

older, we should see more and more that we cannot rely on man. We do not know what a day will bring. But God has it all perfectly within his hand. Let us hold on to him.

Let us observe thirdly that it is a very simple thing to be saved. No doubt there is a great deal in these words which is dark and obscure. No doubt there are many questions to tax the finest minds. No doubt there are questions which could lead to much debate. But one thing is very clear and simple. "Whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved." The judgment of God is coming. History will come to an end. The day of the LORD shall be great and awesome. But every person who trusts in the LORD shall be quite safe.

We do not have to perform any great works to be saved. We do not have to go ourselves to Calvary, and be nailed to a cross. We do not ourselves have to go into the grave. We do not ourselves have to rise from the dead. The Lord Jesus Christ has done all of these things for us. We must simply call upon him, and the gift shall be ours.

Reader, have you felt your need to be saved? Have you felt the weight of your sins? Have you felt afraid of the fierce wrath of God? Have you sensed your danger, as a rebel against your maker? Have you considered that life is short, and that death will soon come?

Call upon the Lord and be saved. He requires nothing of you. His mercy is a gift. His promise is sure. It has been relied upon by thousands and millions. None have ever found that the Lord has let them down. None who have truly called on the Lord have ever wished that they had not. Each and every one who has called on the name of the Lord, has been saved.

If, at last, we find our souls in hell, then it shall be nobody's fault but our own. Salvation has come very near. We must just cry out - just call. God's word is sure. Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

If we have been saved, let us ever remember that it was not for anything we had done. It was not because we worked, that the Lord rewarded us. It was not because of anything we would go on to do, that he gave us this grace. Our salvation is a gift. It was infinitely costly to Jesus - but given freely to us. Let us, every day that we live, seek to feel more grateful for what the Lord has done. let us never forget that out of helplessness and distress we called upon him. Let us never forget that whatever we are or shall be in this world, if we have called on the name of the Lord then we are saved.

Expository thoughts on **The Acts Of The Apostles**

Daily Bible Reading Notes

Week 1 (Chapter 1:1-2:21)

Grace Church Belper

<http://www.gracebelper.org.uk>

(For previous weeks' notes, e-mail david@gracebelper.org.uk – I will e-mail you back the week's notes for you to print)

Acts 1:1-8

1 The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, 2 until the day in which he was taken up, after he through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom he had chosen, 3 to whom he also presented himself alive after his suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God. 4 And being assembled together with them, he commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, "which," he said, "you have heard from me."

The book of Acts is a unique and very precious book. We have four books telling us about what the Saviour did during his earthly life. But there is only one telling us what he did after rising from the dead. If we should search all the libraries in the world, we would not find another book like Acts. To those who deride or ignore the Bible, the early history of the church must remain a complete mystery. But the Christian has in his hands an authoritative, inspired record. It shows him how the gospel progressed from that upper room in Jerusalem, to the ends of the earth. It shows him what gospel the early Christians believed. It tells him how the risen Christ sustained his church through persecutions from outside and corruptions from within. It shows him just how Jesus began fulfilling his promise to "build his church" (Matthew 16:18). Let us, then, read the book of Acts expecting to find a great deal of blessing in it.

As we begin reading, let us notice straight away that *Christianity is all about Jesus Christ*. When Luke sat down under the oversight of the Holy Spirit to make his record, he wrote about Jesus. The gospel he wrote before, was about all that Jesus *began* to do and teach. The record he writes now is about what Jesus *continued* to do and teach. Luke will write about how Jesus was "taken up". He will write about Jesus' chosen apostles, and their carrying out of Jesus' commands. He will write about the Holy Spirit whom Jesus sent, the proclaiming of Jesus' sufferings and resurrection, and about the kingdom of God over which Jesus is the great king.

We must be completely convinced that any "Christianity" in which the Lord Jesus Christ is not absolutely central is worthless. It is not the religion first revealed by Jesus Christ. It is not the faith preached by the apostles or received by the first believers. It may be uplifting and inspiring. It may be outwardly very impressive and convincing. It may have millions upon millions of devotees. It may be much loved by the world and by our nearest and dearest. But if the Lord Jesus Christ is not the sum and substance of it all, then it is not New Testament Christianity. If the great facts about his sinless life, atoning death, glorious resurrection and ascension to the right hand of God are not continually insisted upon - then it cannot save our souls. There are countless numbers of souls following a "Christianity" which has little of the true Christ in it. But false Christs are worthless. Let us be quite convinced about this.

