

Some Great Themes from Acts 1–12

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What is the Book of the Acts? It is a narrative; it tells a story. It has been called a story of missions. But it is too incomplete to be rated as a full history of earliest mission history. It has been called the book of the Holy Ghost. That is right to a certain extent, but the main focus is not on the Holy Spirit.

Now let us ask: *Whose* story is it? The title it bears in our Bibles would lead us to believe that it is the story of the apostles. But we have good reason to believe that this was not the original title. Moreover, such a title does not fit the facts. The apostles are not portrayed as men who act independently, pursuing their own high ambitions or carrying out their iron wills. They are pictured consistently as men who are but the instruments and agents of Another and who knew themselves to be such. Besides, men who were not apostles, in the strict sense, such as Barnabas, Stephen, and Philip, play important roles, too.

The title “The Acts of the Apostles” does not fit the plan of Luke. As he brings out in his introduction to his Gospel and in the first verses of Acts, his purpose in the Gospel was to set forth the story of the Redeemer from his baptism by John to the time of his ascension, whereas in the Acts his aim is to depict the continued activity of the ascended, exalted Lord Jesus.

His acts are the subject of this book. This fact is borne out by the way Luke marks off the sections of the story he tells:

1. Acts 6:7: “The word of the Lord increased” (or grew).
2. Acts 9:31: “Then had the churches rest throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria and were edified, and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were *multiplied*.”
3. Acts 12:24: “But the word of God grew and multiplied.”
4. Acts 16:5: “And so were the churches established in the faith and increased in numbers daily.”
5. Acts 19:20: “So mightily grew the word of God and prevailed.”
6. Acts 28:31: “(Paul) preaching the kingdom of God and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with confidence, no man hindering him.”

So Luke is telling what the Word of the exalted Christ accomplished in those days. It is the Word of the Lord because he gave it into the hearts and hands of his own, and because it tells only of him. It is his creative Word, for the exalted Lord gave the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit operates with power through this Word. Luke tells how this Word of the Lord proved its creative power: how it was preached, brought forth faith and sustained it in the hearts of many, was embattled, and went on from victory to victory.

In brief, God is telling us through the words of Luke: Behold the mighty, wondrous works of your exalted Lord! If we wanted to be more specific, we could sum up this “Second Gospel According to St. Luke” in this way:

The Exalted Lord Plants and Propagates his Church

Under this head we wish to pursue several great themes which course through Acts. Even those we treat will not be exhaustive; we shall have to be selective. We shall have to dispense with any lengthy applications, too. We believe these to be unnecessary for our present purpose, as we hope you will agree when we have completed this study.

As might be expected from what we established in the introduction, the most prominent theme in Acts is:

I. The Exalted Lord Rules by the Power of his Grace, through the Word of God's Grace

A. *Luke brings this truth before us with great force even as he pictures the risen Lord preparing for his exalted rule.*

First Luke reminded his reader of rather high rank ("most excellent"), Theophilus, what he had read in his first account: All that Jesus had done and taught from the baptism by John to the day of his ascension. But he was careful to point out that before his ascension Jesus gave his apostles certain injunctions or behests. We know what these behests were from Matthew 28:18–20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:44–49. We know it from the name "apostles," too. In sovereign grace he had chosen them to be his special messengers.

What message were they to bear? It was not that Jesus would continue to do that work for which he had come to earth, that of redeeming guilty mankind. Their message would be: "Redemption is purchased; salvation is free!" Jesus had won God's grace for sinners. Now he was preparing to distribute or dispense it.

He had begun to do so with the preaching he had done in person. From here on his method of operation would be different. He would continue teaching and preaching through his disciples, first through the apostles, but then also through all believers.

But if they were to be true emissaries of their Redeemer-King, it would not do for these first witnesses to be uncertain about the royal message of grace or to have it all garbled. For this reason the risen Lord did two things. He appeared to them many times after his resurrection. However, he did not merely flash on their sight, only to vanish again. With each appearance he furnished infallible proof that he who had suffered and died was alive again. Of this fact they had to be certain beyond a doubt, for the resurrection of their Lord would be central, pivotal in their message (1:3a).

