

Thoughts on Acts One

Commencement is a word often used at graduations from High School and College. Many think it ends the formal education required to enter the business or professional world. Leaving High School soon finds each person engaged in starting something new, a job or higher education. At some point, it becomes apparent that the commencement exercises were not a celebration of an ending but a celebration of the beginning of the next stage in life. In many respects, Jesus' last words to His disciples and ascension represent their "graduation" and the commencement into the next portion of the work Jesus has planned for them.

Most commentators and teachers point to Luke's comments in Acts Verses 1 and 2. *"The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when He was taken up to heaven, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen"* (Acts 1:1-2). The main point made is the things Jesus began as described in the gospel account. That point is important, but the orders (note that these are not suggestions) to the apostles mark the beginning of their work without Jesus being physically present with them. His "orders," given in broad terms, were *"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth"* (Acts 1:8). Refinements and details of their instruction would be given as they grew bolder in proclaiming the gospel to the world.

Luke records the ascension of Jesus to heaven but does not mention all the details of what happens in the spiritual realm of God's presence. We find some of those details in Paul's letters (Ephesians 1:20-23); (Philippians 2:9-11) and; (Hebrews 1:3, 2:9). As for those who witnessed the ascension, they returned to Jerusalem to prepare for the Holy Spirit and the beginning of their work to spread the knowledge of Christ. God's plan called for 12 men to be apostles, ambassadors of the King, to spread the gospel. Judas was dead, so only 11 men met with others who had remained together since the crucifixion. Those others include the women, Jesus's mother, and His brothers that gather continually in the upper room in Jerusalem for prayer (1:12-14). It seems that the resurrection had finally convinced Jesus's brothers that he was the Messiah. The size of this gathering is noteworthy since we often think only of the few women and the apostles there were *"about one hundred and twenty persons there together"* (Acts 1:15).

Luke reports the need and replacement of Judas in (Acts 1:15-26). Even with the prophetic scriptures and Jesus' own words, that one among them would betray Him, it must have been an agonizing experience to choose Judas' replacement. The selection conditions indicate that more than the 12 followed Jesus during His earthly travels. *"It is necessary that of the men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us—beginning with the baptism of John until the day that He was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection"* (Acts 1:21-22). Of those meeting the criteria, Matthias was chosen. It might appear that the decision was a simple chance, a toss of a coin, as some would say. But the assembly concentrated on praying and seeking God's guidance in making this selection. *"These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer"* (Acts 1:14).

The casting of lots to determine the selection of the twelfth apostle is the last time this process is mentioned in scripture. The Old Testament method of asking God questions that could be answered yes or no seems to have been used until the Holy Spirit descended. The disciple's prayer for help

choosing Judas' replacement shows they had not received the Spirit's gift of discernment, knowing people's hearts. "And they prayed and said, 'You, Lord, who know the hearts of all men, show which one of these two You have chosen'" (Acts 1:24). After the events described in Acts 2, the Spirit led disciples in making decisions. The Spirit worked through the apostles to make the intent of the heart known. After the apostles had completed the written revelation, the scriptures allowed people to compare the actions and words of people to the acceptable will of God. Before the Gospel of Christ, God's will was only partially revealed to determine issues. But now, the Bible gives us the information and requirements to make decisions. As Paul reminds Timothy, "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). We do not need to cast lots to determine right from wrong, good from evil, or even to appoint elders and deacons in the church.

Do we use the scriptures to help us make daily decisions?