

Bibles Study Notes: 1-24-24

THE BOOK OF ACTS *Acts 2-7*

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The True Beginning (2:1-4)

This part of our lesson is the beginning of the new fellowship of believers, the Church as God intended it to be (2:1-4). Even though Pentecost was ushered in with the most dramatic of manifestations (wind and tongues of fire), the most profound point must not be lost in the symbolism. Pentecost was God's inbreathing— ***“they were all filled with the Holy Ghost” (2-4)***—which enabled them to minister. Without the infilling of the Holy Spirit nothing else would have really mattered. But when the coming of the Spirit, the Church, like the collection of dry bones in the Ezekiel story, was able to march as a mighty and powerful army in the world. And those first-century Christians marched!

Growing Under Pressure (2:5-47)

Although they didn't use the same terms as we do, the early Christians knew what it was like to live their faith under pressure. The first pressure the early Christians faced was the *pressure of opportunity* (5-47). We find that God timed the coming of the Holy Spirit with the Jewish celebration of Pentecost. No day, including the Passover, brought more people from all over the world than did the Day of Pentecost (2:5, 9-11). For the Jews it was a time to dedicate the first fruits of their crops to God. For the Christians it became the *“first fruits”* of a new wave of Christian believers who would, in time, grow throughout the world.

While the first Christians were not given any daily quotas to meet, they surely recognized the opportunity they had for “reaching the world” through the people who were in Jerusalem that day of Pentecost. Those first Christians wasted no time in *connecting* with the people. The coming of the Spirit supernaturally enabled them to share the gospel in many languages (2:4).

Luke tells us that the people who jammed the streets of Jerusalem were from ***“every nation under heaven,”*** and they were amazed ***“that every man heard them speak in his own language” (2:5-6).*** Something very strange was happening as that

Bibles Study Notes: 1-24-24

handful of Galileans witnessed to the “wonderful works of God” with boldness and in a variety of languages.

Although we may not be able to “*speak with other tongues*” as the first disciples did, we will do well to realize the importance of “speaking the language” others can understand. We have much better chances for success in sharing our Christian faith when we do so with caring and compassion, and in a common language that everyone can readily understand.

The First Christian Sermon

We also learn from our Scripture lesson that after *connection* had been made with the crowd, *content* was given through the preaching of the first Christian sermon (2:14-36). This first Christian sermon was delivered by Peter. Less than two months earlier Peter had turned coward in front of just a few people in the courtyard of the high priest and denied that he was one of Jesus’ disciples. But now this same Peter, loved and forgiven by his resurrected Lord and empowered by the Holy Spirit, stood boldly before the huge crowd in Jerusalem and proclaimed that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed the Messiah.

It should also be noted that this sermon is a masterpiece of argument. Because of the joy expressed by the Spirit-filled disciples, their critics accused them of being drunk. But in the beginning of his sermon Peter refutes this by reminding them that it was only 9:00 o’clock in the morning, and then he tells the crowd that what they are seeing is a fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy: “*And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions*” (Joel 2:28).

We can be sure that Peter’s opening words had the attention of the crowd, and from that point on he opened the Scriptures to prove that Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of the Messianic words of the prophets and that His coming fulfilled their predictions. And then Peter came to His grand climax with the words, “*Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ*” (2:36).

For Luke, here is the clear confirmation of Jesus’ words in Acts 1:8. Peter’s sermon is a ringing call to the universal proclamation and evangelization that dominates the story in the rest of the book of Acts. Since Luke himself does not personally enter the scene until Acts 16:10, it seems likely that he was a convert to the same kind of message that Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost. His writing is not a reporting

Bibles Study Notes: 1-24-24

of historical events, instead, it is the record of one who had himself been transformed by the gospel message.

The Crowd's Response

Luke now tells us that Peter's message spoke to their hearts and moved them to *conviction*—to a sense of guilt and a recognition of need (2:37-40). Luke's words paint a graphic picture: ***“Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?” (2:37).*** This was an expression of genuine conviction borne out of an encounter with the Word of God.

There is no playing on the emotions of the crowd. Yet, Peter and the rest of the disciples knew that the point of their message announcing the Good News was to call for a response. And as Peter preached, we see him moving closer and closer to the place where those who heard him would have to respond.

Notice that Peter's answer to their question was wrapped in the atmosphere of repentance: ***“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins...” (2:38).*** Repentance is necessary. The gospel demands repentance, that is, a turning away from sin. True repentance relates to baptism (i.e., the sacrament/ceremony that speaks of entry into a new way of life), the responders can demonstrate the complete “turning” that is implied in the term *conversion*. And it was this that Peter called for at the end of his sermon.

