Josephus.

Summation

We are indebted to Luke both as a historian and biographer in supplying an inspired account of the work of the Holy Spirit as the Scheme of Redemption was revealed to the apostles and preached to the world. This provides everyone this side of the Roman era with an unerring guide to God's plan to save the world through Jesus Christ. By connecting the Gospels with the epistles, Luke made his contribution to the full revelation of truth so vital to our own salvation. Luke has finished his work and rests from his labors. It is now our responsibility to read The Acts carefully, along with the rest of Scripture, learn of God's will and obey it fully. Would you be a Christian? We, along with Theophilus, now have the information necessary to make that vital decision.

LESSON 1

WITNESSES

When Luke, the inspired historian, penned the chronicles of some of the apostles in the spread of the gospel throughout “Jerusalem, and in all Judea, Samaria, and to the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8), he provided much more than what many believe to be a simplistic telling of early church growth. That document usually referred to simply as “The Acts” bridges that era of time between the gospel accounts of the life of Christ and the letters to the established churches and individuals within those churches. Had there been no “Acts,” we would have been left to wonder where these churches came from, how they came into existence and, in many cases, who was responsible for their founding. But more importantly, “The Acts” provides a connection between the story of the Gospels and the great theme of justification, a presentation of Jesus to the world as a demonstration of the resurrection, a showcase of the power of gospel preaching, a viable means of integrating all nations into a united kingdom, and much more.

It will be the object of a series of articles (beginning with this one) to explore some of the grand themes of The Acts and to encourage a deeper and richer application of this valuable document to modern faith in Jesus Christ. This series will not pretend to be exhaustive of all the themes open to Bible students, but it will hopefully encourage others to plumb the depth of these riches for the treasure lode of knowledge supplied by the Holy Spirit through Luke.

The Witnesses

It has been suggested by some “friend” of the Bible that a seeker must turn loose of his reason and make a “blind leap of faith” in order to become a Christian. Such a rationale is foolish and harmful to the cause of Christ. It suggests that one cannot be, at the same time, both a rational person and a Christian. A “blind leap of faith” would discredit the testimony of the Scriptures and advocate an inadequate and weak approach to evidences when the opposite is true. In fact, the evidence for Jesus Christ as Savior of the world, based upon his resurrection from the dead, is one of the greatest themes, if not the “crown jewel” of Luke’s entire work.

When we use the word “evidence,” we emphasize a forensic or legal presentation as though before a court of law in which jurors must bring in a verdict. In fact, this is exactly the context which is established by our theme, “witnesses.” I do not believe it to be an accident that Jesus labeled his apostles as witnesses in Acts 1:8. He was preparing the forum for these who were “eyewitnesses” to argue their case. The apostles were to walk into the world (their court room), present the facts, provide the evidence and establish their case. The Acts establishes clearly the manner in which this was done and it agrees remarkably with our current procedures in any court of law.

The Function of Witnesses

In any court of law today, evidence upon which a verdict is rendered by a jury follows a rational and logical procedure. It should be noted that any evidence, clearly established by this procedure, is valid and cannot be rejected arbitrarily. The format which is always followed is this:

Event – Eyewitness Testimony – Verdict

An event happens, it is seen by eyewitnesses, these witnesses present their testimony in a court of law and the jury reaches a ver-

dict based upon the evidence presented. This method of operation is used daily in America in verdicts concerning car accidents, murders, etc., and is established law. It is my contention that this procedure was familiar to those of Luke's day among both Jews and Romans, that it was a procedure acceptable to God, and that the testimony of the apostles qualifies on the same basis and with the same validity as any eyewitness evidence. If one is arbitrarily to reject the testimony of the apostles, one could just as easily reject any court testimony today. However, if we are to be fair and accept testimony in a court of law today, we should also be fair and accept the testimony of the apostles as to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. It was intended by God from the beginning that the story of Jesus was to be established "at the mouth of two or three witnesses" (Matt. 18:16; 2 Cor. 13:1). The event of the resurrection, so established, can no more be rejected by honest people than any other matter of evidence. If one rejects Jesus' resurrection out of hand, we could, by the same illogic, reject the existence of Napoleon or Nero, since we have never personally seen these individuals, having only others' eyewitness testimony of them. On the other hand, if you accept that Napoleon or Nero actually lived, you should, by the same criteria, accept that Jesus rose again. The evidence is valid in both instances.

