

**THE ACTS OF
THE APOSTLES**

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THE APOSTLES**

by

Ellen M. Knox

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PREFACE

The Acts of the Apostles are so rich in variety and interest that they are more frequently studied in schools than any other book of the Bible. Students turn to a historian who is picturesque, accurate, statesmanlike in appreciating vital issues, and clear-sighted enough to keep a just balance between the movement in which he himself is an actor and the other world-movements of his age. And yet, strangely enough, it is in this very wealth and variety that the danger of the study of the Acts lies, for men are tempted to linger, as it were, so long upon the outskirts of the citadel, or beneath its walls, that they fail to find the presence chamber of the King within.

The following lessons are drawn up with a view of leading teachers and pupils, whilst availing themselves of every modern research and accessory, to study the Acts as a whole instead of dwelling upon its exterior and incidental parts. If the student would find the secret of the greatest of all movements he must pass beyond the glamour of the knighthood of St. Peter and St. Paul, the civic problem of a Corinth and an Ephesus, the adventure of a stoning at Lystra and a shipwreck, to

PREFACE

the spiritual power which awakened that knighthood, inspired the character of its leaders and taught the world what Christian love, joy and endurance might be.

In the second place, the lessons strive to show how the men who lived and walked with Jesus understood and applied the first principles of His teaching and acts to the religious and social problems of their day, to the institution of ordinances such as Baptism, the Lord's Supper and the regulation of Church discipline and organization. It is from a right understanding of the power which transformed the first century that the student gains an insight into the power that is transforming the present century, and learns how to grapple with the problems of his own day and generation.

And lastly, the lessons seek to show how these same leaders translated the teaching of Jesus, whether given in parable, paradox or precept, into the spirituality and earnest obedience of their own personal life, a spirituality which found its natural outcome in the active missionary labour of a St. Peter and a St. Paul abroad, and the no less active though quieter service of a Lydia and a Dorcas at home.

The book is intended primarily for the use of the teacher, but secondarily for the use of the pupil also, and has been divided into sections so that facts can be the more easily underlined and paragraphs studied. It has been found that the use of a text book in Scripture teaching lightens the work of note taking, insures accuracy and prepares the way for the elucidation of the chapter taken in connection with it.

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In conclusion, it is only necessary to acknowledge the constant indebtedness of the Author to writers such as Ramsay, Knowling, Rackham, Shaw, Harnack, Conybeare and Howson, the Hastings' Bible, the Expositor's Bible, and very many others whose works are now held to be the classics on this subject and who lead the way not only for the preacher and theological student but also for the more preparatory work of the teacher and scholar.

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HAVERGAL COLLEGE,
October 19th, 1908

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY: THE BOOK AND ITS AUTHOR

The Acts of the Apostles, or “The Gospel of the Holy Ghost,” is a record of the chief historical facts concerning the Church which took place between the years *Anno Domini* 30 and 60.

As the four Gospels tell of the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of the Son of God; so the Gospel of the Holy Ghost tells of the effect of that life, death, and resurrection as it was brought to bear upon the hearts and lives of men.

The Old Testament had told of the settling down of a dark cloud of sin between the world and God, and of the gradual illumination of that cloud as pierced by light from Heaven or lit up by the teaching of the Prophets. The New Testament tells of the enlightening and dispelling of the cloud by the rising of the Sun of Righteousness with healing in His wings.

The Distinction between the Gospels and the Acts

In the Gospels we see the brightness of the visible manifestation of Christ; in the Acts of the Apostles the continued manifestation of Christ, not by His visible presence but by the presence of the Holy Ghost. Throughout the succeeding ages the light of the Holy Spirit has continued, but its progress is not recorded in Holy Writ. We learn of it from human records, or by tracing the work of God's servants in the world around us.

The Gospels concern us more intimately and are more helpful to us than the Acts of the Apostles, in so far as they tell the history of the coming of the living Christ into the world, of His marvellous personality, His words, His acts; they are the record of the manifestation of the Son of God in human flesh. They stand first among all records because they contain the revelation of a personal Saviour, the coming of a mighty power into the world, a power which would change the whole face of human history. But whilst the Gospels stand first as a revelation of God in man, the Acts of the Apostles stand next as a revelation of the same God in man, as also of the way of approach to the invisible Christ. It is true that in some respects the way of approach always has been and always will be the same, whether trodden by the men who saw Christ, as Peter and John, or by the men who had not seen Him, as Moses. It was ever the same path of penitence, faith, and love, the only difference being that those who drew near

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before Christ came, or after He was ascended into the heavens, drew near by faith rather than by sight. It is the revelation of this drawing near by faith through the power of the Holy Spirit which makes the history of the years which immediately succeeded the death of Christ of transcendent importance to us. The Acts of the Apostles, inasmuch as they tell how the great facts of His life, death, and resurrection were translated so that they became a living reality to the men who had not personally seen or known Him, touch us also very closely.

They tell us also how the first preaching of the Gospel influenced and changed the every-day life and character of the early disciples, so that from them we learn how it should influence and change our lives also.

The Acts of the Apostles are of first importance in the world of history, theology, and biography. In history because they tell the story of a decisive crisis in the world, of a time when a great intellectual, spiritual, and moral change began to make itself felt, and they tell this story in a masterly way, from the point of view of a contemporary, one who was himself an actor in the scene.

In theology they are equally important, for they give the effect of the first preaching of the risen Christ upon the Jewish and Gentile world. In biography they stand second only to the Gospels, for they give a life-like sketch of two of the greatest heroes of the Christian faith, men who followed Christ so closely that they marked out, as it were, a path of life for the generations of Christians who came after them.

The Leadership of St. Peter and St. Paul

The Acts of the Apostles might be called the Acts of St. Peter and St. Paul, or the Acts of the Holy Spirit as shown through St. Peter and St. Paul. St. Peter was a man of ready perception, so ready that he opened as with a key the door of everlasting truth, and cried out, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." It was Peter also who first entered the empty tomb of Jesus, and, perceiving somewhat of the import of what he saw, "departed wondering within himself at that which had come to pass." It was Peter who was the first to interpret the meaning of the descent of the Holy Ghost. Peter, again, who opened the door to the Gentiles as he spoke the pregnant words, "I perceive that God is no respecter of persons." The work which Peter began was carried out by Paul, for Paul was a statesman as well as a man of keen spiritual instinct, and he was the first to apprehend the marvellous power of Christianity and the change which it would bring into the world. It was Paul who conceived, and who not only conceived but also carried into effect, the laying of the foundations of the Spiritual Kingdom of Righteousness, Paul who knew that that Kingdom contained within itself elements of power and of greatness which would make it mightier and more far-reaching than the Empire of Rome under which he lived, and which was the world-empire of his day.