Next, Luke tells us that those who responded were honestly welcomed into the *community (2:42-47)*. The disciples knew that without immediate and continual nurturing, their new converts would not hold steady in their faith. Verse 42 tells us exactly what they did to encourage growth and faithfulness: ***“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers”*** Verses 44 to 46 tells us that this nurturing also included attention to the physical needs of the whole company of disciples. And in verse 46, we see that their fellowship together as members of God's new society was a joyful one in their worship and in their relationship with each other.

This post pandemic age has clearly shown that in an age of high technology people still need to feel cared for and given personal attention. Many have experienced feelings of intense loneliness even when people are close by. We all need reassurance that we belong—that people care. Luke helps us to see in this part of our study that these early Christians demonstrated a caring attitude in a practical way.

Bibles Study Notes: 1-24-24

They demonstrated in their day-to-day relationships a deep concern for each other's physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. In this, they gave us a greatly needed model for today—our needs are essentially the same even though more than 2,000 years separate us from their time. Christianity is not a faith that thrives in insolation. We need each other!

A Response to Need and the Results (3:1-4:22)

When the handful of believers in Jerusalem saw the reactions of the crowd during and immediately following Peter's sermon, they felt the pressure of opportunity. In response to their witness the crowds were asking the right questions: "***What shall we do?***" And in response to an alive and genuine witness for Christ today, that same question is being asked. Behind the masks of arrogance and self-sufficiency in our sophisticated society there is a passionate need to be known and cared for and loved. And when those around us see this kind of Christianity in action, they, too, will ask, "What shall we do?"

Christianity does not run into much trouble as long as it minds its own business. It is only when Christians begin to influence their surroundings that reaction and opposition set in. To say that what happened at Pentecost "upset the system" is an understatement, but this next part of our study (3:1-4:22) underscores the problems that arose, for here we look at the second pressure faced by those early Christians—the *pressure of criticism*.

A Cripple Healed

Luke now moves us quickly into a new drama in which the chief characters are Peter and John and an unnamed man who was so severely crippled that he could not walk at all. The setting was the temple, and the time was the ninth hour of the Jewish day, three in the afternoon. It was the time of evening prayer or sacrifice. Peter and John were, no doubt, following their regularly established custom of going to the temple for worship at this hour.

While there, they were confronted at the temple gate by a crippled beggar who asked them for alms (3:2-3). The scene moves next with incredible speed to its climax, for Luke tells us that Peter turned full attention on the needy man and said, "***Silver and gold have I none; but such as I have give I thee: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk***" (3:4-6).

Bibles Study Notes: 1-24-24

After Peter said that he reached out and touch him— “*...lifted him up...And he leaping and praising God*” (3:7-8). Peter and John were used at that moment by the Spirit of God to give the crowd an object lesson on the power that was released on the world by Jesus Christ through His death and resurrection. Peter and John saw a man with a deep need while they were “on their way” to worship and pray. They did not see this crippled beggar as an interruption but as an opportunity, and they created quite a commotion, for the crowd was “*filled with wonder and amazement...greatly wondering*” (3:10-11).

Before going on, an important point needs to be stress. So often we structure our lives with fixed agendas. We set goals for what we think we want to do and should do. Then if, unexpectedly, someone or something distracts our attention, we tend to become impatient or possibly angry—we have been distracted and interrupted. But again, Jesus gave us our model for action—no person in need is ever an interruption.

Peter’s Second Sermon

This sermon of Peter cited two kinds of responses (4:1-4). The priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees arrived angrily on the scene, arrested Peter and John because of their word that Jesus had been raised from the dead, and threw them into jail overnight until they could appear before the Sanhedrin.

Now, as then, obedience to the teaching of Jesus and devotion to the Christian faith produces opposition of one kind or another. For some, that opposition may be social, mental, or emotional. For others, even today, it may involve physical restriction or even prison. To not follow the secular status quo isn’t popular. But just as the previous part of our lesson gave us an understanding of how to handle positive opportunity, we are now given insight as to how to deal with negative resistance.

The scene shifts next to the following morning and to the meeting hall of the Jewish Sanhedrin. After being placed on the witness stand, the disciples were asked, “*By what power, or by what name, have ye done this?*” (4:7). In response, Peter began an explanation (4:8-12).