The risen Lord did another thing to make sure that the apostles would have his message straight. He spoke to them of the "things pertaining to the kingdom of God." he had taught them before over three long years, but this was teaching with a difference, teaching in the light of the resurrection. Now things that had baffled them were clear; things that had seemed all wrong shone forth in their true light as divinely right.

Not that everything had been set right in their hearts and minds. Jesus knew this was not true. Therefore he charged them to wait in Jerusalem for the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Jesus would soon send this new Comforter, or better: helper, Supporter.

How sorely they needed such help they showed by the question they asked their Lord even at this late date: "Wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" Thus they betrayed that some of the false Jewish notions regarding the Messiah and his kingdom were still mixed in with the true conceptions which Jesus had labored long and untiringly to give them (1:6).

But the Holy Spirit would overcome and drive out all such wrong notions. He would empower them. The result would be that they could bring from their Lord a clear, authentic message of grace. Moreover, they would be made completely willing witnesses. Not as men moving reluctantly on command would they proclaim the Lord's words of pardon and life, but as such who were set on fire to bring the message of full and free pardon through their crucified and risen Lord. "Ye shall be witnesses," Jesus told them, not using the 'shall' of command, but the plain future: this is what they would do quite naturally and spontaneously (1:7,8).

But before we leave this verse, let us note that the Lord is planning a rule through which he wants to share the fruits of his redemption with all men everywhere: "both in Jerusalem and in all Judea and in Samaria and *unto the uttermost part of the earth*" (1:8).

Having carefully prepared for his exalted rule, our Lord entered upon that rule when he ascended into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. Though now all things are put under his feet, though he wields all power in heaven and on earth, though his rule certainly includes the constant exercise of sheer omnipotence, yet it is another side of this power which receives the greatest emphasis in this story of the exalted Redeemer. It is the power of his grace. It is brought to bear on the hearts of men by his Word. When his messengers proclaim its message of God's pardoning grace, which he won for sinners in his humbled, self-abased state, many are brought to faith. With this same Word of grace he will sustain, guide, and lead them all their days until he returns clothed in glory as heaven's King, but as the same Savior who lived and bled and died for them. Then he will take them home to himself. His rule in glory is always aimed at the final salvation of sinners (1:9–11).

Now let us go on to focus our attention on

B. The exalted Lord as he evidenced all the power of his grace in the events of Pentecost.

Peter summed it all up when he declared in his sermon: “Being by the right hand of God exalted, he (Jesus) hath shed forth this which ye now see and hear” (2:33).

What we see and hear, seems at first glance to fit better under the head of sheer omnipotence. But when we analyze the sound as of a mighty, rushing wind, the tongues as of fire on the heads of the disciples, the speaking in foreign tongues never learned, we see that these were merely accompanying, confirming miracles. They were supporting signs. (We shall have more to say on this point under another head.)

As we study the extended Pentecost sermon of Peter (even this may be a summary), we find plain evidence that the ascended Lord is active in all the power of his grace.

We see it in the preacher. Peter is clearly inspired, inspired in the strict and highest sense. The Spirit whom the Lord had sent was giving him the words to speak. He was using Peter’s tongue to glorify Jesus, to bring home to the Jewish hearers their heinous sin of slaying One approved of God by miracles and signs and wonders, to set forth that God used their wicked deed to carry out his eternal plan of redemption and that God had declared that plan fully carried out by raising Jesus from the dead and exalting him to his own right hand. Again, his application of the Gospel to stricken, contrite hearts likewise bears the mark of inspiration by the Spirit (2:14–36,38–40). But we are already anticipating our next point.

We see the power of grace in the effect of the sermon. Sinners were pricked in their hearts. They did not merely feel a little uneasiness which could easily be shaken off. They were confronted by their sin and its enormous guilt in such a way they could not evade it or back away from it. They were rocked to the depth of their being. Then the exalted Lord laid hold of their hearts with the power of his grace, so that they gladly received the word of remission in the name of Jesus and had divine forgiveness sealed in their baptism.