Let us observe secondly that Jesus is certainly alive. This is one of the great foundations of the Christian faith. He really was crucified. He really did die. He really was buried. And he just as really rose again. The first disciples were in no doubt about this. Jesus gave them "many infallible proofs". The apostles' bold preaching has no other explanation. A

this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel.: 17 'And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, that I will pour out of my Spirit on all flesh; Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams. 18 And on my menservants and on my maidservants I will pour out my Spirit in those days; and they shall prophesy. 19 And I will show wonders in heaven above and signs in the earth beneath: blood and fire and vapour of smoke. 20 The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD. 21 And it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved."

The words before us now are deeply important. They are the words of an inspired apostle. They begin the first sermon preached in the Christian church. They led to the conversion of about three thousand souls (v41). They are words which deserve to be studied deeply, and from which we can expect to gain a great deal of profit.

See from the see verses what is the means that God uses to convert people. It is preaching. A mighty miracle had been performed. People were filled with amazement. But nobody had been saved. Nobody had yet embraced Jesus Christ. This would only happen through preaching.

Without it being preached, the gospel cannot be heard. Without it being heard, the gospel cannot be believed. Without it being believed, nobody can call on the name of the Lord. Without calling on the name of the Lord, nobody can be saved. Preaching, then, is a very precious thing. It is better than miracles. It shows us the way to life. It opens up heaven to us. It reveals Jesus Christ to our souls.

Let us never undervalue preaching. It has been God's way of doing infinite good to countless millions of souls. It was the tool used to bring the church to birth. It has been used to advance the gospel over two millennia. It has brought dead sinners to life. It has comforted. It has edified. It has encouraged. It has challenged. In short, preaching does the work of God. If we ever find preaching being belittled or done down, let us be deeply concerned. If we find that music is becoming more and more and preaching is growing less and less, let us be very worried. Where preaching disappears, God's work disappears. Noise and excitement may remain. But God himself has left. Let us value and hold on to preaching.

Let us notice secondly that the coming of the Holy Spirit was spoken of in prophecy. It was not an unforeseen event. It was announced long before by the prophet Joel. Was blessing now coming to all nations? Joel had foretold it. Was the Spirit now poured out in great measure? The prophet had said it would be so. Was the whole world order now being changed? It was no more than had been said.

Here is a great encouragement for us. God's works do not come out of the blue. He has spoken of them long in advance. The church is not an after-thought. It was God's intention from the beginning. We do not live in days which God did not foresee. The perfect will of God is being worked out, every part exactly as he planned.

Whenever we see the uncertainty of this present life, let us hold on to God. As we grow

had divided onto each one. Unlearned languages were being spoken. Wonderful things about God were being heard. But what was the effect? They were amazed - and they were perplexed. "Whatever could this mean?" was the question on their lips. Nobody yet cried out "What shall we do" (2:37). Nobody asked for baptism. Nobody was added to the church. How could they be? It was a sign - but of what? What did it all mean?

The answers to these questions were not known until Peter preached. Peter would open his mouth - and declare the facts about Jesus. But until he did so, it was all unclear. The crowd's attention had been drawn - but as yet, nobody knew to what.

If we have reliable preaching, then let us be deeply grateful to God for it. The climax of Pentecost was not the miraculous signs. It was the direct and Christ-centred preaching. Nobody is saved by mere signs. People are saved when they believe the gospel, and trust in Jesus. If we have heard, and if we have believed, then we have all that the signs were intended to lead us to. Let us thank God that he has drawn our attention to his word. Let us value gospel preaching as the highest gift we could ever be given.

Finally, we must observe a very sad and solemn thing. There will always be scoffers for whom nothing at all can be done. What a day to be in Jerusalem this was! The Holy Spirit had come. The church was born! The exalted Christ was pouring out his promised gift. Salvation was coming to all the world. Great signs and miracles were occurring. But there were some who mocked. They could see nothing. They put it down to men drunk on "new wine" (v13).

What a grievous thing this is! Only a hard heart could not be touched by it. Forgiveness was now near at hand. The Son of God, whom they had crucified, was come to offer them mercy. But they could do nothing but scoff. One of the greatest events in the history of the world was taking place - in front of their very eyes! Yet all they knew how to do was poke fun.

We must not be surprised when the gospel meets with mocking. It may be preached in the most wonderful way. It may be accompanied by the most powerful evidences of its truth. It may come with deep sincerity, and be anointed with the Holy Spirit. But there will ever be those who scorn it, and insist on carrying on into hell. We must not lose heart because this is so. If it was so on the day of Pentecost, it will be so for us too. Because a witness is rejected, does not mean it was not faithful. Let us give up because of a poor response. Let us trust that God has those whom he wishes to hear, and carry on speaking. Let us not blame faithful preachers because few choose to listen to them. Let us pray that God will make his word great in the day of his power. And, if we have felt the Saviour's power ourselves, let us be deeply grateful. But for the grace of God, that scoffer would be you or I. If Jesus has taken away the blindness from our eyes, let us never cease to praise him that he had mercy - upon us!