First, we see that Peter was courteous. He addressed the Sanhedrin in formal, polite terms. We might describe him as “cool and collected.” But that is the way it is when the Holy Spirit is in control, and Luke tells us that Peter was “*filled with the Holy Ghost*” (4:8). Again, we see a sharp difference to Peter’s uncontrolled behavior in the Garden of Gethsemane when he pulled out his sword against the opposition (John 18:10). This change in Peter is an example of Jesus’ words, “*Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth*” (Matt. 5:5). The term for “meek” in the Greek of

Bibles Study Notes: 1-24-24

the New Testament means “one who demonstrates power under control.” Peter’s calmer response is no indication of inactivity, unconcern, or even fatigue after an uncomfortable night in jail. Instead, it is the attitude of one confidently bearing witness to his Lord in the power of the Holy Spirit.

By being “under control,” by maintaining a calm and courteous spirit, Peter was better able to give a good defense of his faith. And Peter opened his defense by showing the benefits of the faith and its excellence over other ways of life. This is important because critics of our faith will be quick to see through inconsistencies between our expressions of faith and our actions. As Christians, we must keep close watch on our lives and witness to make certain that we are an encouragement to others in their search for faith.

In closing his arguments to the Sanhedrin, Peter made the way of salvation clear for them and us when he said, “*Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved*” (4:12). And while we see from the rest of the scene that Peter’s witness didn’t change their minds, Luke tells us that they were amazed at the boldness of Peter and John and “*took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus*” (4:13).

But while the Jewish religious leaders were not won over by either Peter’s witness or the sight of the healed former cripple, we read that “*they could say nothing against it*” (4:14). They could not deny the miracle or the strength of Peter’s words, but they could try to keep it quiet—to keep Peter and John from speaking and teaching “*in the name of Jesus.*” But Peter’s response was clear: their actions would not be regulated by legal decree (4:19-20).

There will be those times when we, as believers, feel the pressure of opposition. But the qualities demonstrated by Peter and John in this scene can be of help to us as we attempt to handle opposition wherever it may be found. As with the first disciples, the real issue is not whether to witness. The real issue is how to witness. But we can be certain that when we are sensitive to the Holy Spirit, He will provide not only opportunity for witness, but also the proper attitude and approach.

The Jerusalem Church Under Fire (4:24-6:7)

As soon as Peter and John were released from custody, they “*went to their own company, and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said unto them*” (4:23).

Bibles Study Notes: 1-24-24

And following that we have their prayer (4:24-30), their grand affirmation of trust in the Lord and their determination to speak boldly and to act in the name of Jesus.

Even though the believers then received unusual assurance of the power and providence of God in their behalf (4:31), they did not assume a passive posture when it came to taking care of each other's needs. They were drawn together in a powerful unity that Luke says caused them to have ***"all things common"*** (4:32). Because of this open spirit among them, no one lacked for anything. The early Church was a community of believers who knew and cared for each other. And even though the church in Jerusalem now had several thousand members, a way was found to know those who were in need and minister to them.

At the same time, the book of Acts is very realistic. In 6:1-8, we see that this system, though admirable, was not perfect. Luke shows us here how the Christian community responded when its program was inadequate. The Greek speaking Jewish converts complained that they were being overlooked in the daily distribution. They asked for attention and support, and the church responded.

First, the believers stopped any form of special treatment. Culture, language, and racial differences were not allowed to determine the distribution of aid. And second, they took action to put priorities in perspective. If everyone was involved in the daily distribution, the tasks of prayer and the ministry of the Word would collapse. Some division of labor was needed so the apostles could be free to devote themselves to prayer and the Word. To meet the needs of the community, a new order of men with good reputations, who were wise and full of the Holy Spirit, was formed. They were called deacons, and Stephen was part of this group.

Deception of Work

The book of Acts never glosses over the imperfection of believers. This adds to the sense of realism we get when we read it. As soon as the early Christians had dealt with the pressure of providing for those in need, they then had to turn their attention to handling the pressure of deception (5:1-11).

Here is a vivid story of deceit and dishonesty. The problem of Ananias and Sapphira was not that they withheld part of their money for themselves. Rather, the problem was that they lied to the church by implying that what they gave was all they had. It was the lie, not the amount, that brought the condemnation. Peter's words were very strong: ***"Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost... thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God"*** (5:3-4).

Bibles Study Notes: 1-24-24

The condemnation was that Ananias and Sapphira wanted to look like “total givers” when in fact they were not. This Scripture lesson is a double warning to us today. First, it warns us not to become dependent upon the so-called big givers. They may not be giving in the right spirit. And second, we need to prayerfully check our motive for giving.