Thus the King of grace brought 3,000 souls under his sway in one day.

As we further pursue the story of his mighty acts, we witness how

C. The exalted Lord moves from one great victory to another.

Not long after Pentecost the healing of the life-long cripple (3:1–11) led to another sermon by Peter preached in the power of the Spirit (3:12–26). (We shall not attempt here a study of these sermons. A study of all the sermons or addresses in Acts would make an excellent conference assignment.) Peter did not actually complete that sermon. While he and the other disciples were still speaking, the Sadducees came with a detachment of Temple police, arrested Peter and John, and clapped them into jail (4:1–3).

How could the word of men undergoing such public disgrace have any impact on their fellow men? But it was the powerful Word of the Lord, not that of mere men, and so it did not remain without effect, but reached home to the hearts of many: “Howbeit many of them which heard the word believed; and the number of the *men* was about five thousand” (4:4). Those who preached the gospel could be imprisoned, but the gospel, charged with the creative power of God’s grace for sinners—that gospel could not be bound.

When Peter and John, the next day, were threatened under dire threats, “not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus,” the apostles prayed to God, *not* that he would end the harassment and opposition by their enemies, but that they be given boldness to preach his Word. Their prayer was answered, first by a sign: “the place was shaken where they were assembled together,” and then in this way: “And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spoke the word of God with boldness” (4:23–31). The Lord of all grace sustained them to proclaim God’s grace to sinners as it always ought to be preached.

Right after this we have Luke’s second picture of the Jerusalem church (the first was in 2:44–47). Here we note his mention of the multitude of them that believed. The growth in the number of believers had been such that Luke no longer attempted to give an exact figure. But we should note too, what it was that made these believers “of one heart and one soul,” what brought it about that “great grace was upon them.” All this is accounted for by the kind of preaching about which they gathered: “And with great power gave the apostles witness of *the resurrection of the Lord Jesus*” (4:33).

We must pause over this statement. So important and central was the resurrection of the Lord in apostolic preaching that it can be characterized by this one phrase: “the witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.” (See the same in Acts 17:18: “he preached unto them Jesus and the resurrection”; Romans 4:24; 10:9.)

Preaching the resurrection of Jesus Christ does not mean, of course, being silent about his death. Such preaching would be pointless. We preach Christ crucified for our sins. But we preach also that Christ’s crucifixion death did to mankind’s sins what it was intended to do; that is, to remove them, to cancel out their guilt and condemnation. But on what basis do we preach this? On that of the resurrection, for God raised him from the dead as a sign and guarantee that we were reconciled to him by the death of his Son.

“So we preach, and so ye believed,” Paul says (I Cor. 15:11). Then he goes on to show that if Christ be not raised, both preaching and believing are empty, without foundation, making of the preachers rank deceivers and of the believers pitiable dupes. He also calls preaching and believing without the resurrection of Christ vain in another sense, that of being unprofitable, getting the sinner nothing.

If we fail to give the resurrection of our Lord its rightful place in our preaching, a place of great and consistent emphasis, then to that extent our witness will lack some of its power to win hearts to Christ and to reassure and comfort hearts already bound to him. We now merely chart the next notable stages in the triumphal march of the gospel.

Chapter 6:1 tells us: “In those days when the number of believers was multiplied....” Again Luke reflects the fact that the number of Christians had grown so great that no one any longer kept an accurate count. Lenski has this interesting statement in this connection: “It has been conservatively estimated that at this time the total number of disciples was between twenty and twenty-five thousand.” He does not give the data on which the estimate is based, nor can I further enlighten you. At any rate, our wonder over this growth in numbers increases when we remember that this happened in the very stronghold of the Lord’s enemies, Jerusalem.

Shortly after we hear: “And the word of God increased; and the numbers of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and—now note—a *great company of priests* were obedient to the faith” (7:7). Here the Lord was truly reaching into the camp of the enemy for his recruits. How great is the power of grace over the hearts of men!