Acts 2:14-21

14 But Peter, standing up with the eleven, raised his voice and said to them, "Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and heed my words. 15 For these are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. 16 But

dead Christ could not inspire them to risk their lives. A dead Christ could not cause them to preach boldly before the murderous Sanhedrin. A dead Christ could not enable them to face down mobs, or preach to kings. A dead Christ could not build a world-wide church. The apostles met with the living, resurrected Christ. The living, resurrected Christ sent them to preach to the ends of the earth. That Christ was risen and alive was the great theme of the apostles' preaching.

If Jesus is dead, then our faith is worthless, and we are still in our sins (1 Corinthians 15:17). We must not think that we can salvage Christianity if there is no living Christ. Either the Son of God intervened in human history, or he did not. Either the living Jesus is a real part of space and time, or he is not. There are no half-way positions.

Let us ask ourselves what kind of Christ we serve. Are we bold for his cause, knowing that he is alive? Do we attempt great things for him, believing that he has all power at God's right hand? Are we careful and hard-working, knowing that he will soon give us our reward? The church at Sardis had a name that it was alive - but was dead (Revelation 3:1). What about us? Is our religion dead, or is it alive?

Thirdly, let us notice that *the apostles were men under authority*. They were chosen by Jesus. They received divine commandments. They had instructions from him about the kingdom. They had no liberty to go their own way, or teach their own ideas. They had a master, and his will was their law.

We must, then, remember that no Christian teacher is any more than this. If even the apostles were mere servants, then how ordinary men? To be sure, it is the highest possible privilege to be called to proclaim the gospel. But it is still the place of a servant, not a lord. Those who treat the churches as their own playthings, who "lord it over the flock" (1 Peter 5:3) have no warrant from the apostles, much less any approval from Christ.

Let us not treat our favourite teachers as if they were heroes or kings. Let us remember that whatever good they do, it is from their good master. The world is full of "personalities" and "stars" - but the church should have none. Once a minister of the gospel starts to obscure Christ by his own glory, he has become a minister of the devil. A humble Christian, whatever position he is in, will thank the Lord when he is brought low, and not grumble over it. Let us be grateful if the Lord has never raised us to a position which our pride cannot cope with! If we are doing some useful act of service for the Lord, whether in a high or low position, then let us do it, and be glad. "For even the Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

Acts 1:4-8

4 And being assembled together with them, he commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, "which", he said, "you have heard from me;" 5 "for John truly baptised with water, but you shall be baptised with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." 6 Therefore, when they had come together, they asked him, saying, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" 7 And he said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in his own

authority." 8 "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

These are words of unique importance. Here are the last utterances of the Son of God upon earth. If a great man's last words are thought worthy of remembering, then these are infinitely more so. Let us pay careful attention to them, and expect special insight and blessing from them.

Let us notice firstly from these verses that *even the apostles could do nothing without the Holy Spirit*. They were undoubtedly very blessed men. They had had three years of teaching from the Son of God. They had walked in his footsteps. They had breathed the same air. They had seen his miracles - seas calmed, crowds of hungry people fed, demons cast out, and dead people raised. The preaching they had heard was like nothing ever heard. The perfection of his life had been before them day after day. They had witnessed him die. They had seen him alive again. There is no college or university that could give a training like these men had. Yet Christ told them, they must do nothing until the Holy Spirit was given. Their own witness would not be enough.

Only life can cause life. Wonderful as their preaching might have been, without the Holy Spirit it would have no effect on its hearers. Here was a fundamental lesson for them. In their own strength they would only fail, fail and fail again. But when Christ gave the church his Spirit, they would take the gospel to the ends of the earth. Let us learn that the church is not built by man's power. It does not continue because of man's hard-work, human power, or human wisdom. It goes forward only because Jesus, who is in heaven, sends his Holy Spirit.

Let us ask ourselves, how much our religion is a religion of the Holy Spirit? Could what we do be done just the same if the third person of the Godhead had never existed? Would our Christianity be any different if, like the Ephesians, we had never so much as heard that there was a Holy Spirit? (Acts 19:2). We must remember that the religion in which the Holy Spirit is not absolutely vital is not the religion of Jesus Christ, or of his apostles. It is not the one which gave birth to the church. It will prove in the end to be only a religion of "flesh and not spirit ... and they shall all fail" (Isaiah 31:3).