The Author of the Acts—St. Luke

All tradition unites in ascribing the authorship of the Acts to St. Luke, although his name is never expressly mentioned as the writer. This testimony is confirmed by the study of the book itself, for the author of the Acts is clearly the same man as the writer of the Gospel of St. Luke. He has the same literary style; he opens his epistle as he opens his Gospel with a preface, and addresses it to the same man, “the most excellent Theophilus,” a convert evidently of high rank among the disciples. He is also a co-worker with, and a lover of St. Paul. He is an eye-witness, for he has been present at many of the scenes which he narrates, and he describes them with an accuracy and a detail which distinguish them from other parts of his writing; as for instance in the closing chapters of the book. These are full of personal touches which could only have been given by one who had himself taken part in what he describes, and contrast in this respect with the earlier chapters, which are comparatively vague and wanting in little touches of detail, the record of what the author has heard and learned rather than of what he himself has seen. Then again, the latter chapters are distinguished by the pronoun “we,” and St. Luke tells of the time when he was with St. Paul, when they were together at Troas and Philippi, when they journeyed from Miletus to Jerusalem and from Jerusalem to Rome. These chapters are so vivid that the reader is carried away by them, and becomes for the time himself a living actor in the

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scene, an eye-witness of all that passes. He is one of the assembly, he hears Paul speak, sees him beckon with his hand, stands beside him on the ship, hears the clank of the iron in the prison at Rome, and watches keenly the effect of his teaching on those who believe the things which are spoken and those who believe them not.

His Nationality and Method

The writer probably is a Gentile, and one who sympathizes with and understands the importance of the revelation of which he is speaking, not only to the Jew but also to the Gentile. This tone runs through the Gospel of St. Luke as well as that of the Acts, for in each book the purpose of the writer is practically the same. He wishes to set forth a clear account of a matter which he holds to be of the first importance, and “to set to” his seal to what is true. He is a witness to that which he most surely believes, and which will be as surely believed by those who read his writings, because they, too, know the facts as to what has been passing around them and will recognize the truth of which he writes. His first desire is to tell of Christ and of the spread of Christianity, but in doing so he desires especially to emphasize the attitude of Christ towards the Gentiles and the attitude of the early Church generally towards the Gentile world. Thus he writes from a wide point of view, from the standpoint of one who sees beyond his day, and as seeing beyond his day welcomes not only the revelation of the Godhead to those who had already received light, but also to the Gentiles who were

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lying in the shadow of death. Thus in the Gospel we see how vividly he narrates the healing of the Gentile widow, the Gentile leper; how carefully he notes that repentance and remission of sins are to be preached among all nations.

In like manner in the Acts of the Apostles he eagerly welcomes the progress of the Gospel as it passes from the Church at Jerusalem to the Church at Galatia and at Rome. He views with as keen an interest the movement of the Church towards the Gentiles and the response of the Gentiles towards Christianity as he had watched the movement of Christ towards the individual Gentile and the reply of the individual Gentile to Christ.

Thus underlying the apparently abrupt transitions of the narrative is a real order and movement. St. Luke is giving in a few master-strokes the effect of the first facts about the foundation of the Church upon the countries of Syria, Asia Minor, and Europe, the first appeal of the Gospel to varying nationalities and types of thought, and he gives together with the appeal the particular response which it evoked, whether that response came from the philosophers of Athens, or the theologians of Jerusalem, or the barbarians of the island of Melita.

His Relation to St. Paul

In the third place we can see from the narrative that St. Luke was the chosen companion of St. Paul, and a co-worker with him in the Gentile world. He writes with the pen of a man of action, one who knows that

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whereof he speaks. The whole narrative is the work of a man who is spending himself as fully upon the future of Christianity, upon the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, as St. Paul himself, and who loves Paul with an intensity beyond all other loves, not only for himself, but still more because of the future of the cause which he represents. From the brief notices it seems that it was St. Luke who stood beside St. Paul and protected him throughout the darkest days of persecution. It was he who watched over the life of the great Apostle with the affectionate reverence of a disciple as well as with the tender care of a physician, and whose writing is the passionate outcome of his soul. He has caught from St. Paul a fire and enthusiasm for Christianity equal only to that of St. Paul himself, so that in the last extremity when the call comes to St. Paul to witness by a martyr's death to the truth which he proclaimed, St. Luke for the sake of Christianity does not deem that sacrifice to have been in vain.

His History

Very little is known as to St. Luke himself. He was probably a Gentile, and, according to tradition, came from Antioch in Syria. He uses Greek idioms in his writings, and has a Grecian accent. His name is only mentioned three times in Scripture:—

“Luke, the beloved physician” (Colossians iv. 4).

“Luke, my fellow labourer” (Philemon 24).

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“Only Luke is with me” (2 Timothy iv. 11).

Three sentences only, three master-strokes only, but strokes which delineate the outlines of a great character; a man whose personal charm attracted all around him; one whose faithfulness endured when that of all others had fallen away; one who by the power of the Holy Spirit laboured side by side and endured with the greatest, the most inexhaustible, the most self-sacrificing hero the world has ever seen.

His Characteristics

There are many little touches in the Gospel of St. Luke and in the Acts of the Apostles which show the writer to be a physician as well as a scholar. St. Luke gives an accurate account of every miracle of healing performed either by Christ or by His disciples; and as he gives them he shows he has a physician's compassion for and understanding of suffering as well as a physician's consideration for all who are weak—for women, children, and slaves. Thus he shows his sympathy for women and his consideration of them by the way in which he speaks of them and by the position which he gives them in the Church. He is careful to narrate any service which they have been able to render to the Church, whether it comes from the hand of a maidservant like Rhoda or from a woman of standing like Lydia at Philippi.

Tradition says that St. Luke was a poet and a painter, and in some of the churches in Italy there are pictures

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shown which are said to have been painted by him. But no authority can be given for this statement; it is a mere tradition. On the other hand, it is quite possible that St. Luke was a painter and a poet; for although his style is abrupt and rugged, yet there are many touches in his writings which show that he had a keen sense of beauty, that he saw every scene with an artist's eye, and that he illuminated what he saw with a poet's thought.

St. Luke, in addition to his compassion and sympathy, was also full of faith and of the spirit of prayer. Throughout his writings we find that he realized the power of prayer, and rejoiced in the expression of the faith which manifests itself in prayer. The whole trend of his spirit is towards love and unity. He exposes self-seeking and covetousness, and shows how it destroys the spirit of unity and love which he is striving to spread upon the earth. It is little wonder, therefore, that Christians of all ages have especially prized the Gospel of St. Luke and the Acts of the Apostles—for they are aglow with a fire of faith and love.

The Title of the Book

This book is always called the Acts of the Apostles, although it might be divided into two parts: Acts i.-xii., the life and works of St. Peter; Acts xiii.-xxviii., the life and works of St. Paul. It passes from the one to the other, as the first and second books of Samuel pass from the story of Samuel to that of David and of Solomon.