The remarkable extension of the church proceeded according to the Lord’s own plan into Judea and Samaria, and then beyond, not merely in spite of the persecution under Saul, but as a result of it. This expansion we shall treat more fully under another theme. We note, however, that in connection with this expansion mission work among the gentiles began. But the Lord’s plan called for intensive, systematic work among non-Jews in many lands. And so it came about. Through the work of the former persecutor, Saul, and of his associates, the gospel of God’s grace in Christ advanced over Asia Minor to Macedonia, to Greece, and to Rome—and Rome was the gateway to the whole ancient world. Thus the plan of gospel-witnessing which the Lord had given to the church was carried out (1:8).

But we do not want to conclude this theme without saying more of that event which stands out among the miracles of grace which our exalted Lord performed. We have just alluded to it: the conversion of Saul.

The fanatical persecutor of the church was not only made a believer in the gospel. He became God’s special instrument in bearing his saving name among the gentiles. Who can rightly express what a sovereign act of grace this was? Paul himself never stopped marveling over it.

Let us be clear on what happened. The Lord Jesus arrested Saul on his course just as he was going to win new laurels for himself by extending the persecution of Christians to Damascus. With a blinding light from heaven the Lord cast Saul to the ground. He appeared to Saul and spoke to him. Then and there Saul was converted.

Here we find a curious thing in Lenski. He says: “Jesus preached the law to Saul; he confronts him with his sin and his crime....But *Jesus does not preach the Gospel to Saul*; he orders him to go to a place where the appointed minister of the Gospel will proclaim this to him.” Lenski’s argumentation here is: “here again we see how Jesus honors his ministry.” (Emphasis is mine.) Again he says: “One thing alone is certain: when Jesus smote Saul with the law, this crushed him but did not kindle faith in him. It is often said that Saul was converted

on the road to Damascus. Strictly speaking, this is not the fact. His conversion began in his encounter with the law, but it was not accomplished until the Gospel entered his heart by faith, and that did not occur on the road but in Damascus.”

True, the Lord Jesus does honor his ministry, but that fact does not prevent him from acting alone, in sovereign independence. That he did so in this case, is evident. Search all three accounts of Saul’s conversion in Acts (9:1–19; 22:6–16; 26:12–18), and you will find only three things that Ananias did: 1) he acted as the Lord’s agent in restoring Saul’s sight; 2) he baptized Saul; 3) he told Saul that he would be the Lord’s special messenger to the gentiles. You will find no mention of his preaching the gospel to Saul.

Galatians 1:11,12 also stands squarely in the way of the role which Lenski assigns to Ananias. Paul says: “But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man. For *I neither received it of man*, neither was I taught it but by the revelation of Jesus Christ.” That statement excludes the agency of Ananias as well as that of the apostles in Jerusalem.

If Lenski’s view were correct, the question which Saul addressed to Jesus would be rather devoid of meaning. Here I recall a significant statement in the Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown *Bible Commentary* on Acts 9:6. After a parenthetical comment on the textual problem, “(The most ancient MSS. and versions of the New Testament want [lack] all these words *here*; but they occur in ch. 26:14 and ch. 22:10, from which they appear to have been inserted here.),” the Commentary goes on to say:

The question: “Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?” indicates a state of mind singularly interesting (see 2:37). Its elements seem to be these: 1) Resistless conviction that “Jesus whom he persecuted,” now speaking to him, was “Christ the Lord.” See on Galatians 1:15,16. 2) As a consequence of this, that not only all his religious views, but his whole religious character has been an entire mistake; that he was up to that moment fundamentally and wholly wrong. 3) That though his whole future was now a blank, he had absolute confidence in him who had so tenderly arrested him in his blind career, and was ready both to take in all his teaching and to carry out all his directions.

Then, too, there is the assurance which the Lord gave the apprehensive Ananias in regard to Saul, “Behold, he prayeth.” Here the Lord was saying: This praying marks Saul as a Christian like you, one from whom you or any other Christian no longer has anything to fear.

