

Notes on Acts 1–10

By Grant Thorpe

Available at

<http://www.corobaptist.org.au>

The following notes may be copied and distributed freely if they are acknowledged and not used for profit.

Chapter one

Jesus had spoken many things about the kingdom before his death. Now he was clearly alive and still speaking about the reign of God. His death had not been a lapse in the reign of God but its central point. Now, Jesus commanded his disciples by the Holy Spirit, but asked them to wait for the Spirit to baptise them, so forming his people as a holy temple and with him among them as the heavenly Lord. This is the way the people of God would live between the going and the coming again of Christ. In one sense, the majesty of Christ's ascent into heaven was not in his going but in the Spirit he would shortly send.

There were things about the kingdom and its timing, especially in regard to Israel's restoration, that the apostles were not permitted to know. Such details would not be necessary to them. The disciples waited for the Spirit, as Jesus required. They had one intent. They were not diverted into sleep as in Gethemane, or arguing about their greatness, but eager in anticipation for the fulfilment of Christ's promise. Their confidence that everything was in full flow is seen in their replacing Judas. 'He has gone to his place, but let someone else step in to carry straight on.' The criteria they employed shows that they knew that their task was to bear witness to Jesus living among them, from his baptism to resurrection. This had been the revelation of God to the world.

Prayer

Thanks be to you, our Father, for sending your beloved Son, whose coming among us has been the revelation of yourself. Thanks be to you too Father, that your Son has not left us as orphans but come to us in the coming of the Spirit and that we await his coming to fulfil all things necessary to your reign in the world. May we live this day in the confidence that we too are about your business and that you will lead us by your Spirit. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

Chapter two

The apostles could never have calculated or produced the effect created by the coming of the Spirit. They found themselves proclaiming the wonderful works of God to Jews from far and near. Jesus had promised that when the Spirit came the Apostles would bear witness to him. They would have the witness in themselves so that they could no more deny Christ than they could deny their own existence. Now, they had authority, zeal, opportunity, potency, and especially, the understanding provided by the love of the Spirit. Israel would be without excuse because the declaration of the coming of their Messiah was now made known with power.

Notes on Acts 1–10

The meaning of the event could only be known through prophecies given to Israel. God had told Joel that, even though Israel had been devastated by a plague of locusts, God would come to restore them and pour out his Spirit on them. This grace of God had now happened. Israel had fallen into a terrible condition but God had come to restore her. Her condition was revealed by their killing their own Messiah, God's Son. They stood under God's judgment. But now, God's grace had been revealed by raising Jesus from the dead. Jesus had defeated death not just cheated it.

David's Psalm about being saved from death could not refer to David for, in the end, he did die. Rather, it applied to the Son who was promised to David. This meant he was Israel's true King. Because David had died, he could not remain the hope for Israel. He had been prophesying about Jesus who was now alive and enthroned beside God as Lord of all nations. It was he who had poured out the Spirit to bless Israel.

What could Israel do? They were caught in terrible sin and God had acted to reverse their deed. Where did they stand? God graciously gave them the gift of changing their mind, of being joined to this Christ whom they had rejected, and receiving forgiveness and the gift of this Spirit. This promise was addressed to them (and also to others whom the Lord would call in the future, Gentile people). They should get out of the terrible evil Israel had fallen into. Many did so, and the miraculous community of the church was born, a community who knew they lived by every word that God spoke and who loved one another freely.

Prayer

Gracious Father, we worship you because you have turned the awful crime of killing Christ into a message of mercy for all nations. Now, we live in the day of your Spirit, poured out. Your saving acts are being declared and received. We rejoice in your Son whom you raised up. We thank you that he is reigning to give the grace of forgiveness and gift of the Spirit to all who will hear. Grant now, that we, your church, may devote ourselves to your word and to one another in kindly deeds, for the sake of your glory. Amen.

Chapter three

The healing of the cripple could not be hidden in a corner: the man and his healing were well known. Just as clear was the way Peter said 'Look at us', and 'what I do have I give to you'. He directed the man to himself and what he had. But then, just as clearly, publicly disowned responsibility for the event: 'Why do you gaze at us?' and he turned the population to Jesus.

Israel had killed the Holy One sent by God to be their Prince of life. The God they thought they worshipped had raised up Jesus, and here he was, still, doing good deeds among them. The grace of God could not have been more thoroughly demonstrated. Their killing of Christ had been done ignorantly, and had been anticipated by the prophets. God had not sent his Son ignorant of what would happen to him but so that, through their murdering him and God raising him up, they would repent. There was still time for refreshing for Israel and still the hope of them receiving a full inheritance when Christ returned. They were still the people of the word of God and his promises and could now begin to listen to him, by receiving the

Notes on Acts 1–10

good news of Jesus. The Abrahamic blessing would be released for the whole world through their turning to their Messiah.