The Apostles As Witnesses

That Jesus planned for the apostles to function in their capacity as eyewitnesses from the beginning can be clearly seen. Luke even begins his gospel account by referring to those who taught him as being eyewitnesses (Lk. 1:2) and their testimony provided the basis for his narrative. In giving the Great Commission (again, Luke's account), Jesus said, "Thus it is written, and thus it behooved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And ye are witnesses of these things" (Lk. 24:46-48). Jesus knew that the apostles were qualified to testify to these things: "And ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning" (Jn. 15:27). In replacing Judas with

Matthias, the Lord required: “Wherefore of these men which have companied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John, unto that same day that he was taken up from us, must one be ordained to be a witness with us of his resurrection” (Acts 1:21, 22). It might be noted here that modern “witnessing” by people who speak of their own personal faith is not the same as the eyewitness testimony of the apostles. We have their testimony, duly entered into evidence, and do not need the spurious word of latter day claimants who cloud the issue by misusing “witnessing.”

After the resurrection and prior to imparting the Holy Spirit, Jesus promised the apostles: “But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost port of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Did the apostles understand this? Perhaps not fully until Pentecost, but surely then, for they (the twelve) asserted, “This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we are witnesses” (2:32) . . . “we are witnesses” (3:15) . . . “And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus” (4:33) . . . “And we are his witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Ghost” (5:32) . . . “But unto witnesses chosen before of God, even to us, who did eat and drink with him after he rose from the dead” (10:41) . . . “And he was seen many days of them which came up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are his witnesses unto the people” (13:31).

Even Paul, the apostle born “out of due season” (1 Cor. 15:8), was made an eyewitness of the resurrected Christ so that he might enter his voice into the evidence. On the road to Damascus, Jesus told Saul, “But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou has seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee” (Acts 26:16). Ananias also told him, “For thou shalt be his witness unto all men of what thou has seen and heard” (22:15).

He later asserted that if Christ was not raised, then all the apostles had been false witnesses (1 Cor. 15:15).

Peter added his own voice by claiming to be an apostle, an elder and a witness (1 Pet. 5:2), having been privy to his transfiguration (2 Pet. 1:16).

John, the apostle whom Jesus loved, said, “For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us” (1 Jn. 1:2).

Using the Testimony

Brethren, our faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead does not depend on a blind leap, secular history or less than rational testimony. Indeed, the biblical record is entered into evidence on the same basis and with the same credibility as any testimony in any court of law. We should present the case for the resurrection (and, consequently, the Lordship of Christ) as a reasonable (Rom. 12:1) conclusion, based upon valid proof. Christians need not take a back seat to anyone when it comes to demonstrable verification of what we affirm.

Jesus Christ lived, died and rose from the dead. The substantiation of this is one of the great themes of the Book of Acts.

QUESTIONS ON LESSON 1

MULTIPLE CHOICE: Underline the correct answer to complete the sentence.

1. The inspired historian who penned the Acts of the Apostles was:
 - A. Paul
 - B. Luke
 - C. John
2. In Ac. 1:8 Jesus labels his apostles as:
 - A. witnesses
 - B. ambassadors
 - C. disciples
3. God intended for the story of Jesus to be established at the mouth of:
 - A. twelve witnesses
 - B. six witnesses
 - C. two or three witnesses
4. For an apostle to be chosen to take the place of Judas he had to be ordained to be a:
 - A. good speaker
 - B. witness of the resurrection of Christ
 - C. Jew
5. The apostle born “out of due season” was:
 - A. Peter
 - B. John
 - C. Paul

TRUE OR FALSE: Circle “true” if the statement is correct or “false” if it is incorrect.

1. TRUE FALSE The book of Acts bridges the era of time between the Gospels and the Old Testament.
2. TRUE FALSE It is impossible to be both a rational person and a Christian at the same time.
3. TRUE FALSE When we use the word “evidence,” we emphasize a forensic or legal presentation as though before a court of law in which jurors must bring in a verdict.
4. TRUE FALSE The testimony of the apostles qualifies on the same basis and with the same validity as any eyewitness evidence.
5. TRUE FALSE If one accepts that Napoleon actually lived, he should, by the same criteria, accept that Jesus rose again.

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