*Why Did Jesus Begin to Do, and Yet at
the Same Time Say "It is Finished"?*

Christ had said upon the Cross, "It is finished." It is true that His life-work and His atonement for sin were finished, but the effect of His life-work and atonement were not finished. They were only begun, and would be continued in the Acts of the Apostles and in the acts of His servants in succeeding generations, because they contained within themselves an inexhaustible store of light and truth. There was more light and truth in the concise suggestions which were found in the personal acts and deeds of the living Christ during three years than can be found in the personal acts and deeds of the lives of all other men of all other ages.

The whole life of the Church is a continuation of the life of Christ, because Christ acts through the characters, the words, and the acts of His servants. Hence in whatever service man renders to God, his cry ought to be "not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto Thy name give the praise," because it is the Spirit of Christ Who is working in him to will and to do of His pleasure. All work that is done in the power of Christ and for His sake, whether it be the release of a fellow-man from the leprosy of body or from the leprosy of soul, is a continuation of the vitality and of the very life of Jesus, because the hand which breaks the chain of suffering or of sin which is dragging down a fellow-man derives its power from Christ Himself. Christ in

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the person of His servant continues to take part in the conflict which He began, and which He will continue until the strongholds of sin and of Satan have been forever thrown down and cast away.

CHAPTER II

ACTS I. 1-11

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The Forty Days

The first verses of chapter i. are written in the form of a preface and give the summary of the intercourse which took place between Christ and His disciples during the last forty days. As Elijah had passed from school to school of the sons of the prophets to prepare them for his coming departure, so Christ spent the last 40 days in instructing and preparing the Apostles for the task which was about to be committed to them. Christ knew the need for such preparation, for he understood the weakness and the heaviness of their nature. He had literally borne their griefs and carried their sorrows. He knew also the gravity of the work about to be committed to them. The task which lay before them was the regeneration of the world. Who and what were they to undertake it?

*The Preparation of the Disciples—
I. The Royal Commands*

Christ prepared the disciples in three ways. In the first place He gave commandments as to the nature and order of the spiritual kingdom which they were about to found on earth. He their King would be absent from that kingdom, but they were to witness for Him and to carry out His commands.

When Christ was upon the earth the disciples had been slow of heart to receive and understand His teaching. Would they be able to receive the commands which He was now giving them? The conditions were changed. The disciples who had formerly been slow of heart to understand His teaching had been given power through the gift of the Holy Ghost. After His Resurrection Christ had breathed upon them and had said: "Receive ye the Holy Ghost." They had been made partakers, in a measure, of His Spirit, the Spirit of Wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of Knowledge and of the fear of God. He spake unto them through the Holy Ghost, and through the power of that Holy Ghost they could apprehend the nature of His commands, and could execute His bidding.

Furthermore, He gave them commandment as to their immediate work. They were not to depart from Jerusalem, but were to "wait for the promise of the Father." The natural impulse of the disciples would have been to leave the place which had rejected and

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crucified their Master, and which was ready to persecute them also. Why should they not witness to Christ's Resurrection in cities which had not as yet heard and which might be ready to receive their testimony? But it was in Jerusalem that they were to proclaim the fact of the Resurrection—the place where the witness of that fact could be corroborated by over 500 brethren who had seen Jesus at once. If the fact of the Resurrection were accepted in Jerusalem, where there was abundant power of proof or disproof, it would be accepted by every other kingdom and nation also. Moreover, they were to wait in Jerusalem and to expect the promise of the Father. They might in their zeal have thought that the King's message required haste and been eager to go forth and to bear witness immediately, whilst all men were still speaking of the Crucified and Risen Jesus. But Christ taught them then, and through them teaches us, that all witness is in vain unless it is accompanied by the power of the Holy Ghost, and that the first requisite is to wait for the inspiration and power of that Spirit. "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength."

II. The Proof of the Resurrection

The second preparation was the distinct proof of His Resurrection. Paul spoke truly when he said: "Touching the resurrection of the dead, I am called in question"; for that was to him, as it has been to all disciples, the turning-point of their faith. With the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, it has been truly said, stands or falls the Divinity of Christ; and with the Divinity of Christ stands

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or falls the Christian faith and hope. The disciples must wait until they knew even more certainly that Christ was risen, for to this they must witness before their enemies, who would assail them to the utmost of their power, and therefore Christ, in order to strengthen their faith, appeared to them at intervals for forty days. He showed them His hands and His feet, that He was body and not Spirit only. "A Spirit hath not flesh and bones as ye see Me have." In the second place He showed them that His body partook in larger measure of the spiritual than of the fleshy nature; for He came and went at will, He was circumscribed neither by the laws of time nor of space. This power was used in order to prepare the disciples for His ultimate withdrawal, the suddenness of His appearance and disappearance giving them a consciousness of His spiritual nearness at all times, and preparing them to walk by faith and not by sight. Lastly, the Resurrection as it became more vivid to their spiritual even than to their bodily vision—as, for instance, when "He opened their understanding so that they might understand the Scriptures"—gave them an absolute certainty of His bodily, mental, and spiritual identity—a certainty which could never pass away.

III. The Promise of the Holy Ghost

In the third place He prepared them for the baptism of the Holy Ghost. They had been baptized with the baptism of repentance; that is to say, they had been cleansed from past sin by an act the outward and visible sign of which was water; but now they were to receive

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the indwelling gift of the Holy Spirit, that Spirit of which a foretaste had already been given them, a baptism far exceeding that of John.

The Response of the Disciples

At first sight the attitude of the disciples is disappointing. They were gathered together with Christ for the last time, and it may be that their hearts were heavy with a dim consciousness that God would take away their Master from their head this day. What last request had they to make to Him? What last protestation of faith and of love? They asked that which lay upon their hearts, the great question which they had often asked before, "Lord, wilt Thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" As we hear them speak their words seem so sad, so far away from what they might have been. They had followed Jesus from the first with this hope and expectation, and this thought had been foremost with them, although He had striven to raise their thoughts from the temporal Messiahship to the spiritual kingdom. But does this question really show that they were no further, in anticipation and in understanding, than they had been at first? Was this heritage of longing which they had received from generations of their forefathers, who had waited for the coming of the Messiah and for the establishment of an earthly kingdom of surpassing glory and majesty, still their predominating and only thought? It may have been so, but as we think the matter over we find that there may have been a deeper meaning to their question.

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Why need their King be parted from them? Would he not, even at this eleventh hour, return and reign among them? Could he not again restore the kingdom to Israel? Could he not again turn the hearts of all men to Him, their true and only King? Their question was, after all, practically the same as that which John the Baptist had asked in his prison, as that which we and all who love the Lord Jesus Christ from age to age have asked, and are still asking, either with our lips or dumbly within our hearts—why need the long time of suspense, of doubt, of difficulty, of pain and weariness, of sin and distress still continue? Why need the work of Christ be carried on by such feeble agency and in the midst of so many difficulties? Why will not, why cannot, our Master return and restore again the kingdom to Himself?