Prayer

Dear Father, your Son is our Prince of Life, though we killed him. By him, you have turned us from being enemies to being your beloved sons and daughters. We thank you for the life which now flows in your church and for the signs and wonders that Christ continues to work in the earth. Grant that we your people may turn from all thought of personal power or piety for you are now giving us our life through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

We look to you for the refreshing you have for us in the present and for the inheritance of a creation filled with the knowledge of yourself. Grant that we may see the works you wish to do today and glorify your son Jesus. May the world see and hear what we have because of your gift. Lord, hear our prayer through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Chapter four

With many believing in Christ, and a message of resurrection gaining strength, the political leaders, especially the Sadducees who did not believe in a resurrection, sought to repress the apostles. They could not allow such a teaching to spread for it altered everything and destroyed their own power. The immediate question for the authorities was how the sick man at the temple had been cured. This was what was causing the public to take such notice of the message.

Jesus had told the Apostles that they would be hated and arrested and brought to trial, so that there could be a witness before the authorities to his reign. Peter kept directly to the matter in hand: they were in jail because someone had been healed, and this had been done by Jesus, raised from the dead. For the third time, Peter accused them of killing Christ. 'But he is the author of life and God has raised him from the dead. There is salvation in his name'. Jesus had come 'in the name of the Lord' as indicated in Psalm 118. The nations had hated him but God had established him, and established him for the benefit of all his people. Like Israel before him, what man rejected, God had established as central, not just to the apostles but to the whole world and its salvation.

The authorities had reasons for the Apostles to stop, political reasons. The Apostles had better reasons not to stop. They feared God and they were witnesses of Christ's reign. If Christ was Lord and the future of the world depended on this, they could not be quiet.

The Apostles did not derive their strength from popularity but sought the presence of Almighty God to sustain them. The entire world may fight against God's Christ but they were assured that its rage would come to naught.

So, the new community was established, not only a community of powerful witness but of great generosity amongst themselves. The very nature of God was being formed in his people and this was a powerful part of their proclamation. Jesus said that by our love for one another we would be known as his disciples. What made things difficult for the authorities were not just the miracle and public opinion but the boldness of these men and their love for God and one another.

Prayer

Father may your works be done in us today. We do not desire to have a life other than the life of your risen Christ for he has conquered death and brought life and love and joy and peace to us who believe. Grant that we, together with your whole holy church may be kept vibrant in witness and not be dismayed by the intensity of those who oppose us, or perhaps, ignore us. Grant this for the sake of your son Jesus Christ. Amen.

Chapter Five

Believers were willing to part with part of their inheritance so the whole church could move forward in love. Annanias and Saphira wanted to appear to be part of this community and pretended that their partial gift was total. Peter saw that Satan had filled their hearts. They were testing the Spirit; would the Spirit endure their chosen behaviour? But the Spirit had tested them. Under this reign of the Holy Spirit, the church was kept holy. Only those whom the Spirit joined to this body of people dared join themselves to them. Great power was with them to heal and bear witness to Jesus Christ.

For a second time now the Apostles were arrested, and this time, imprisoned over night. The agenda of the world represented by Israel and the agenda of God represented by the angel of the Lord were in sharp conflict. God would have his word broadcast and commanded the apostles to announce all the words of this life. When brought before the authorities again, but carefully now because of public opinion, the apostles were more direct than previously. 'We must obey God rather than men. God has exalted Christ as Prince and Saviour.' Christ was the one in charge and had given Israel opportunity to change its mind and receive the forgiveness of sins. The apostles knew that, as they bore witness, so did the Holy Spirit.

Why Gamaliel advised the Council to take care is unclear. Perhaps he had begun to fear that the message of Jesus Christ was in fact the message of God. Or, perhaps he just feared the people and could see the political consequences if Israel acted too severely. The Apostles received a flogging but rejoiced that they were so linked to the name of Christ that they could suffer for him.

Prayer

Father in the name of Jesus Christ, you have poured out your Holy Spirit to make a holy people. Sanctify your church. Sanctify us now. Grant that we may be part of your holy people in all truth. Grant too that we may be willing to suffer for your sake and consider it a joy that we are one with your Son. Father, you have made Christ a Prince and a Saviour. Grant that his saving word may be clearly heard and received in faith. Amen.

Chapter Six

The church had quickly recognised the needs of its members and the need to provide for them. In this practical setting, the church's first recorded dispute arose. Would the distinctions between Jew and Gentile that were so powerful in the world now come into play in the church?

