A Study in Acts 1:1–26

Theophilus — What Jesus Began to Do — The Promise of the Father — Transition from Gospel to Acts

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We are reading Acts chapter 1, beginning at verse 1.

> *"The former treatise have I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and to teach, until the day in which he was taken up, after that he through the Holy Ghost had given commandments unto the apostles whom he had chosen: to whom also he shewed himself alive after his passion by many infallible proofs, being seen of them forty days, and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God."*
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> *"And, being assembled together with them, commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father, which, saith he, ye have heard of me. For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence."*
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> *"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 Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth. And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight."*
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> *"And while they looked stedfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel; which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like*

manner as ye have seen him go into heaven."

Theophilus — A Continuation of Luke

The name Theophilus means lover of God — Theos for God, and the latter portion related to love, as in Philadelphia. It was a name with pagan origins, but it is not unreasonable to think that this man had come to know the Lord. In the Gospel of Luke he is addressed with a formal title — Most Excellent Theophilus — which would suggest he held some position of standing in Roman society. That title is dropped here in Acts, and it seems not unlikely that his official position had been given up, perhaps for reasons of Christian conscience.

Acts is the continuation of the Gospel of Luke. The former treatise is Luke's Gospel. And the opening words of Acts are carefully chosen: all that Jesus began both to do and to teach. He began. The word is left open — there is more to be said. The Lord Jesus did not cease doing and teaching when He was taken up. Mark 16:19–20 makes this explicit: after the Lord had spoken unto them, He was received up into heaven and sat on the right hand of God — and they went forth and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word with signs following. He was in the glory, still working.

John 17:18–19 adds a further dimension: As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself — that is, He set Himself apart in heaven for their sakes. He is there as the heavenly object of the ministry He had sent them to carry out. And that is the character of the whole ministry of the Acts: it is heavenly in character, proceeding from Christ in the glory, through the Spirit sent down from the glory. It is not merely a continuation of what Jesus did while on earth — it is the outflow of what Jesus began to do when He entered the heavenly sphere.

He Gave Commandments Through the Holy Ghost

Verse 2 states that he through the Holy Ghost had given commandments unto the apostles. This is a statement of great importance. After the resurrection, in the forty days before the ascension, the Lord was still giving His instructions by the Spirit. The resurrection had not changed that. As man — perfectly dependent man — every word and every work continued to be by the action of the Holy Spirit. It was so before the cross and it was so after the resurrection.

This was not incidental. The Spirit of God has made it very clear in this passage that the resurrection state did not alter the character of His manhood. That manhood is now in a glorified state, but it is still the same manhood, and the manner of its operation — in dependence upon the Spirit — has not changed. What changes is the state in which that manhood is held, not the reality of the manhood itself. As we shall be changed at the last and be like Him in glory, yet remain who we are, so He in His resurrection glory remains who He is.

Wait for the Promise of the Father

They were commanded not to depart from Jerusalem but to wait for the promise of the Father. This promise runs through several scriptures. Luke 24:49: I send the promise of my Father upon you, but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high. In John's Gospel both the Father and the Son are spoken of as the senders of the Spirit: in one place the Lord says I will send Him, and in another the Father will send Him in my name. Both send the Spirit.

The manner in which this is accomplished is given in Acts 2:32–33: being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, he hath shed forth this which ye now see and hear. The Father gives the glorified Man in the glory the Spirit, and the glorified Man in the glory, having received the Spirit from the Father, sheds Him forth upon the waiting disciples below. Both the Father and the Son are thus active in the giving of the

Spirit, and this is how both can rightly be called the sender.

For John truly baptized with water, but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence. The baptism of John was a baptism unto repentance — repentance is necessary for salvation but is not salvation itself; it precedes it. Now a different baptism was coming. In 1 Corinthians 12:13 we learn that in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body. The Spirit is the power, the one body is the sphere into which believers are baptized, and Christ is the baptizer. The body was formed once and for all on the day of Pentecost. We are connected with that once-for-all event by receiving the Spirit — called in Ephesians 1:13 the Holy Spirit of promise, a designation that couples every subsequent sealing of a believer with the great event of Pentecost, linking us to that once-formed body.

The Ascension — He Was Taken Up

While they beheld, he was taken up, and a cloud received him out of their sight. Luke's Gospel says He was carried up into heaven — language perfectly suited to the character of that Gospel, which presents the Lord as the dependent Man, sustained and upheld in all His ways. Here in Acts He is taken up. In John's Gospel, by contrast, He says I ascend — language of divine prerogative, suited to John's presentation of Him as the eternal Son come down and going back up. Each expression is true; each is appropriate to its context. The ascension is not described as a mere departure — it is the enthronement of the glorified Man. He sits at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

Two men in white apparel stood by them and said: This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven. The bodily, personal, visible character of the ascension is the pledge and pattern of the bodily, personal, visible return. He went up bodily; He will come back bodily. He went up from the Mount of Olives; He will return to the Mount of Olives (Zechariah 14:4). He was received by a cloud; He will come

in the clouds of heaven with great glory.

Forty Days — and the Kingdom Question

The forty days between the resurrection and the ascension were spent speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God. The disciples' question at verse 6 — Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel? — shows that these conversations had a bearing on the restoration of the kingdom. They were not confused about the existence or the promise of the kingdom; they were asking about the timing. And the Lord's answer, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, did not deny the expectation. He said their timing was wrong, not their expectation.

This is important to state plainly, because it has sometimes been said or implied that the disciples were carnal or mistaken in expecting an earthly restoration of the kingdom to Israel. That is not what the Lord's answer conveys. When John the Baptist preached, the kingdom of the heavens is drawn nigh, no one would have regarded him as a prophet if he had attached a new and spiritual meaning to the kingdom inconsistent with what the Old Testament prophets had plainly taught. The godly remnant expected the kingdom the prophets had described. The Lord presented that kingdom. It was rejected. And now what is deferred is not the truth of the kingdom but its time — the Father has put that in His own authority.

The verse is in fact a post-resurrection sanction of the hope of the earthly kingdom. The Lord did not say: you are wrong to expect any such thing. He said: it is not for you to know the times or the seasons. That is the exclusion of the disciples from those defined prophetic periods, which is entirely consistent with the heavenly calling of the church — the church is not an age among the ages in Scripture, it is an undefined epoch above and outside the prophetic calendar. The disciples would not experience the times and seasons of prophecy. The kingdom would come, but not through them, and not then.

The Replacement of Judas — and the Hundred and Twenty

The chapter closes with the action of the hundred and twenty gathered in the upper room. Peter stood up and directed attention to the necessity of replacing Judas, quoting from Psalms 69 and 109. The qualifications for the twelfth apostle were specific: one who had accompanied the disciples from the baptism of John until the ascension, and who could therefore be a witness of the resurrection. Two were put forward — Joseph called Barsabas and Matthias. They prayed and cast lots, and the lot fell on Matthias.

It is worth noting the language of the assembly here: they were come together, they abode together, they continued with one accord in prayer. These are beautiful expressions. But they are not yet the language of the assembly of God properly so called. That awaits the next chapter. They were come together — but where two or three are gathered together in His name is the language of Matthew 18:20, the assembly fully constituted. They were assembled together with Him — but to have the Lord Jesus in the midst of His assembly is a shade different from being assembled together with Him. The most distinctive feature of the assembly — gathering to His name, with Him in the midst, bound to one another as members of one body by the Holy Spirit — that had not yet come in. It was all present in anticipation, but the great event was still ahead.

He was received up into heaven — and the Lord working with them, confirming the word with signs following.