The Reply Which Jesus Makes

Jesus answers them and at the same time answers us also. He takes the whole responsibility of the matter into His own hands. He quiets at once the restlessness and the longing. The question of the sin and of the weariness of the world concerns them only in so far as they can feel for it and relieve it. The Father Who has created all, Whose love yearns over all, has the times and the power and the seasons in His own hand. He will bring them forth in His own time, and with them His own peace. Meanwhile He calls upon His followers, whether they are Apostles or whether they are disciples of succeeding generations, in the first place to wait for

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the promise of the Holy Ghost; and, in the second place, to witness first in their own homes and then unto the uttermost parts of the earth.

Jesus promises there will be times and seasons of special refreshment; that is to say, of outpouring of His Holy Spirit. They will come from God at the time known only to Him and in the manner He has chosen. They will be veiled from human eyes. The disciples are to go forward on their way—a clear commission in their hands and an absolute knowledge of the truth which they are witnessing, a truth about to be assailed by the whole force of infidelity. They are to be at rest even as they press forward; for the future, with all its perplexities and apparent impossibilities, is in their Master's hand.

The Great Cloud of Witnesses

Thus Jesus bade them go forth “to the uttermost parts of the earth.” These are His last words. As He stood on the Mount Olivet and looked once more at the world which He was about to leave, we wonder whether the future once again unrolled itself before His eyes; whether He saw passing before Him, as it were in a long, continuous train, His witnesses, His servants, who from age to age and from generation to generation would go forth to minister in His name, until they passed even to the uttermost ends of the earth. Did all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them thus a second time pass before his eyes, but did He see them lighted up with

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the coming glory, His kingdom instead of the kingdom of Satan? As He gazed did the shadows flee away before his eyes—was death swallowed up in victory?

Truth and Light: The Characteristics of the Kingdom of Christ

The inflowing light which is gradually covering the earth is the second great witness of the Resurrection, just as the Divine character, as shown in the life of Christ, is the first and greatest witness of it. If the disciples had spread a lie, if the Resurrection itself had been a lie, then the outcome of untruth must have been untruth. The witness of a lie must have overspread every country into which it came with a cloud of darkness and with a desolation of separation from God. “By their fruits ye shall know them.” Whereas we know that wherever Christ’s heralds have proclaimed that He is God and that He is risen from the dead, a river of the water of life has flowed forth and carried with it the healing of the nations.

The Ascension

His command given, a command which is in itself both a promise and a prophecy, Christ was parted from His disciples. He was lifted up before their eyes, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. The revelation of His glory was seen but for a moment and then passed

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away in mystery and in cloud, and Christ became an unseen but still surrounding presence.

The disciples stood gazing wistfully towards heaven in the vain hope that as He had at other times departed and come again so He would once more appear before their eyes. Their agonized gaze must have been akin to that with which we watch the angel of death take away from us the desire of our eyes. The great question was whether when they knew that He had gone they would, like the sons of the Prophets, go hither and thither to seek Him in the hope that in some mountain or valley He might even yet appear, or sink into hopelessness, feeling paralyzed at the thought that they were left alone to witness in a city and in a world which had rejected Him.

Whilst they were gazing two messengers stood beside them—two angels sent from heaven to witness to them just as they were about to be sent to witness to the world. These angels had no new message which they could give; they did but reiterate the command and the promise of a sure return. They warned the disciples against letting their attitude be one of wonder or of longing, or of attempting to pierce into mysteries mercifully veiled from them. They bade them turn away their eyes and concentrate their thought and energy upon the allotted work. Their Master would one day return and would take account of His servants. He would come as mysteriously and as suddenly as He had gone, and the assurance of this return would be their stay and hope, the secret of their endurance.

CHAPTER III

ACTS I. 13 TO END

THE FALLING OF
THE LOT OF MATTHIAS

The Gathering in the Upper Room

Christ was gone “through the veils of time and space,” “passed into the Holiest Place,” and the disciples had returned filled with awe and wonder to carry the tidings of their Master’s departure to the company assembled together in the upper room awaiting them.

This upper room, according to tradition, was in the house of Mark, and had been for a long time set apart for the use of Jesus and His disciples. It was here that the Passover was said to have been eaten, and here also not long after that the Holy Ghost would be given at Pentecost.

Amongst those who were gathered together were the eleven disciples and Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the brethren of Jesus also. This is the last time that Mary is mentioned in Scripture. She had been blessed among women, but the greatest part of her life-work was now

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over, and we see her for the last time united in prayer and supplication among those who had seen the risen Christ and been witnesses of His resurrection. We see also the brethren of Jesus, the men who had so long doubted His divinity, who had dared to think and to say that He was beside Himself, but who now knew that He was risen from the dead, for He had appeared to James as well as to other of the disciples, and by their presence showed that they were prepared to witness to His power and resurrection.

The Action of Peter

But however many might be gathered together He, to whom each eye had turned, each heart had been uplifted, was no longer in the midst of them. Whither should they go, to whom should they turn for guidance and for aid? It was not the sense of emptiness alone, it was the sense of responsibility also, a responsibility greater than could be borne, intermingling with an even greater sense of loss, and which, if it had not been resisted, might have paralyzed thought and action. But Peter, who from the time of his first call seems to have taken the lead among the disciples, saw that not only the place of his Master but that of the traitor was empty also, and nerving himself he took the first step towards completing the band of disciples, and thus preparing for the coming responsibility. Standing up, therefore, he rehearsed the fate which had befallen Judas, and as the leader, but not as the ruler over the disciples, called upon them to appoint another in his place. We notice

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the change which had passed over the disciples and the way in which they had grown in spiritual understanding even during the few hours which had elapsed since they were with Jesus and had put that last question to Him. We see a spirit of union, of prayer and of supplication, far away from their former attitude, and very far away from the hopelessness which had taken possession of them when they were scattered hither and thither after Jesus had been crucified and for the first time parted from them.

Judas: His Character and His Weakness

Peter tells the story of Judas. His words are few in number, but terrible in signification. Judas had been numbered with the disciples. He had been called to and had taken part in the ministry of Christ, though what the motives were which attracted him to Jesus we cannot tell. Judas seems to have been naturally the ablest of all the disciples, and in some respects the most far-seeing amongst them. He may have recognized the beauty and the power of the character of Christ and have anticipated that He would speedily be recognized and acknowledged as the Messiah of His people. If so, he probably expected that the disciple who now carried the money-bag would obtain the post of greatest power and influence under the new King—might possibly even be the Chancellor of His kingdom. But however great his ambition, so much the greater was the tragedy of his fall. Christ had warned him of his besetting sin of avarice,

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but Judas had despised His words. He deliberately chose the evil and left the good. When at last startled by the realization of his crime, when too late he recognized that Jesus was the Son of God, he came to the Temple and threw down the money as though the very touch of it was hateful to him; but he received scant comfort from those who had been the partners in his sin. "What is that to us? See thou to that." Deserted of man, and, as he believed, deserted of God, he seems to have clung to what was left, to have gathered up the pieces of money and to have bought with them a field, the reward of his iniquity. This field which Judas bought stands as one of the terrible monuments in Scripture of the things for which men have been content to sell their souls. Eve's apple, Esau's mess of pottage, Achan's wedge of gold, the young ruler's riches, Judas's field—all alike the price of a soul. "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?"