Much of what happened to Saul on the Damascus Road must remain mysterious to us—after all, it is a miracle of God’s grace. But several things can be said. It is certain that Saul was not ignorant of Jesus and his gospel up to this point. On the contrary, he knew all about Jesus and his claims on the hearts of men. For that very reason he was fanatically opposed to Jesus. He saw in Jesus’ teachings a godless departure from the faith of his fathers and thought he owed it to the true God to persecute all the followers of the blaspheming Jesus.

Now, when Saul heard the words, “I am Jesus, whom thou persecutest,” it was indeed a preaching of law that he heard, but “I am Jesus,” also had the effect of telling Saul: All that you have heard of Me, all that you considered to be a blasphemous deceiver’s wild claims—all this is true, is true *for you*. That was gospel.

Followers of Christ and workers in his gospel cause, fix your eyes on your exalted Lord! See him as he ruled with the power of grace, through the Word of grace, when the Christian church was young. He does so still. Here the church of every age is to find edification for her faith, a clear vision of her role in the world, courage for her battles, strength for her trials and strenuous labors, and joy and zeal for her task, the task of dispensing to poor sinners everywhere the grace which our Lord once won at such a great price.

II. The Exalted Lord Intervenes with the Power of his Omnipotence to Further the Progress of the Gospel

Here again we must be selective. But even the few items we select will underscore the point that the Lord does not employ miracles and wonders merely to dazzle, to instill a momentary, rather superficial awe.

They are always signs which point to the saving truth and, therefore, are to lead the beholder to a higher, enduring awe, awe over the incredible grace of God in Christ.

A. We have already alluded to the wonders of Pentecost Day. With them the exalted Lord captured and held attention for the apostolic preaching of Christ. With them he brought together the audience for Peter's sermon, the first full proclamation of the crucified and risen Christ, right there in the camp of his fiercest enemies, only fifty days after the event which they thought had eliminated their feared and hated Rival from the scene. Since some in that audience were Jews and proselytes who returned to their homelands after the festival, it is likely that the Lord used some of them to spread the gospel which they had heard and which had brought them to acknowledge Jesus as both Christ and Lord.

B. In the first days after Pentecost "many wonders and signs were done by the apostles." Again, as the pairing of "wonders and signs" shows, the Lord was performing them through his instruments, not to overawe men and win followers for himself as a mere miracleworker, but to support and further the gospel work, even as the miracles he did directly during his visible presence among men were the certification that he was indeed the Christ

C. The same truth stands out in the healing of the cripple. It is striking that Peter and John, who daily went to the Temple, regularly passed by the cripple at his daily station and yet did nothing to help him until the day which Luke records. Why not? The answer is obvious: The Lord had not yet given the two apostles any direction to that effect. The apostles did not go about doing miracles as the whim struck them, but only when their Lord clearly indicated that he wanted a miracle performed.

Peter knew that he was only the instrument or agent of his sovereign and all-powerful Lord, for he said: "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk" (3:6). When he noted that the amazed people were ascribing the healing either to some supernatural power he and John possessed or to their holiness, which had received miracle-working power as its reward, he emphatically corrected them: "And his name, through faith in his name (namely, the faith of Peter and John, for the cripple had none to begin with) hath made this man strong."

Yes, the man was made strong and whole, whole also as to his soul. But that fact does not fully cover the purpose of this miracle. Note again that the apostles' Lord gathered the audience for the sermon by Peter. The miracle was made to serve the purposes of his grace toward many.

After the arrest and imprisonment of Peter and John, there followed the judicial hearing conducted by the Sanhedrin. But the Jewish authorities had to content themselves with an injunction to silence, accompanied by strong threats. There stood the healed cripple as incontrovertible evidence of the miracle. Everybody in Jerusalem knew of it and was overwhelmed by awe and was praising God for this miracle. Thus the exalted Lord checkmated his enemies (4:1-21).

D. When the apostles prayed for boldness in the face of the injunction, the Lord manifested his presence, for "when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together." Exactly how this took place, we are not told, but it was wholly supernatural. It was also the answer to their prayer. Their mighty Lord was promising to sustain them as bold witnesses to his saving name (4:31).