Notice secondly what a wrong-headed question the apostles asked our Lord. If there was ever proof of our need of the Spirit, here it is! Our Lord was returning to heaven, to rule over the universe. He was about to give them instructions about a kingdom that was not to be only in Jerusalem, but would extend to the very ends of the earth. The task that he had for them was to be "witnesses". And yet what in their minds remained ideas about an earthly, local and national kingdom. Whilst the Lord had instructed them about the tribulation that lay ahead (Acts 14:22), they still had thoughts of reigning in Palestine as kings.

We must be quite certain in our own minds that the Lord has not called us to reign in this present age. To be sure, in Christ we are already enthroned in heavenly places (Ephesians 2:6). To the Christian who perseveres to the end is promised that he will sit down with Christ on his throne (Revelation 3:21). But this present age is one of labour, and suffering.

and the Spirit was sent.

The way in which the Spirit came is intended to impress this upon us. The sound came "from heaven" (v2). It was as a mighty wind - which no man can control (John 3:8). The disciples began to do what they had never learnt (v4). It was clear - this power was not from within. It was from the risen Christ.

Let us take this to heart. The church is not a human body. It exists because God has acted. It carries on existing only because God continues to act. The church without God in it is a corpse. The true church is a living body - with life from Jesus. When we firmly believe this, we can never lose heart. The power is not from us - so our weakness is beside the point. The church was not set up by us - so our imperfections cannot bring it down. The church lives because Christ supplies his Spirit to it. The church advances because the Son of God intervenes. Our helper is mighty!

Let us take notice too from this passage just what the gift of tongues was. There are many strange and bizarre opinions on this question today. There are many believers who have been led astray into useless beliefs and unhelpful acts. These things could be easily avoided by taking notice of this passage.

The gift of tongues was a gift of unlearned foreign languages. The disciples already spoke their own languages; now they spoke in "other" ones (v4). When they were sent out into the open, they were heard and understood by those from foreign places (v11). The words which they heard were not gibberish, but understood by the hearers. The languages spoken were not of angels, but of the surrounding nations (v6). The sounds were not without meaning, but declared "the wonderful works of God" (v11). It was not a private prayer language, but a declaration for the world.

This sign was most suitable for the day. The gospel was now no longer only for Jews. The church contained the whole world. The seeker after God need no longer trek to Palestine. The good news would be brought to him. The person who would be saved need no longer become a Jew. He could now become one of the people of God, just how he was. Repentance and faith was needed, and nothing besides.

Here was a fitting sign for the unbelieving Jew too. The gospel was being preached - but not in his tongue. Those from other nations could hear - but he was shut out. Tongues were a sign to those who did not believe (1 Corinthians 14:21-22).

The gift of tongues was never intended to always continue. It was not given to believers for their devotional life. It was a public sign - when the church was first born. Of such signs, we have no need. The church is already composed of all nations. The gospel is already spreading throughout all the earth. The Bible is complete, and God's mind for the church is fully written down. To seek after tongues today, is to thoroughly misunderstand the times in which we live. Let us be grateful to God that we have a completed Scripture - and not desire for the times when the church had less.

Let us notice thirdly from these verses that the gospel cannot advance without preaching. A most mighty miracle had occurred. A sound had come from heaven. Tongues of fire

directly by God (1 Corinthians 11:23). But Paul is the exception, not the rule. The appearance to him was "last of all" (1 Corinthians 15:8). No man alive today fulfils any off these condition. None of them were taught the gospel directly by Christ. All of them heard it from fellow men. None of them has seen the body of the risen Lord. All of them must rely on faith. None of them has been given direct instructions from heaven. All who claim such things have been led astray.

Let us be quite certain that we do not intend to follow charlatans. The Lord replaced Judas, and completed the intended twelve. And of apostles to the Gentiles, there was only ever meant to be one. Those who pretend to this position today must be ignored, and their teaching scorned. Following the false ideas of men will never do us any good. Let us be grateful to God that he has given us all that we need. His apostles bore faithful witness. That witness is kept for us in his word. We have no need of new apostles. The old ones passed on all that we need to know. We have a sufficient Scripture. We have the whole mind of God for his church. Let us hold fast to it. Let us not look for new words. Let us obey the word which we already have.