Judas: His Reward and His End

Judas received as little comfort from the reward of his iniquity as iniquity ever gives. In a passionate fit of remorse he threw himself over a precipice in the field purchased by the priests with the money returned to them (and thus rhetorically said to be purchased by himself) and died there. It is recorded that he went down "to his own place." Some have thought that this place signified Gehenna; some the place which he deserved, or the one which he had chosen; but whichever it might

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be, it was not the place to which Jesus had called him and to which, if he had been faithful to his Master, he might have been chosen.

As we read the story we cannot help wondering whether, if he had turned even at the last hour, as Peter turned, his most awful sin might have been pardoned; whether Jesus would have had mercy upon him? But Judas did not turn. He probably believed that it was too late, and that there was nothing left for him to do but to destroy himself and to meet his fate.

The spot where he died was shunned by all, and was called *Aceldama* (“the field of blood”)—a field marked out not only by his own blood, but, in a sense, by his Master’s also. In his despair when he realized that Jesus was God, and that the wrath of God must surely fall upon him for his awful betrayal of the Son of God, we find even Judas numbered amongst those who despite themselves have witnessed to the Godhead of Christ.

Matthias Chosen

In the prayer of Peter, when the choice between Joseph and Matthias was about to be made, we see how clearly the disciples realized that Jesus was still spiritually present among them. They spoke to Him as they would have spoken had He been standing in their midst. Peter seems to realize that Jesus lived, loved, understood, just as much at that moment as when He went in and out amongst them. He whose eye had read the thoughts and intents of men when He was upon

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earth would read the hearts of the two men standing before Him and would choose one so that he might be numbered among the disciples and rise to the high hope and calling which had been set before Judas. The lot was cast and fell upon Matthias. This is the last time that the use of the lot is recorded in Scripture. Some have thought that Peter was too impulsive, and should not without clear guidance have sought to fill the vacant place. They believe that it was Paul who was called of God to complete the number of the disciples, and that Peter should have waited God's time, just as the Israelites should have waited for David.

We cannot tell how this may be. There is no record left of Matthias or of his work further than this one mention; but that does not necessarily mean that he was not a chosen servant of God. There are many of God's saints of whose work no record remains save the influence which they have exercised upon their day and generation, and through that generation upon succeeding generations. The life and work of Matthias may one day be found where we would each wish that our life-work might be found also; that is to say, in the Book of Remembrance before God and in the great sum-total of influence for good in the world.

CHAPTER IV

ACTS II. 1-13

THE DAY OF PENTECOST

The Feast of the Passover was the most important of the three great Jewish feasts at which all the males in Israel were commanded to appear before God. The Feast of Pentecost was the second great feast of the old dispensation, and at the period with which we are dealing it was, according to a census taken in the time of Nero, more generally attended by the Jewish people than even the Passover Feast itself. The Jews assembled together not only from Jerusalem and from the surrounding districts, but also from the outlying provinces of the Empire. Two causes contributed to the popularity of this feast. In the first place it was more convenient for those who laboured on the land to come to Jerusalem when their work was completed, and they could rejoice in the consciousness of an ingathered harvest; in the second place Pentecost (the Feast of Weeks), being seven weeks later than the Feast of the Passover, the season of navigation was further advanced and it was easier for the Jews from the west to come by sea to Jerusalem.

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The Feast of Pentecost

At the commencement of the harvest, the second day of the Passover, a sheaf of ripe corn was always cut from the field and brought to the temple and waved in it as the first fruit of the coming ingathering. This wave-sheaf was not accompanied by any sin-offering because it prefigured Christ the first-fruit of the Resurrection, for whom no sin offering could be made, because He was without sin.

On the day of Pentecost (Gk. *Pente*) seven weeks later, when the harvest was completed, two wave-loaves, prepared from the best wheat of the country and baked in the temple itself, were offered, accompanied by a sin-offering of seven lambs, one young bullock and two rams. This feast was an expression of national gratitude, a joyful acknowledgment of the completed harvest; but it prefigured also the final ingathering of souls redeemed by the blood of Christ and by the outpouring of His spirit. The sin-offering was for all, for all alike had sinned and come short of the glory of God.

Besides the thanksgiving for the harvest of wheat and the looking forward to the final harvest of souls there was a commemoration also of the redemption of the children of Israel from the land of Judaea, so that there was a threefold meaning in the Feast of the Pentecost.

Pentecost and Sinai

According to Jewish tradition the Feast of Pentecost was the time not only of the feast of ingathering but also for the remembrance of the giving of the law upon Mount Sinai. That law had been accompanied by earthquake and fire as well as by the whirlwind, and the law then given, although Divine and instinct with power and purity, was written only upon stone; whereas the new law, which was to come, like the still small voice to Elijah, after the earthquake and the lightning, was to be written on the table of the heart. The giving of this second law brought no destruction with it. It was itself life, and as life it entered into and controlled the outcome of the heart, finding expression not only in the thoughts and words, but also in the whole life of the recipient. It is not probable that the disciples understood, until long after, the full bearing of either of these aspects of the Day of Pentecost. It was comparatively easy to see the connection between the ingathering of the harvest of wheat and the ingathering of the harvest of souls, but the connection between “the rushing mighty wind” of Pentecost and “the thunderings and lightnings” of Mount Sinai was not so clearly manifest until they saw how the old dispensation was fulfilled in the new, and the laws given upon Mount Sinai were illuminated by the light and teaching of the Holy Spirit.

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The Waiting Disciples

During the preceding day bands of pilgrims from all quarters had gathered in Jerusalem. They came up with joy and gladness, for this was the one great festival in which public peace and thank-offerings were offered for the whole nation. The city at this time was in the full beauty of early summer, and as the pilgrims approached the end of their journey and looked towards the glistening towers of the Temple a glow of joy and of religious patriotism must have arisen in every heart on the Day of Pentecost. The disciples had probably joined in the early service of the Temple, but had now withdrawn, and were waiting in the upper room in prayer and supplication. Christ, the first-fruits of the Resurrection, had, like the Passover sheaf, been given back to them, and they were waiting in the hope that God would hear their prayer and would grant, together with the ingathering of the harvest of wheat, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the longed-for ingathering of the harvest of souls also.

The Descent of the Spirit

Their prayer was heard; whilst the service was still in progress, most probably during the time of the offering of the wave-lambs and the wave-bread, the sound of a rushing mighty wind was heard all over Jerusalem

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which centred and circled around the house where the disciples were gathered together.