Notes on Acts 1–10

How the apostles dealt with this is very significant. First, they knew they must not be diverted from a ministry of the word and prayer. Apart from this there would be no life for the church, no gospel. They also saw the need for this task to be administered by people who are full of the Spirit and wisdom, or full of faith and the Holy Spirit, or in the case of Stephen, full of grace and power, or full of wisdom and the Spirit (vv. 3, 5, 8, 10). The significance of this passage is not simply that they continued as a caring community but that the source of this community was the Spirit of God, the grace of God, the power of God and the faith and wisdom of its leaders who believed in this message.

As this practical ministry continued, Stephen in particular became known and had opportunity to speak boldly of the message that had formed this vibrant community. Some who had consciously chosen Judaism could not bear to see their chosen faith being shown up by this new life and had to resort to lies to bring a charge before the official leaders of Judaism.

Prayer

Father, grant that we may have today all that is necessary for daily life in this world. We confess that inequalities and cultural pressures that support them have sometimes caused us to be resentful. Grant that we may not be embittered by these things. Grant too that we may do what we can to provide for the needs of others. Keep our hearts warm and generous in the gospel. Fill us with your Spirit and with grace and wisdom. May your power be upon us and upon your whole church that together we may always bear witness to your saving grace in this present world, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Chapter Seven

Stephen's defence is given at length and it is helpful to see the things that were on his mind as he stood trial for his life. They were certainly not the things that would have secured his own release. He may have remembered the word of Christ that we should not think beforehand what we are to say. This was not a planned defence but an outpouring of the things that the Spirit of God had written on his heart.

The God of glory had appeared and so Israel had been formed. They had been promised an inheritance. Stephen emphasised that it was God, by his mercy and interventions, who had brought their fathers to their land. From the beginning, Israel as a whole had opposed and hated God's messengers, as the patriarchs had done to Joseph. Now they had killed Jesus, the Author of life.

God had stood by Joseph and by Moses (vv. 35–36). Moses was raised up by God for Israel's salvation and had been rejected from the beginning. At the foot of Mt. Sinai, they preferred what they had made with their own hands (vs. 41). While being sustained by God in a wilderness, they were more interested in idols that they brought with them from Egypt than in God who had saved them.

Israel's false faith was threatened by a gospel that did not require continuation of the temple system. Stephen now came to this matter and showed the true nature of the temple God had given them. Its pattern was revealed to Moses. It was established after God had freed them from their enemies. It came through David who sought for

Notes on Acts 1–10

a place to locate it. It was built by Solomon who acknowledged that a temple could not house God. Isaiah reminded Israel of this. God showed that he was larger than the institutions by which he had revealed himself.

These Israelites were keen to maintain the formality of outward circumcision, but God had commanded true circumcision of the heart. This had happened in Christ (Col. 2:11) and which would come to them through faith in him. But they were resisting the Holy Spirit as Israel had always done. They had not received but murdered their Messiah and they had not kept the law.

While their anger broke loose, Stephen's heart was set free to see the glory of God, and Christ at his right hand, and so he died with the same cry on his lips as Christ when he was killed. All the words that had proceeded from Stephen's mouth were in fact nothing other than the outpouring of the grace of Christ upon Israel, although they could not see this. Saul was standing there and the work of God had begun in his life.

Prayer

Father, you search our hearts to know what is true in us. What is true is that we have always fought you. But it is also true that you have loved us and pursued us and brought us to faith in the mercy revealed in your Son, and so we worship you in spirit and in truth. Lead us by your Spirit into all the truth. Have mercy on all who oppose you and grant that we may be free of love of this world so as to portray your truth to those for whom we are witnesses, for the sake of Christ your Son. Amen.

Chapter Eight

The triumph of Stephen in his death aroused the full anger of Saul, the Pharisee. Perhaps this was what he referred to later when he said, 'that he would not know what envy was unless the Scripture had said you should not covet what belongs to your neighbour'. How could Stephen be so sure of his relationship with God? Paul was stirred to jealousy and made plans to utterly destroy the Christian faith.

Christ as Lord and the Spirit as Lord assured the going on of the gospel. Philip in particular, perhaps sensing that the fields were white to harvest (as in John 4), went to Samaria, and Christ was revealed through his ministry as in the days when Jesus was in Israel. People heard the word of Christ, believed the word of Christ and were baptised. But with all this, they did not receive the Spirit. The Spirit moves as he wills. He did not come until the apostles arrived from Jerusalem. In this way, the unity of the church was assured. The apostles fully acknowledged and participated in the coming of the Spirit to the Samaritan people. They were one with those to whom the Spirit had come on the day of Pentecost.

The grace filled ministry of Philip stands in sharp contrast with the desire for power in Simon. The apostle Peter left him in no doubt that he would have to change his ways. Now the work of John and Peter opened out into other Samaritan villages. The work of Philip also continued. All this was under the direction of the Holy Spirit.