Acts 2:1-13

1 When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. 2 And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. 4 And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. 5 And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven. 6 And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language. 7 Then they were all amazed and marvelled, saying to one another, "Look, are not all these who speak Galileans? 8 And how is it that we hear, each in our own language in which we were born? 9 Parthians and Medes and Elamites, those dwelling in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya adjoining Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11 Cretans and Arabs - we hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God." 12 So they were all amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "Whatever could this mean?" 13 Others mocking said, "They are full of new wine."

These are very special verses. There is nothing like them anyway in the world. Here we read about the birth of the New Testament church. Long predicted, and long awaited, now she was born. If we are part of the church today, we ought to find these verses especially interesting. What is the church? Where did it come from? What makes it special and unique? Surely only the spiritually dead can fail to come away from these verses without a sense of awe and privilege.

Let us notice firstly that the New Testament church began with a sovereign intervention of God. It was not the work of man. The first believers did not decide how the church would begin, or lay plans to start it up. The church is the result of the power of the Holy Spirit of God. The believers were in Jerusalem, waiting, as they had been told (1:4). They laid no plans of their own. They simply watched and prayed. As promised, the risen Christ acted,

The way to glory which our master has carved out goes by the way of humiliation. Glory comes through the cross. The servant is not above his master, and we must like him crucify ourselves daily. If we would gain our lives, we must lose them. We must lose the whole world, if need be (Mark 8:34-38).

This episode shows us starkly that the best of men are but men. The apostles undoubtedly became the very best of men. By Holy Spirit they taught and wrote without error or fault. But in themselves, they still knew much weakness (1 Corinthians 2:3). Let us learn from our Lord's answer not to put too much trust in men, whoever they may be. Let us look to the Lord.

Finally, see *what a Christian minister is*. He is a witness. Even the apostles, privileged as they were, were never allowed to invent their own teachings. Their great duty was to testify to historical facts about Jesus. Whether they were in Jerusalem, Judea, or Samaria, they had one great duty. If they went to the uttermost parts of the earth, their responsibility was the same. They had to pass on the essential facts about Jesus Christ, and the truths which he had revealed. And if this was the apostles' work, then who will say that Christian ministers need something more? The Bible never calls the apostles priests. They never offer any sacrifices. They never to they serve at any altars. They never hear any confessions. And neither did they tell anybody else to do so either. We may be quite sure that this way of thinking never came from Jesus Christ. It goes quite against what he said.

No Christian today can witness just as the apostles did. Having seen the risen Christ in his resurrection body, they could bear eye-witness testimony to the world. That job is now done. Their witness has been kept in Scripture for us. But each of us who has felt the power of the risen Christ may and must bear witness to him. Our opportunities may be few. Our hearers may be hostile. Our lips may stammer. But Jesus has died and risen for us. He has given us his Holy Spirit. He loves us, and watches from heaven over us. And he says "you shall be my witnesses". If we know him, then let us pray for more of that Spirit - and let us speak more about our Lord. We do not have to speak about him to kings. We do not have to speak about him to crowds. But where the Lord does give us hearers to listen – let us speak about him.

Acts 1:8-11

8 "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." 9 Now when he had spoken these things, while they watched, he was taken up, and a cloud received him out of their sight. 10 And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold two men stood by them in white apparel, 11 who also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw him go into heaven."

There are some verses in the Bible which are particularly important. All of Scripture is God's word. Every syllable is breathed out by the Spirit and is precious. And yet there are

some verses which are parts of the foundation of the house, and others which are tiles on the roof. I would not like to have holes in my roof. But without the foundation, there would be no house.

Acts chapter 1 verse 8 is a verse which explains the whole book. As we read through Acts, what do we see happening? We see the apostles bearing witness to Jesus. They do it in Jerusalem. They do it in Judea and Samaria. Then they do it to the end of the earth. By what power or strength do they do this? By that of the Holy Spirit, come upon them. Acts 1:8 is the key, which opens the lock.

The book of Acts is not intended to tell us everything that the apostles ever did. About many of them, it tells us nothing particular at all. Which countries were evangelised by Thomas, or by Bartholomew? What were the special achievements of Andrew, or of Matthew? We will not find any answer to these questions in Acts.

But we do find the Holy Spirit coming. We see the apostles receiving power to witness to Jesus. We find the church being born. We see the gospel spreading from the heart of Judaism in Jerusalem, to the heart of the known world, in Rome. Acts tells us how Jehovah, the creator of all, fulfilled his promises. The prophets said that all the earth would worship the God of Israel. Acts shows us how the risen Jesus fulfilled his word.