Whilst the disciples were listening in awe-struck wonder the room in which they were sitting was suddenly illuminated by a glowing sheet of fire. This fiery cloud or sheet was cloven, and seemed to be like tongues of fire which separated the one from the other and alighted upon the heads of the disciples.

“The fires that rushed on Sinai down
In sudden torrents dread,
Now gently light, a glorious crown,
On every sainted head.”

“OUT OF THE FULNESS OF THE HEART THE MOUTH SPEAKETH.”

These cloven tongues were typical of the new breath or Spirit which had descended from God and which, being cloven or distributed, were about to enter into the hearts of the disciples and to become part of their very life, even of themselves. In the beginning God the Creator had breathed into man a first breath of life; in the fulness of time God the Redeemer had renewed life by conquering death; and now in these latter days God the Sanctifier had breathed upon the world a newer and yet fuller life. This life was symbolized by glowing tongues of fire, a sign of the power which was about to be given, for the tongue, being set on fire of the Spirit, would glow with enthusiasm and life, and be used of God to kindle a like fire and enthusiasm in the hearts of others also.

As fire purifies and destroys evil, so the Spirit of God would purify and cleanse the hearts of men; and

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as fire is the symbol of life and of energy, so the Holy Spirit would fill the hearts of the disciples with a zeal and God-given energy which would enable them for their work.

The First Results

The new life which descended upon the disciples took entire possession of them. They were carried away by the Spirit, and as in old time “holy men of old spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost,” so the disciples in like manner on this Day of Pentecost spake as they were moved, and one after another proclaimed the glad tidings not only in their own tongue but even in tongues which they did not before understand, so that each man heard in his own vernacular the wonderful words of life.

The Gathering of the Multitude

It is generally thought that as soon as the disciples had received the gift of the Holy Spirit they went up to the Temple to return thanks to God, and that either in Solomon’s porch or in the great gathering place outside the Temple the scene which is recorded in the amphitheatre took place. An old writer says that it seemed as if a rushing mighty wind like a great bell from heaven had summoned men from every part of Jerusalem to come together and know what this thing may be. It was a strange and representative crowd that was gathered together. For hundreds of years the

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Jews had been dispersed into almost every part of the Roman Empire, and among the number of those who had been carried away or who went away of their own free will were many who in their heart had remained true to the Jewish faith, truer even than the dwellers in Jerusalem themselves. A great number of these men came up from time to time to the annual feasts from the most distant parts of the Empire. They were the Jews of the Dispersion, a dispersion rightly regarded as a punishment for sin, but by the mercy of God turned into a blessing not only to the Jews themselves but also to the Gentiles; for just as these Jews by coming into contact with other men and other thoughts were more ready than the Jews of Jerusalem for the newer and wider conception of the relationship between God and man, so too the Gentiles amongst whom they settled were brought into contact with the teaching of the Synagogue and thus prepared for the coming of the Gospel.

The Scene in Solomon's Porch

The whole crowd was filled with amazement. They saw before them a band of people, for the most part rude and unlettered, united in an outcry of joy and thanksgiving to God. Everyone who listened, to his amazement, heard in his own language words of joy and thanksgiving, even though he could not fully understand what this joy and thanksgiving meant. He knew by the dress and bearing of the men that they were Galileans, but how could Galileans speak in foreign

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tongues and utter words which could be understood without an interpreter? When we remember from what a wide area this multitude was gathered together we cannot wonder at their astonishment. They came from the East, West, North, and South. From the East, where dwelt the Parthians, Medes, and Elamites—that is to say, a remnant of the Jews which had been carried away into Babylon, as well as a remnant of the ten tribes; from the West, the strangers of Rome; from the North, descendants of the company which Antiochus the Great had exported into Galatia and Phrygia, and who had now become a powerful and wealthy people; from the nearer West, men of the great Colony of Cyprus; and from the South, especially from Egypt and Alexandria, men of learning and position.

The first effect of the gift of tongues was one of pure amazement and astonishment upon all who had heard it. This gift of tongues stands, as it were, mid-way in the history of the world between the dispersion of tongues in Babel and the gathering together in one of the great multitudes which is prophesied in the Book of Revelation. The effect of Babel was the confusion, after which it was named, and the scattering apart of men from one another upon earth; the effect of Pentecost was amazement. It was different also in its consequences; it was followed, not by a scattering of the nations as at Babel, but by a gathering together, a union of peace and love, foreshadowing the perfect union of the hereafter when the servants of God will unite in one common song of praise to “Him Who sitteth upon the throne and unto the Lamb.”

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The men who listened were divided then, as now, into two great classes. There are always those who mock and who are ready to ascribe anything which they do not understand to sin, and there are those who seek to find out the truth of the phenomena which they witness and who ask what these things mean.

The Meaning of the Gift of Pentecost

We find in the Old Testament that the gift of the Spirit seems sometimes to have been an abiding presence within a man: sometimes a power which descended for a time and was, as it were, without the man—that is to say, the Spirit rested upon and endued the man with strength, but if he were not obedient to the will of God would too soon pass away. Thus the Spirit fell upon Samson and gave him an arm of strength; upon Balaam and enabled him to see visions of God; upon Saul, and, despite his natural incapacity for religion, nerved him to carry out the will of God. But the gift of Pentecost seems to have been given in fuller and more abiding measure and to have been an indwelling such as we find in the case of Moses and other of the Old Testament saints of God. We see that it was lasting and enduring, that it became the very life of the men who received it; that they were changed in character, were ennobled, strengthened. It is true they were still men of like passions with ourselves, they had still the natural qualifications and limitations of their characters. They were liable to frailty and even to sin; but they were

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changed men, and their lives showed that they had been taught of God.

How Far Was the Gift of Tongues Permanent?

It is not clear how far the gift of tongues, which was the peculiar manifestation of the Spirit upon the Day of Pentecost, remained permanently with the disciples. We find that St. Paul says that he had the power to speak with more tongues than any of his fellow disciples, and we conclude that this power was given to him as to the other early converts. We find, too, that at Lystra he seems to have spoken without difficulty in the tongue of the people. Ramsay says that although Greek was generally understood by the Jews of the Dispersion, there is no question but that St. Paul must have spoken to the common people wherever he went in their own tongue. The question is one, therefore, which cannot be answered. It is probable that, like the gift of healing, the gift of tongues rested in large measure upon the disciples in order to fit them for the exceedingly difficult work which they were called upon to do.

The Effect of the Spirit upon the Character of the Disciple

Whether the peculiar aptitude of speech passed away or not there is no question that the other great manifestation, the change of character, remained permanently with the disciples. The spirit of their

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teaching was changed, and the men who received the Holy Ghost from that time forward began to speak with the courage of their Master. The tongue which in its natural state is, as St. James says, “set on fire of hell” and “full of deadly poison” became, when set on fire of heaven, full of grace and truth, and being full of grace and truth the Christian’s greatest weapon in his warfare against sin. The Christian has been told to put up his sword into its sheath, but he has been commissioned to speak words of wisdom, love, and consolation—words which are mighty even to the pulling down of the strongholds of sin.

