

## A SHOCKING DISCOVERY

I suspect that many would consider it shocking to hear me say that the gospel of our salvation cannot be found in the first 12 chapters of Acts. It is common knowledge in churches that reject covenant theology that the church began in Acts 2. If you ask most “run of the mill” dispensationalists, they will gladly proclaim the Jewish feast of Pentecost in Acts 2 as “the birthday of the church.”

Would it be reasonable to expect that shortly after the birth of the church the historical account would soon record the message of the gospel of our salvation? And since Acts 2-12 include several very detailed sermons by very prominent leaders of the Acts 2 movement, sermons directed toward those not in that movement, wouldn't we expect our Gospel to be shared?

But from Acts 1-12 (the focus of this lesson), *the gospel of our salvation is not found*. This doesn't mean that you cannot find bits and pieces of “things that are similar” to our gospel. Some of these similar things would be the centrality of Jesus Christ, the foundation of His death, burial, and resurrection, and the exclusivity of finding salvation in Christ alone. But what you *do not find* is a message about the good news of the cross, and God using the work of the cross as the basis for a grace-gift of immediate salvation of the individual. That is, nothing like Ephesians 2:8-9 is found in Acts 1-12.

There *is* a gospel in Acts 1-12, but it is a gospel of *works*, of the *law*. It is a national gospel rather than individual. It is a continuation of the prophetic message to Israel found in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is a call to repentance in order to receive covenantal promises. And all that is *very different* from the gospel we share.

## GOSPEL PASSAGES IN ACTS 1-12

It is equally shocking to many to see that the *last question* asked by the eleven before Jesus was ascended is this, **wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?** (Acts 1:6). This question lets us know that after a forty-day teaching marathon in which Jesus was **speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God** (Acts 1:3), the Apostles had a *kingdom mindset* that was *wholly earth-bound*. If the standard modern view of the kingdom is held, then this is either massive ineptitude of the Apostles or a colossal failure of teaching on the part of Jesus. A better option is that *the Apostles understood exactly what Jesus taught* and therefore had an expectation of the restoration of the kingdom to Israel. It is noteworthy that Jesus did not correct the assumptions of their question, but simply told them that they were not going to be privy to information on the timing of the restoration of the kingdom.

I propose this idea to you: *the message of Acts 1-12 is a message of good news about the restoration of the kingdom to Israel*. I believe that if you test this hypothesis through these chapters, you will find it to be accurate.

Acts 1:8 is familiar to many believers as a form of the so-called *Great Commission*. In this passage, Jesus tells the eleven that that **shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth**. The phrase **witnesses unto me** is key. The apostles will go forth preaching *the identity of Jesus as the Messiah*, and that message would be the heart of their gospel. The ability to proclaim the identity of Jesus as the Christ was so important to the message that shortly after the ascension the apostolic criteria for the replacement of Judas was a thorough personal experience with Jesus **beginning from the baptism of John, unto that same day that he was taken up from us** (Acts 1:22). I believe that you will find that in the sharing of the kingdom Gospel there is tremendous emphasis on

proving Jesus as *the Christ* (see Acts 2:36, for example). In sharing the gospel of grace, however, the emphasis is on the completed work of Jesus Christ.

It is furthermore worthy to note that the activity of Acts 1-12 is heavily affected by *the fulfillment of prophecy*. See Acts 1:16 and 2:16, for example. Compare this with Ephesians 3:3 (and following) that show that *prophecy* is not part of *mystery*, and that our gospel is *fully mystery*.

There are at least five times in Acts 1-12 in which calling on the name of the Lord is a requirement for the salvation being offered (2:12, 8:35, 37, 9:15, 22). But to *call* is, by nature, a work, something done *of yourself*, and the gospel of grace is **not of yourselves, it is the gift of God** (Eph. 2:8).

When Peter gives his great day of Pentecost sermon, he shares *nothing* that speaks of the gospel of grace. His focus was on the fulfillment of the prophetic message that God would **raise up Christ to sit on his throne** (Acts 2:30). In contrast to this goal, Christ is now **by the right hand of God exalted** (Acts 2:33) and will be there **Until I make thy foes thy footstool** (Acts 2:35).

The crowd's response to Peter's sermon is also an important aid in understanding *which gospel was being proclaimed*. When the crowd asked **what shall we do?** (Acts 2:37) Peter famously replied, **Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins** (Acts 2:38). His answer failed to involve grace and clearly involved works. I don't think we can be satisfied with explanations that try to make grace and faith "assumed in the answer," especially if we are going to take this as *the first sermon of the church age*, as so many run-of-the-mill dispensationalists do. Note that in Acts 10:38 Peter also **commanded** those in Cornelius' household **to be baptized**.

Another important factor in the Acts 1-12 gospel is that *one had to be called into it*. This is so clear in the text that many dispensationalists are also Calvinists. When the gospel is confused, Calvinism is one of the perversions that results. Acts 2:39 says that the salvation being offered would be given to **as many as the Lord our God shall call**. It is hard to build a gospel for all out of a gospel offered only to those whom **the Lord our God shall call**.

Continuing, we find that this early assembly was both Torah observant and led by Torah observant men. To be *free from the law* would have been a foreign and highly offensive position. Note Acts 2:46, 3:1, 5:12, 20, 21, 25, and 42. In each of these passages the assembly is meeting *in the Temple*. But to do so one not only had to be Jewish, but also had to be observant. Furthermore, in Acts 6:13 it was said that a **false witness** had gone forth saying that Stephen had been speaking **blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law**. Since Scripture refers to this allegation as **false**, then we must assume that Stephen was law-abiding and teaching others to do so. Add to this that Peter was kosher many years after Pentecost (Acts 11:8) and that Ananias, who met Saul immediately after his Damascus road experience was **a devout man according to the law** (Acts 22:12), it becomes impossible to prove Biblically the fanciful idea that the early assembly considered themselves saved by grace through faith without works.

In the gospel of our salvation, the death of Jesus Christ is *good news* for the lost. Virtually all of our gospel tracts and evangelistic sermons present His death in such light. But in the second recorded sermon of Peter, he recounts the death of Jesus as *bad news* for which the hearers should be ashamed and for which they should repent (Acts 3:13-15, see also Acts 5:30). Should we revise our tracts to present the sinner as guilty of crucifying our Lord? Or should we *rightly divide the gospel* and recognize it as *good news* in the manner presented in 2 Corinthians 5:21 and other Pauline passages?

Surely, one may ask, Peter preached our gospel of grace to Cornelius in Acts 10? But you will search Peter's sermon in the Cornelius household in vain to find an Ephesians 2:8-9 message. Rather you will hear Peter proclaim, that **in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him** (Acts 10:35). Under what circumstances can grace-alone be concluded from such words?

I think that the best conclusion is that *the gospel must be rightly divided* and that *the gospel of grace has not been revealed at the close of Acts 12*.