Let us be convinced that God will fulfil his word. The difficulties may seem very many. The enemies of truth may seem very numerous, and be very active. All power may appear to be with those who care nothing for Jesus or his church. But the Lord reigns - and his word will be carried out. Do you feel discouraged, Christian? Are you losing heart? There is no need. Jesus has promised blessing - and it shall be.

Let us notice, secondly, that *Jesus has ascended to heaven*. After saying all that he had to say, he left the earth, and was removed "out of their sight". Where is the God-man now? He is in glory. He is at the right hand of the Father. He is ruling from the throne of the cosmos. He is from there working to "put all his enemies under his feet" (1 Corinthians 15:25). He is asking of the Father, and receiving the nations of the earth for his possession (Psalm 2:8).

Jesus has not vanished into non-existence. Nor has he ceased to be a man, and returned to being God only. He has gone into heaven. He rules, not from any mere earthly throne in Jerusalem, but from a position infinitely higher.

Here is the Christian's comfort in distress. Here is the Christian's encouragement through hardship. Here is the Christian's hope for the future. We do not only have a teacher to learn from. We do not merely have an example to copy. We have a king who has power. We have a lord who is absent in body, but present in power by his sent Spirit. We have a master who has gone to receive a kingdom.

Let us ask ourselves, what do we know of these things? Is our Christ he who now rules? Let us be convinced of one thing. If our Christ does not reign, then he is no help at all. Church buildings may be pretty. Christian worship may have great beauty. The Bible may be a most majestic work. But if Christ does not rule, then all of these things are quite

before, the Psalmist had written, "Let another take his office."

As long as we live, let us be quite convinced that the Bible is the word of God. It does not contain the ideas of mere men. It does not contain pious thoughts and empty hopes. It contains the very words of the living God. Not one word of it can fall to the ground. Every line and every syllable must be fulfilled. Let us treat the Bible as a solid rock. In every age of history, new ideas will come and will go. People everywhere will be saying that this is true, and that is true. But amidst all the coming and going, God's word shall never fail. Let us rest upon it. Let us build upon it. It will never let us down.

Let us notice for a second thing, *how clearly this passage affirms the double-authorship of Scripture*. There could hardly be a more definite statement of this truth. The mouth of David uttered; but the Holy Spirit spoke. The words were entirely those of the ancient king; the words all belonged to the mouth of God. A human mind was active and at work; but the origin was with God.

Let us not make any mistakes about this teaching. Some will say to us that because the Bible is of man, therefore it is not of God. Others will treat it as if were delivered from heaven on a set of plates. Both of these are serious mistakes. The one will lead us to think that it is a book containing errors. The other will lead us to think that it is written in some kind of code. Both will lead us far astray.

To benefit from the Bible, we must know what kind of book it is. Holy men of God wrote - as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. The thoughts are expressed in each author's way. But every letter, and every stroke of the pen, is the infallible word of God.

Let us be convinced, then, that the modernist teaching is quite wrong. Just because a book is written by man, does not mean it cannot also be of God. Men may always be making mistakes - but the Spirit of God may prevent them when he pleases. The Bible does not contain only divine ideas, filtered through man. It does not contain only flashes of inspiration, and hints of God. Our task is not to strip away the human to get to the divine. Our task is to receive every word, as from the mouth of God. This is what the apostles did. This is what our Lord did. We must do too.

Let us notice, thirdly, from these verse, *what an apostle was*. We live in days when the most extravagant claims are being made. Jesus appointed twelve apostles, but today there are twelve hundred, and more! It was never more important to notice what a true apostle is.

Peter laid down 3 distinct things. An apostle must have been with Jesus from the beginning - he must have been there when John was baptising. He must have been taught the gospel by Christ himself. He must have been there until the day he died, rose again and went up to heaven - he must have been a "witness ... of his resurrection". To fulfil this difficult criteria, the disciples could only find two.

It is evident that no man living today can be an apostle. Paul was one "born out of due time" (1 Corinthians 15:8). He saw the body of the risen Lord. He was taught the gospel directly by Christ himself. He was told about the ordinances of the church by no man, but

believers, unless we like them learn to pray.

Acts 1:15-26

And in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples (altogether the number of names was about a hundred and twenty), and said, 16 "Men and brethren, this Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke before by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus; 17 for he was numbered with us and obtained a part in this ministry." 18 (Now this man purchased a field with the wages of iniquity; and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his entrails gushed out. 19 And it became known to all those dwelling in Jerusalem; so that field is called in their own language, Akel Dama, that is, Field of Blood.) 20 "For it is written in the book of Psalms: 'Let his dwelling place be desolate, and let no one live in it'; and, 'Let another take his office.' 21 Therefore, of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, 22 beginning from the baptism of John to that day when he was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection." 23 And they proposed two: Joseph called Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias. 24 And they prayed and said, "You, O Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which of these two you have chosen 25 to take part in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place." 26 And they cast their lots, and the lot fell on Matthias. And he was numbered with the eleven apostles.