CHAPTER V

ACTS II. 14-40

ST. PETER'S SERMON

Whilst all men were lost in amazement at the wonders of the Day of Pentecost, the disciples themselves probably echoed in their hearts somewhat of the cry which they heard around them, "What meaneth this?"—when Peter, who was ever the first to apprehend the things of God, unlocked, as it were, the door which barred the way to their understanding, and lifting up his voice interpreted the matter, and spoke words which marked one of the great turning-points in his own spiritual life. Otherwise how would he, who had joined with the disciples in asking Christ but ten days before whether He would not restore again the kingdom to Israel, have suddenly, as it were, recognized the spiritual nature of the kingdom of righteousness? How otherwise would he have seen the whole purpose of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ lie open before him? How have shown so great a change of character as well as understanding? Until now Peter had been so easily swayed by the multitude, so ready to take the impressions of all around him; but he now

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stands up, and in the very town and in the face of the multitude who had cried “Crucify Him! crucify Him!” dares single-handed and alone to arraign them as the murderers of his Master, and to charge them with the murder of the Son of God.

The Sermon of St. Peter

He begins with words of quiet calm and conviction. He forces them to withdraw the charge that they have made by bidding them remember how impossible it was that such a thing could be. They knew themselves that the Jews, especially on the Day of Pentecost, when engaged at one of the most solemn festivals of the year, could not and would not be drunken at the third hour of the day. Then with a swift turn, as they become conscious of their injustice, he gives them the true explanation, speaking not in his own words but in the words and by the authority of the Scriptures themselves.

The Prophecy of Joel

Peter points out that the events which have just taken place are but the fulfilment of prophecy, and quotes the words of the prophet Joel. The whole multitude is suddenly hushed. What may this thing be? Is this outpouring of the Spirit indeed a fulfilment of prophecy, a drawing near of God to them? Joel had been writing about the judgment of locusts which, at his intercession, had been removed from the land, and he had turned

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the thoughts of the people away from judgment to the future mercy and promises of God. He had given one of the broad outline visions which are so frequently met with in the Old Testament, and in which we seem to stand upon some mountain top and see unrolled before our eyes, in the light of a glorious sunset, a great and mysterious landscape—a landscape in which the sea and mountains, clouds, and glory, are in the far distance blurred and mingled into one glorious whole.

This is the prophecy which Peter quotes, and as he speaks the people stand amazed; the first part of the verse has unquestionably just come true—the sons and daughters have prophesied and God has poured out of His Spirit upon all flesh. The question which each man is asking is, Will the rest of the words come true also? Are signs and wonders about to show themselves in the heaven above and in the earth beneath? Will the sun be turned into fire and the moon into blood? Is the great and notable day of the Lord at hand? If so, what does this wonderful word of promise mean? Is it true that whosoever shall call upon the Name of the Lord shall be saved? Whilst they are thus silent with amazement, with apprehension, and with wonder, he makes another swift turn and brings their thoughts back from the future and in upon themselves.

The Miracles of Jesus and the Miracle of Pentecost

The miracle that has just taken place is in its nature akin to those miracles of love and wonder which Jesus,

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Whom they had known and seen, and Whom they had just crucified, had been working in their midst. They see now that the miracles of Jesus are the miracles of the Son of God, Whom they have taken and by wicked hands have crucified and slain. They stand powerless and undone. They cannot undo their deed; nor can they prevent the end of the world, which is coming and in which they must answer for their deed. Then when the sky is dark with thunder and with clouds Peter gives a ray of hope. It is true that they cannot frustrate the purpose of God any more than by their crucifixion of Jesus they were able to frustrate His mercy and His purpose towards them. He has burst the bonds of death, He has ascended into heaven. He is there, and His ascension is proved in the same way that the gift of Pentecost has been proved. His death and ascension have been foretold as surely in their very Scriptures as the passage which he has just narrated.

The Prophecy of David

Peter then applies the words of David as swiftly and as suddenly as he had applied those of Joel. David foresaw that Christ would burst the bonds of death; He could not be holden of it. "His soul was not left in hell, neither His flesh did see corruption." David spoke of Christ and of no one else; for if he had spoken of himself his tomb, still containing his body, would have contradicted his words; whereas the tomb of Christ, with the stone rolled away and empty, is a witness

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of the Resurrection. They have the testimony of the empty tomb and the testimony of their own senses also. They know two things; they know that the risen Jesus has been seen by very many of their own number, and they know that He must have ascended because He has poured out this gift of tongues of which they see the effects before their very eyes. Then he gives a sudden personal application such as he had given at the close of the quotation from Joel. David, like Joel, bids them beware that Jesus is about to make His foes His footstool. Who are His foes? Let all the house of Israel know assuredly that the Jesus Whom they have crucified is that Jesus Who is sitting on the right hand of God, Who as Lord and Christ is waiting until they, His foes, are brought beneath His feet.

The Call to Repentance

We see the vast multitude shaken physically by what they have seen, and spiritually by what they have heard; they stand convicted. They are pricked to the heart and beside themselves with fear. Each man is brought before the judgment-seat of his own conscience and he cries, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" Like Christian when he rushed from the City of Destruction, he is filled with one thought and one thought only—the way of escape. The Holy Spirit has been moving upon the audience, and has accompanied with power the words of Peter.

The Ingathering

We can almost see the vast multitude as Peter passes up and down amongst them. They are cut to the heart at the thought that they have crucified the Lord of Glory, and Peter sees their anguish and exhorts them with many words to save themselves from this untoward generation. As he speaks great numbers gladly receive his word and are baptized, and the same day there are added to the Lord three thousand souls.

The Preaching of Christ and of St. Peter

As we consider the effect produced by this sermon of St. Peter upon the multitude we cannot help wondering, when Jesus was preaching upon earth, why a like conviction of sin and a like understanding of the nature of sin and of the true position of the soul before God did not take possession of the multitude of that time also. The answer is found in the words of Christ Himself. "It is expedient for you that I go away." When Christ was upon earth He deliberately let His words fall only where He would. He called unto Himself whom He would, and at times He turned away and left the multitude just when they seemed as though they were about to believe and to understand His words. But now all is changed; He has burst the gates of hell and of death, and has ascended up to heaven. He has opened the gate of life and outpoured the gift of life upon men.

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It is through this new life that Peter is speaking and convicting his hearers so that they have turned to God and repented of their sin.