E. Turning to the case of Ananias and Sapphira, we need not wonder why sudden and condign judgment descended on them. As the Lord of the church had warded off the danger from without, that of a bloody persecution, so here he averted a danger that threatened his church from within, that of hypocrisy (5:1-10).

F. Merely taking note of the "many signs and wonders wrought among the people" shortly after the Ananias and Sapphira incident (5:12), we go on to the deliverance of the apostles from prison. The Lord bared

his mighty arm because he was not yet ready to have a bloody persecution break upon his church. He wanted his church to continue its peaceful growth in grace and in numbers a while longer.

G. While we leave other manifestations of the Lord's supernatural power for mention under other heads, we do not want to close off this theme without mentioning two other miracles performed by Peter. The first, the healing of Aeneas, is notable because the apostle made it crystal clear that he was the mere agent of Another: "Jesus Christ maketh thee whole. Arise and make thy bed" (9:31–34). In the account of the raising of Dorcas we are struck by the close similarity it bears to the Lord's raising of Jairus' daughter. Here, too, the miracles were supporting signs. After each one, it is recorded, many turned to the Lord and believed (9:35–42).

Men and brethren, honored partners with the Lord Jesus in the gospel cause and coworkers with him in extending his church, your exalted Lord lives and rules on high, to bless you and the witness you bear for him personally, through your congregation and pastors, and through your Synod in missions in many parts of our country and in countries abroad.

Another theme running through the Acts, somewhat related to the one just treated, might be worded like this:

III. The Lord enthroned at his Father's right hand guides and shapes all events for the benefit of his Church

A. We point out again and at greater length that he prevented bloody persecution from coming upon his church until he judged the time to be right.

Recall how he used the high regard which the apostles enjoyed among the people after the healing of the cripple to put a tight rein on the murderous intentions of the Sadducees (4:21,22).

Then move on to the dramatic scene in chapter 5. The apostles were handled like common criminals. As such they were thrown into jail. But what a shift took place the next morning after the Sanhedrin had assembled to put them on trial! When the officers reported to the councilors in session that the apostles were missing from prison under the most dumbfounding circumstances, the status of the apostles changed completely. Now they were treated courteously. They were escorted before the Council like men called in for a routine hearing. Why this change in the Sanhedrists? Their own consternation at what might have happened in the prison partly explains the change (5:24). But remember that these were hardened men who could readily shake off the impression that some uncanny supernatural force had been at work to set the apostles free. The deciding factor was fear of what the people might do. "Then went the captain with the officers and brought them without violence; for they feared the people lest they should have been stoned" (5:26).

Even so, this respite would have been short-lived, had not the Lord been in full control of affairs. When the high priest whined that "ye intend to bring this man's blood upon us," Peter told him and his fellow councilors point-blank that they *had* slain Jesus and hanged him on a tree, but that God had exalted him to be a Prince and a Savior, and that through him alone could be had forgiveness of their sins. Then they would have proceeded to murder the apostles out of hand—but for an intervention that was entirely unexpected. God used the counsel of Gamaliel (5:35–39), this Hamlet of the High Council, this master of indecision, of unbelieving, damnable indecision (not a "wise" Gamaliel, and by no means one halfway on the road to faith, as some try to make out)—the Lord used this counsel, we see, to delay the kind of persecution which relentlessly pursues and kills. The Council was persuaded merely to have the apostles beaten and to release them under a renewed injunction to silence (5:40).

B. Finally the Lord let the bloody persecution descend on his church. But then he made it serve the spread of his gospel and his church.

We all know the story of the persecution which resulted in the martyrdom of Stephen (chapters 6 and 7). But note the way in which the exalted Lord moves his wonders to perform! The zealous, aggressive Saul soon headed up this persecution. In his fanatic zeal he did not shrink from murder of the Christians (9:1). Like a wild beast was he, wreaking on the faithful his "righteous indignation" (he thought he was performing an outstanding

service for God). But the more he strove to exterminate the Christians, the more he helped the spread of the gospel and so the increase in the number of believers. “Therefore they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word” (8:4).