These words before us are quite unique. They cover an incident on which the Bible is otherwise completely silent. There are few words so solemn as these in the whole of Scripture. They shine light on one of the most unhappy deaths of all time. Let us approach these words carefully, desiring to know what is the mind of God in them.

Let us notice firstly *how precisely every prediction of Scripture must be fulfilled*. Peter spoke to the believers of how "Scripture had to be fulfilled". It must be so, for "the Holy Spirit spoke". David had spoken; but the true author was God.

The death of Judas was a very horrible thing. He bought a field, and perished in it. Seeing someone of his wickedness, he hung himself (Matthew 27:5). But falling from his rope, he burst open and the field was completely defiled (v18). It was now twice unclean. It was purchased with blood money; it was defiled with Judas' blood. This was all very horrible. But was it unforeseen? Not at all. A thousand years before, the Psalmist had written, "Let his dwelling place be desolate, and let no one live in it".

The fall of Judas was a most terrible thing. Christ had chosen him. He had been with the Son of God for three years. He had heard the most wonderful words. Heaven had been opened up to him. He had seen the most wonderful deeds. Love itself had been at work before his eyes. Works of power and works of grace had been before him every day. But it had done him no ultimate good. For thirty pieces of silver he betrayed his master, and sold his soul. He lost his place amongst the apostles. The gospel would be preached to the world - but by someone else. He himself would be discovering to all eternity the terrible truth of Christ's words - "Good were it for that man if he had never been born." (Mark 14:21). This was all very terrible. But was it all a surprise? Not at all. A millennium

useless. Unless our Jesus is the king, our religion is in vain. To what Christ are we looking? Let us trust in the King.

Finally, let us observe *what was said to the apostles*. Whilst they stood staring at the sky, they were told quite distinctly that *there was work to do*.

"Gazing up into heaven" was not the activity which their master planned for them to do. It was true that he would one day return. But it would not be any time soon. There was a gospel to be preached - throughout the whole earth. There were hearers to reach. There were prayers to be made. There persecutions to be faced,. There were spiritual enemies to be conquered. There were all kinds of duties for them as servants of Christ.

A day is coming when the spiritual battle will be over. The Lord Jesus Christ will return in splendour and majesty. His bodily absence will end. He will reign amongst us, in a perfected and purified world. All struggle with sin will be gone. All assaults of Satan will have come to an end. We will search carefully for the wicked - but not be able to find him (Psalm 37:10). Jesus Christ will be all in all - and we shall enjoy our perfect rest in him.

But that day has not yet come. Our day is the day of fierce battle. The Lord Jesus claims the world for his own - and the devil contests every inch. We are the Lord's servants - but sin seeks to bring us back into its service. We are redeemed out of the world - but the world seeks to entice us back in.

In short, in every part of life - there is work to be done, and battles to be fought. We do not do this work on our own, because the Lord Jesus has sent his Holy Spirit, and continues to do so. We are weak – but he gives more strength.

There is nothing more wrong than to find a Christian at ease. What? Is there nothing to do for the Lord? Has Satan been defeated? Is the world purged of all sin? Has the flesh given up and finally submitted? A Christian at ease is a Christian in danger. Not all peace is the peace of life and victory; there is also the peace of the graveyard, where life has been eclipsed by death. Let us make sure that we are not merely "staring at the sky", waiting for things to happen on their own, or batten down the hatches as if the Lord were known to be returning straight away. Let us be convinced that a faith that does not lead to works is dead, and cannot save us. Let us know that the Lord will return when the time is right - and in the meantime, let us get to work.

Acts 1:12-14

12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey. 13 And when they had entered, they went up into the upper room where they were staying: Peter, James, John and Andrew; Philip and Thomas; Bartholomew and Matthew; James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot; and Judas the son of James. 14 These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

These verses cover a unique time for the Christian believers. Christ was gone to heaven; but the Holy Spirit was not yet sent. The Lord was absent in body; but not yet present by

his Spirit. The word of the Lord was "wait". But for how long? And what would happen when the Spirit came?