The Message of St. Peter

Peter, like John the Baptist and like the prophets of old, calls on all to repent; but he follows the call with a promise fuller than they were able to give. He bids men not only repent, but also be baptized in the Name of Christ and receive from Him the remission of sins. He tells them that the chain which holds them down may be broken, that they may receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, that they may arise and walk. For them the dark cloud of guilt and of death may be for ever rolled away. They may, if they will, belong not to the number of those who must bend beneath the footstool of God's throne, but to the number who will receive the word of welcome and will stand at the right hand of their Master for ever. Peter foretells even more than this, for he is carried further still by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and prophesies that the promise is not only to those who hear him but also to their children and to all that are afar off "even to as many as our God shall call."

Did Peter realize the full significance of his words? Probably not, for it was not until after he had fallen into a trance and seen the heavens opened that he realized that the promise was indeed to all that were afar off, and that God was no respecter of persons, but that Jew and Gentile alike would hear and respond to His call. At

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dawn on the Day of Pentecost there were one hundred and twenty men and women who were the avowed followers of Christ, but when the day closed other three thousand souls had been added to the Church. All this had come to pass through the outpouring of the gift of the Holy Spirit; but it had come to pass in part also, under God, through the instrumentality of St. Peter. How had Peter been prepared to do so great a work? How was he able on the impulse of the moment to interpret the signs of the times and by the light of the Scriptures to point the great multitude to Christ? The Spirit in which we meet a great crisis is not the outcome of that crisis itself. It is the outcome of daily events, of daily smaller crises that have occurred in our lives, and which, according as we have met them, have made us what we are when the decisive moment comes. Peter spoke, no doubt, under the direct inspiration of the Holy Ghost, but he spoke also under the influence of the teaching of our Lord and out of his three years' intercourse with Him. Jesus had, day by day, taught His disciples out of the Scriptures and interpreted their meaning. Thus Peter was able to call to mind the Scriptures and to understand the signification which might otherwise have been veiled from him.

Encouragement to Workers

There is encouragement in this for all who labour in God's vineyard, for all who strive to teach the Scriptures to children or to those who seem to understand so little and to be far away in heart from Him. "My word shall

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not return unto Me void.” The words learned, precept upon precept and line upon line, may seem like the seed sown upon the stony ground; but when that ground is broken up and watered by the dew of heaven, the seed will spring up and bring forth fruit, some thirty-fold, some sixty-fold, some an hundred-fold.

CHAPTER VI

ACTS II. 41 TO III. 3

THE APOSTLES' DOCTRINE AND FELLOWSHIP

Let There Be Light

Three thousand souls had been added to the Church, three thousand men and women, touched by the Spirit of God, had been convicted of sin and had repented and turned to Christ, but, although called to follow Christ, they as yet knew little about Him, understood little of the meaning of the change which had passed over them. If they had been left to themselves they might have wandered back to their old homes, some, perhaps, to far distant provinces of the Roman Empire, and drifted away into error and indifference, and the glorious dawn of Christianity been overshadowed by clouds and darkness. But the apostles who had themselves been taught and led of Christ were now prepared, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to lead and teach others also, and we read that the converts “continued

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steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread and in prayers." We can almost see the apostles and the one hundred and twenty men and women who had been praying together in the upper room passing up and down among the converts, and we can hear them tell in glowing words the story of their Master Jesus; we can hear them reveal that which formerly they did not themselves understand, which had been hidden because of the hardness of their hearts, but was now manifest through the power of the Holy Spirit. They could tell as none other of His marvellous personality, His compassion, and long-suffering. They had witnessed His miracles of healing and of love; they had been in the garden of Gethsemane; had stood at the foot of the Cross; had seen His empty tomb; had heard Him say, "It is I, be not afraid"; they had been told by the angels that He Who had been taken from them would come again in like manner as they had seen Him go into heaven. What would we have not given to have been among the number of the converts, to have heard the story from the lips of the apostles also.

The Fellowship of the Disciples

The words of the disciples were exemplified by their lives. If we turn from an account of the Court of Rome at this period—from the record of the lives of the Roman citizens and nobles, with their selfishness, bloodthirstiness, and pride—to the fellowship of the disciples, to the love and unity amongst them, we see how marked the contrast was between them and the

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men of their day and generation. The life of holiness and communion with God, of peace and goodwill towards one another, must have attracted the multitude and helped them to understand the recital of the words and deeds of Jesus, and to keep them true to the faith which they confessed; but for this there would have been a great temptation, after the first impression of Peter's speech had passed away, to go back to the old life and to leave a faith which demanded everything from them.

They knew that Christ had not where to lay His head, that persecution and death had for ever dogged His steps, and that He Himself had foretold that the shadow of the Cross which had fallen upon Him would fall upon them also, and that shadow had already fallen. The temper of the multitude was as hostile towards them as it had been towards Jesus, how could they face that multitude, how bear the persecution and death which lay before them? If they looked towards earth they would only be drawn back again, but if they looked towards Heaven the thought of pain and persecution would be swallowed up in victory. We seem to feel a breath of Heaven passing over earth in a time of marvellous teaching, communion and fellowship, when all the followers of Jesus were joined in the love feast, partook of the memorials of their Master's death, and saw the deeds which the apostles were enabled to work through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Unity in Prayer

This foretaste of Heaven upon earth gave a simplicity of faith and a realization of the immanence of Christ, which has been an inspiration to all succeeding generations. They turned to Christ as readily for guidance and help as for pardon for their sins; “Lord, show whether of these two thou hast chosen,” “Lord, behold their threatenings,” “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”

They realized the immediate presence of their Master and turned to Him not only for pardon, but also for guidance and help. The new converts were taught by the disciples to pray, they were brought by them into the same beauty of holiness, they came into the presence chamber of the Master Himself, they learnt from the disciples the secret of prayer—a secret which enabled Stephen to see Jesus in place of his persecutors and to say: “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”

The Community of Goods

A further teaching of the true character of love was given in the manner in which they “had all things common.” From what we find in the following chapter of the Acts it seems as though this community of goods was not so much what we understand by Socialism as an idealization of the thought of stewardship. Jesus had throughout His life emphasized this sense of

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stewardship, not only by His words, but also by His teaching and actions. He gave to every man according as he had need, He fed the multitude, He healed the sick, Himself He had not where to lay His head. This was the attitude which the Christians were learning to show towards their worldly possessions. They were stewards over them as well as over the mysteries of Christ. They knew that they had to follow their Master's example and to give account to Him for all He had entrusted to their hands.

When we come to think how many men and women were thus suddenly withdrawn from their former surroundings and occupied for the most part in learning the Christian faith, we can see that a great sacrifice of money and goods was necessary on the part of the wealthier converts, a selling of possessions and goods and a parting of them to all men as every man had need, if those who were poor were to have opportunity for learning the Gospel also. This was possibly not as strange to them as it might be to the Christian of to-day, for they lived in an atmosphere of immediate anticipation of the return of Christ, and in that anticipation gathered together "daily with one accord in the Temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God, and having favour with all the people." By thus following in the footsteps of Christ they attracted others to the faith, "and the Lord added to the Church daily such as should be saved."