As the Christians settled down in various places, they formed the nucleus around which other Christians were gathered.

This was true, first, in Palestine. The persecution brought Philip to Samaria. There the Lord scored a great gospel success through Philip: many of the Samaritans believed (an echo of the Samaritan conversions in our Lord’s ministry on earth—John 4) and even the man who had long held them in his evil spell, Simon, came to the faith (8:5–13).

But it was not only Jews and Samaritans that Jesus, the Administrator and Executor of God’s grace to sinners, had in mind when he turned the work of wicked persecutors to his high and holy purposes. He sent Philip to the Ethiopian treasurer, bringing him to faith in him who as a lamb was led to slaughter for sinners, and so he garnered in the first-fruits of the gentiles.

The extent to which the Jerusalem Christians were dispersed is often overlooked. Perhaps this is so because the facts which complete the picture are not given until chapter 11:19–26. There we hear that the gospel spread beyond Palestine to Phoenicia, Cyprus, Antioch, and Cyrene (in Northern Africa). Though it was purely Jewish mission work that was done by these scattered Christians at first, some Greek-speaking Jews from Cyprus and Cyrene worked among pagan Greeks at Antioch: “And the hand of the Lord was with them; and a great number believed and turned unto the Lord” (11:21).

In all this the Lord was setting the stage for a much more extensive and systematic work among the gentiles.

C. The conversion of Paul is perhaps the most striking demonstration how the Lord of boundless power makes even the most hostile forces work for his ends.

We have already pointed out what a triumph of grace Paul represents. The great apostle himself remained deeply conscious of this grace all his days: “And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, who was before a blasphemer and a persecutor and injurious, but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. *And the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant* with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus” (I Tim. 1:12–14).

But the important point for us in this connection is the radical change in circumstances which Jesus brought about for his church through the conversion of the relentless, ruthless persecutor: “Then had the churches rest throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria and were edified and, walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied” (9:31).

The other pertinent point here is so obvious that a mere recalling of it is enough: The worst enemy and the fiercest persecutor of the church, the one who “made havoc of the church,” became the Lord’s most effective instrument for the greatest outreach of the church, as Paul gratefully records: “I labored more abundantly than they all; yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me” (I Cor. 15:10).

D. Believers have always marveled to see how *the Lord Jesus conditioned his church for full-scale work among the gentiles*.

It took some doing for the Lord to loosen and uproot the prejudice bred into every Jew, a prejudice that had been nurtured for centuries. When the Lord in the vision told Peter regarding the animals in the vessel, both clean and unclean: “Rise, Peter! Kill and eat!” Peter cried out with revulsion, “Not so, Lord!” And this revulsion in his heart extended to the gentiles. Though Peter very likely was not averse to the thought that here and there a non-Jew might be admitted to the church, the idea and prospect of gentiles in any great numbers coming into the family of God was one alien to him.

But the Lord dealt effectively with this inbred pride and prejudice. Gladly Peter went to the house of Cornelius, frankly admitted his former prejudice, told how the Lord had conquered it, and proved his conviction that God is no respecter of persons by preaching the crucified and risen Lord to Cornelius’ household as

fervently as to any audience of Jews. We also refer to the fact that simultaneously with the preparation of Peter for his visit to Cornelius, the all-wise Lord had prepared the Roman captain for Peter and his message (Acts 10).

When Peter returned to Jerusalem, he met with objections from “those of the circumcision.” These were Jewish Christians who held that circumcision was necessary for entrance into the church. They accused Peter of having gone into the homes of the uncircumcised and eating with them, and by such conduct betraying the cause of the church. Now the Lord used Peter to remove the deep-seated prejudice which had blacked out the revelation that the Messiah was to be “a light to lighten the gentiles” as well as “the glory of Thy people Israel.” When they had heard Peter tell of God’s dealing with him and of the faith and the gift of the Holy Spirit which the Lord had bestowed on those gentiles in Caesarea, “they held their peace and glorified God, saying, ‘Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life’” (11:1–18).