Notes on Acts 1–10

We know little about the eunuch from the Ethiopian queen's court. He had been a worshipper of God; he visited Jerusalem, and now, was moved by the revelation of Isaiah 53. He received this as a prophecy and a proclamation of Jesus Christ who Philip proclaimed to him. He knew Christ had died for his sins and was eager to be baptised. We may assume that the Spirit of God also came on him and that a work of God began where he lived, but we have no clear idea of what happened.

Prayer

Father, we thank you that through Jesus Christ, established as Lord, you enable the proclamation of the gospel, even in the presence of its enemies. Grant that we may be led by your Spirit, may be freed from the desire of control and power and walk in the delight of your Servant and Son Jesus Christ who made himself an offering for our sins. May healing come to the nations, according to your promise, through the proclamation of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Chapter Nine

Judaism had drifted so far from God that Saul could get letters from their leaders authorising the arrest of Christians. This would have turned Damascus synagogues into a secret police and Jerusalem into a repressive regime. Saul had all the marks of a desperado. Such hostility was no match for the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

When Jesus appeared, Saul called him Lord before he knew who he was. When he knew that he was Jesus, his life was totally altered. He was blind and had no interest in eating or drinking for the three days, until the Lord completed what he had begun in him. The same Lord appeared to Ananias so that, through him, Saul would receive the Holy Spirit and be joined to Christ and to his holy church, and to the sufferings that would be especially his in that fellowship. Paul now preached in the synagogues that Jesus was God's Son, or the Christ. This was so effective that he had to escape from the web he had helped to weave.

The Apostles back in Jerusalem were understandably hesitant to receive Saul. Barnabas, the encourager, introduced him there. In this way, Paul's ministry to Jerusalem began. Quickly, his work drew fire from the same group who had stirred up trouble against Stephen, so, for a second time he had to make a hasty exit from a city. The church felt it best to send him back to his home city. It appears he was content to stay there for thirteen years, or at least, we do not hear of him for the next thirteen years. The church in Galilee and Samaria and Judea made good progress under the fear of Christ and the comfort of the Holy Spirit.

The story returns to Peter now moving out from Jerusalem. His apostolic ministry, the ministry of the word and prayer, was needed in the wider church. Two healings occurred, both of which revealed the saving reign of Christ and drew people to him. Peter worked the first of these miracles unsolicited. The second opportunity arose because the church sensed that it was important for Peter to come. With all of this growth in the church, it is understandable that Peter stayed there many days.

Prayer

Lord, we thank you for the gracious ministry of your apostles. Through them, you have shown us that the church depends wholly on Christ and the Spirit. Through them, we know that you have provided for us to live in your blessing and as a holy community. Grant that we too may fulfil the ministry that you have appointed for us. Grant that we may see the works you are doing now. May the grace and power of Christ be revealed again, for his name's sake. Amen.

Chapter Ten

The gospel was now established in Jewish and Samaritan territory. Now, the bigger jump of bringing the gospel to Gentiles was about to occur. God prepared the way by summoning a Gentile into action. God did not need to call a devout man, but the fact that he was so made his turning to Christ more difficult for Jews to reject. Already, the prayers and gifts of Cornelius had ascended to God as if he was a member of the covenant community. God had always worked outside of his own apparatus and was no respecter of persons. Cornelius' worship was already like the new Christian worship that would be offered (Matt 26:13; Phil. 4:18; Heb. 6:10).

God further prepared the way for Gentile proclamation by a vision given to Peter. It was God himself and not the Jewish culture that sanctified anything. Jewish worship had been given by God. It was a preparation for what was to come. Now that Christ had come, Peter had to move outside of what was familiar to him and flow with all that the Spirit was about among the nations.

Cornelius was awed by what had happened. Peter would not accept his veneration and entered the room as a fellow creature concerned with the actions of God. So, the two men shared their stories. In the light of this clear intervention by God, Peter had no hesitation in proclaiming the gospel to this Gentile family, just as he had preached it to Jews.

So, this man whose conscience had been alerted by God, together with his friends, heard the message of peace through Christ who is Lord of all. He already knew that Jesus had come with power and by the Spirit. Peter told them that the Jews had killed their Messiah, that God had raised him from the dead. This Christ, said Peter, has been appointed Judge of the living and the dead. Those who believe in Him according to the prophetic word will receive the forgiveness of sins.

God again took the initiative and poured out His Spirit on these believing people. Peter knew that they were part of the church and baptised them. So the prayer of Jesus Christ that the church be one was fulfilled. The Spirit had come in Jerusalem and in Samaria, and now, the same Spirit, with the same gift of tongues, had been poured out on the Gentiles.

Prayer

Father, may your Spirit direct us today as He has always guided your holy church, that through us the good news of Jesus Christ may be announced to all whose hearts you have prepared. Amaze us again; Father, as the broadness of your love gathers in the harvest of those who will worship you in spirit and in truth. We ask this in Jesus name. Amen.