The proper spirit for giving is described by Jesus in the story of the widow’s mite (Luke 21:1-4). While she gave all she had, it wasn’t much. It was the spirit in which she gave that mattered to Jesus, not the amount. Luke may well have had that story in mind as he wrote about the deception of Ananias and Sapphira. These two stories illustrate the sacredness of our stewardship. Our giving to the Lord and His cause is not done to impress people or for income tax deduction—it is a sacred matter between ourselves and God. To be honest, to give with a wrong spirit, is to fall victim to the pressure of deception.

Faith Under Fire

Even as the church was growing rapidly (5:12-16) and many miracles were being performed, the Jewish leaders stepped with their most forceful resistance to date. They ***“laid their hands on the apostles and put them in the common prison” (5:18).***

Why were they jailed? It was not because people were healed, or the kingdom of God was advanced. The issue here is much more indirect. The ***“indignation” (5:17)*** of the leaders occurred because the apostles continued to teach in Jesus’ name and were “bypassing the system.” Their movement was “unofficial” even if some good was coming out of it.

This section in Acts 5:12-42 reveals two important lessons for us. First, we need to face the truth that God is not limited in the ways He acts. He may do it “our way” or He may do it in a completely new and different way. God is not limited by our understanding of Him. But the Jewish leaders based all their assumptions on the idea that God was bound to act through the approved religious system or at least in ways consistent with the Jewish tradition. The assumption was wrong. By holding to that assumption, the religious leaders not only remained blind but also actually worked against the purposes of God!

The second lesson for us here is expressed in the words of the apostles themselves: ***“We ought to obey God rather than men” (5:29).*** This was not a super-pious statement made to impress anybody. Instead, it was an honest statement of their conviction and was the result of a long period of walking with Jesus Himself and being instructed by Him after the resurrection. By the time they said these words, they knew

Bibles Study Notes: 1-24-24

to whom they belonged and to what they were called. They were firm in their belief, but it was a firmness based on fact.

At any rate, we see that God honored their courage they were delivered from prison (5:19). This kind of confirmation left no doubt about what position they should take before their accusers. We can believe that when our response is correct and in the right spirit, it will be confirmed in some way by God. If we are truly “obeying God rather than men,” we shall obey Him when He tells us to stick to our guns, and we shall obey Him when He shows us we are wrong and need to confess it.

Again, Peter and the other apostles gave their accusers a straightforward witness of the Saviourhood of Jesus and to the power of the Holy Spirit. But Luke tells us they were “*cut to the heart*” (5:33) and discussed their intention of killing the apostles. Now the story takes an interesting turn. Gamaliel, a loved member of the Sanhedrin, and a Pharisee, attempted to intervene and prevent violence. He offers good advice: “... *if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought: But if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it*” (5:38-39). In this case, the group agreed with Gamaliel and released the apostles with only a beating and a warning to keep quiet.

Faithful Unto Death (6-7)

The final pressure faced by the early Christians was that a martyrdom as demonstrated by Stephen in Acts 6:8-8:3. The fact that Luke devotes so much space to this event reveals its importance then and now.

The first thing of importance to us here is to see the active nature of evil (6:8-12). When Stephen’s opponents in debate in the synagogue saw that they were beaten, they dig up some witnesses who perjured themselves (lied) by claiming that Stephen made certain heretical (wicked) statements. Based on this flimsy evidence, Stephen was arrested and taken before the Sanhedrin. But we will see that the power of evil could not prevent the spread of the gospel.

The second thing of importance to us is to notice that Stephen was prepared. He was ready in attitude and countenance (6:15), and he was ready in message and content (7:1-53). The sermon he preached followed a similar course to those we have seen already in this lesson. And it had a similar outcome, but the consequences were more severe. The difference between Stephen and his listeners is obvious (7:54-60). His listeners were full of hatred; Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit. His listeners were intent on murder; Stephen was intent on forgiving. They called on their anger; he

Bibles Study Notes: 1-24-24

called on his God. They left in departed in rage; he died in peace—the first Christian martyr.

And Saul of Tarsus saw it all! As a matter of fact, there are those who believe that Saul played some kind of role in the event (7:58). That Luke saw fit to add in 8:1 that “***Saul was consenting unto his [Stephen’s] death***” makes this all the more probable. It is clear that Saul’s presence and possible participation in the affair was used by God to impact his life and prepare him for his forthcoming conversion.

The events in this lesson remind us that it is too easy to think that growth takes place in times of security and ease. More than that, it is easy to interpret comfort and prosperity as signs of God’s blessing. God’s blessing was on the Church during this time, but it was still a difficult time. Yet, the final message is one of hope: *You can grow under pressure*. As a matter of fact, it seems that most of the time our growth and maturity come when we are under pressure.

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