In line with this conquest of prejudice is what we hear a little further on. When the tidings of the gospel success among gentiles in Antioch reached the Jerusalem Christians, there was no displeasure and outrage. Rather, it was greeted as a welcome development, and Barnabas was dispatched to assist in the rapidly expanding work. Barnabas, in turn, enlisted the help of Saul (Paul) (11:22–26).

There were to be further struggles with Jewish ceremonial legalism. Paul especially was still to wage a fierce struggle with the Judaizers in Galatia and elsewhere. But the solid groundwork had been done for the Council of Jerusalem. It confirmed the position taken by Peter, Paul, and Barnabas in bringing the gospel to the gentiles and it put its blessing on gentile mission work. So, by and large, even now the church had become a free church, free from the ancient prejudice and legalism which would limit the grace of God both as to the fullness of its comfort and as to those who might share in it. Therefore it was a church free to carry a full gospel, without any ifs and buts attached to it, to new lands and to people considered ineligible and unworthy before.

We cannot refrain from reaching over into Part II of Acts to cite the evidence for this particular point in chapters 13 and 14.

When the Holy Spirit wanted Paul and Barnabas set apart for mission work chiefly among the gentiles, the Christians at Antioch, who were largely Jewish Christians, assented wholeheartedly. Readily they gave up the valued services of Paul and Barnabas for work among the gentiles (13:1–3).

When the missionaries returned from their first journey, these Antioch Christians felt so deeply involved in this work of God’s grace, felt themselves to be partners in it to such an extent, that they could not hear enough of “all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles” (14:26–28—Note especially: “kept on rehearsing or reporting”).

E. We cannot bring this theme to a close without recalling that in several instances *Jesus, the all-powerful Defender of his church, delivered his apostles from what seemed an inevitable death.*

We have heard what happened when infuriated unbelief was on the verge of slaying the apostles. We can well imagine what a blow it would have been to the young church if the High Council would have had its way and all the apostles had been put out of the way. The church would have been left leaderless. But God used Gamaliel’s counsel of expedient waiting to cool the blood-lust of the Sanhedrists (5:33–42).

Moving on to Paul, we remember that twice the Lord saved his special ambassador to the gentiles from a violent death. In the first instance Paul escaped the tight cordon which the Jews had thrown around Damascus when God put into the hearts of the disciples the strategy of lowering him over the wall in a basket (9:23–25). In the second case, the plot of the hellenistic Jews to kill Paul was revealed to him by the Lord. It became known to his fellow Christians in Jerusalem as well. The Lord then gave them the wisdom to escort Saul all the way to Caesarea, for the enemies of Paul and the gospel which he preached would have been quite capable of laying an ambush for the apostle and pouncing upon him along the road (9:28–30).

Though the Lord allowed Herod to kill the apostle James, he foiled Herod’s plan to give the Jews an additional treat by killing Peter. Stronger than the quadruple guard under which Peter was kept and the chains which bound him hand and foot was the unceasing prayer of the church for him. The Lord answered with a mighty deliverance of Peter by the hands of his angel (12:3–19).

How impotent the fiercest enemies of the church were against its Lord, comes out in what follows immediately: When Herod accepted from the people the homage which belongs to God alone, “immediately the angel of the Lord smote him, . . . and he was eaten of worms and gave up the ghost.” And what follows hard on that? This: “But the word of God grew and multiplied” (12:21–24).

What better commentary on Jesus’ promise: “Lo, I am with you always even unto the end of the world,” will you find than the Book of the Acts? We see Him present in the world with His almighty, unlimited power. We behold Him using that power to guide and shape and control events both great and small in such a way that they work out for the progress and welfare of His church. The exalted Lord Jesus in this respect, too, is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Therefore look to Him, you partners in His gospel work. Here let your weariness give way to new energy and zeal, your disappointments to new hopes and new horizons for the gospel work, and your faint-heartedness to new courage. Say to Him, “Lord Jesus, our faithful Helper and Defender, our mighty Champion, lead Thou on!”