The first thing to notice in these verses is that *Christ had kept all of his chosen apostles*. Three years earlier, twelve had been chosen. Those twelve had been with Christ through thick and thin. They had seen him rejected by his family. They had seen him rejected by his own nation. They had seen him rejected by the Sadducees. They had seen him rejected by the scribes and Pharisees. They had heard many say "his teachings are too hard for us". They had seen many stumble at his humble background, and failure to claim an earthly throne. More than that, they had seen him betrayed, humiliated, and crucified. They had seen him buried, and his enemies triumphant. But despite all this, except for the son of perdition, Christ's chosen disciples had remained.

This fact is fit to be called a miracle. What can explain the fact that each one of these had remained, where so many others had fallen away? Only that Christ, by his supernatural power, was keeping them.

Here is a fact which deserves to be remembered and considered very often by the believer. If we had to rely on ourselves to not fall away, we should be lost. The devil is too clever. The world is too alluring. The flesh is too strong. But Christ is stronger than all of these.

Let us remember that our salvation depends ultimately upon Christ. If we truly trust in him, that is no accident. It is because the Father loved us in eternity, and gave us to the Son. The Son has shed his blood and died for us, and secured us forever. The Holy Spirit is given to us - as our guarantee. If our faith is in Christ, then it rests upon a solid rock. Salvation is a work of God - and God's work can never fail.

We can never lean too strongly upon these truths. We can never think them too important. Nothing will keep us through the storm except a strong anchor - and such is Christ.

Let us notice secondly that *the believers were all together*. That the Holy Spirit wants us to especially notice this is made clear. The same word is used in chapter 2 verse 1, in chapter 2 verse 46, chapter 4 verse 24 and chapter 5 verse 12. It is deliberately noted on each of these occasions that the believers were "with one accord".

The unity of true believers is a very precious thing in God's eyes. And it ought to be so in ours too. We have one Father in heaven. We have one Saviour who has died for all of us. We have one way to God. We have one Spirit present in all of us. We have all experienced one baptism (Ephesians 4:4-6). We have one set of truths delivered to us. We have one hope ahead of us. These are unanswerable reasons why we must strive for unity.

I have no wish for a false unity. There are some divisions which must remain forever, and we thank God for them. The true gospel must always be kept separate from the false. The pure truth about the Lord Jesus must always be sharply distinguished from heresy. True believers can never embrace those who hold the errors of liberalism, or Roman Catholicism. The Lord never intended a unity of mere appearance, or in outward organisation. Unity must be in the truth.

I recognise too that some divisions will likely remain until our Lord returns. I do not expect that all believers will become like-minded on all questions this side of eternity. Some will always think that the churches must be organised *this* way, and some *that*, and the matter will never be concluded.

But despite all of this, we must strive for unity. Those who will be together in heaven ought to love one another on earth. When the Lord has loved us despite all our sins, faults and failings, we ought to be seek to do the same.

There is little that is more impressive to the outside world than a truly united church. When we see that old enemies are now friends, we are impressed. When those with nothing in common except Christ are together, it is a powerful testimony.

True unity is something which God find especially precious. He has saved us so that we might love. The fruit of love is unity. It was a united church which Christ left behind on earth. It was a united church which the Spirit came to on the day of Pentecost. It was a united church which weathered the first storms of persecution. Let us do all we can to gain and keep unity amongst us.

Finally, let us notice what the believers, having been parted from Christ, did. They prayed. Their Lord was not with them to help them - but they could pray. The Spirit was promised but not yet come - but they could pray. They had no work given to them, but they must wait in Jerusalem - but they could pray.

Prayer is always fitting for us. The more we grow as believers, the more we shall realise our need of it. The more we see our own weakness, the more we shall see the need for his strength. The more we see the deadness of man's heart, the more we shall see the need for God to bring life. The more we see the desperate condition of the lost, the more we shall cry out to God for mercy.

Whatever we can't do, we can pray. If we are house-bound and crippled, yet we can pray. And whatever we can do, we can never do more than when we pray. The mightiest spiritual victories were not won by cleverness. They were not won by gifts and talents. They were not won by experience. They were won by prayer, or they were not truly won at all.

What Christ's church needs today is for men and women to pray. All of our cleverness has not got us far. All the expertise of salesmen, of marketing men, and of businessmen, has only done the church harm. What causes the church to advance is not the wisdom or power of this age. It is the work of the Spirit of God, in response to prayer.

What each Christian needs today is to pray. All of our self-effort will never get us far. All our techniques, and all our resolutions, will only do us harm. What causes a Christian to grow is not his own strength. It is the work of the Spirit of God, in response to prayer.

Let us resolve that every year we live, we shall pray more. We shall never likely be content that we pray enough. But let us make sure that we are moving in the right direction. Let us always be making progress. We shall never be more like those early