

Sermon 2, The Kingdom's Progress, Acts 8:1-15

Proposition: Flying over the terrain of Acts, we see that the book is about the reign of Christ through His Spirit, over His opponents and all nations, and the vindication of that reign in front of earthly rulers.

- I. The Reign of Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit, 1:1-2:47¹
- II. The Reign of Christ the Lord Over Rising Opposition, 3:1-8:3
- III. The Reign of Christ the Lord Over Outcasts and Enemies, 8:4-9:31
 - A. Samaria
 - B. Ethiopian Eunuch
 - C. Saul
- IV. The Reign of Christ the Lord Over All Nations, 9:32-12:25
 - A. Peter Preaches Christ in Lydda, Joppa, to Cornelius and his Household
 - B. The Jewish-Gentile Church in Antioch Is Established
 - C. Peter Is Rescued from “King” Herod Agrippa I and his Prison
- V. The Reign of Christ the Lord Proclaimed to the Nations: Part 1, 13:1-16:5
 - A. Commission in Antioch, 13:1-3
 - B. Ministry in Cyprus, Pisidia, Lycaonia, 13:4-14:20
 - C. Nurturing the Churches, 14:21-28
 - D. Evaluation in Jerusalem, 15:1-16:5
- VI. The Reign of Christ the Lord Proclaimed to the Nations: Part 2, 16:6-21:36
 - A. Commission in Troas, 16:6-10
 - B. Ministry in Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth, Ephesus, 16:11-19:41
 - C. Nurturing the Churches, 20:1-21:14
 - D. Evaluation in Jerusalem, 21:15-36
- VII. The Reign of Christ the Lord Vindicated Before the Rulers, 21:37-28:31
 - A. Trial Before the Crowd in Jerusalem, 21-22
 - B. Trial Before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, 23
 - C. Trial Before Felix in Caesarea, 24
 - D. Trial Before Festus and Herod Agrippa II in Caesarea, 25
 - E. Final Meeting with Jewish leaders in Rome, 28

Introduction

Most of you have heard the parable about the king who wanted a map so accurate that it had to be the same size as his whole country. Well, brothers and sisters, in one sense that is what I give you when I preach week-by-week through a book of the Bible. It is my desire to magnify the text, to show it at greater than full size, indeed to expand upon it and draw out its implications. I

¹ This outline is taken from Alan J. Thompson, *The Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus* (Downers Grove/Leicester: IVP/Apollo, 2011), 69-70

have reason to believe that you all appreciate how I do that. But the downside to that approach is that it can be hard to see the big picture. Today, then, we are going to look at a map that is much smaller than the text of Acts. Of course, for that very reason we won't be able to see the details. But I hope that looking at Alan Thompson's powerfully constructed outline will show that Acts is indeed about the reign of Christ, in relation to the Spirit, the church, the nations, and the rulers. Jesus reigns over all these things. Acts confirms the certainty of that for us.

I. The Reign of Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit, 1:1-2:47

The opening two chapters of the book set up the rest of it. As we saw last week, the disciples looked for a restoration of the Kingdom of God using an OT vocabulary. They were hoping to see some kind of geopolitical Kingdom set up. And then Jesus effectively told them "No. You're the Kingdom. You will get the Spirit, and in His power you will reboot the Kingdom of God."

Whoa. But then, after choosing another apostle (it was essential to be ready for the coming of the Spirit; don't expect the Spirit to do what you need to have people in place to do!), the disciples experienced the coming of the Spirit. It was beyond glorious. Jesus may have come with no fanfare to a peasant girl in a stable, but that is not how the Spirit came. Wind, fire, tongues, power — all of that and more accompanied the Spirit, who came on the feast 50 days after Passover. Peter explains it as the fulfillment of prophecy — and so it is. Through the Spirit, people of every tribe, language, tongue and nation can now have a king who speaks their language. The day of distant imperial overlords who don't speak your language and know nothing of how you live is gone. The Kingdom of Jesus is here, and it is a Kingdom in which God keeps His promise of resurrection life, first of all to His Son Jesus and then to everyone who repents and believes in Jesus.

Anyway, right away we see the power of the Spirit in bringing people to Jesus. Once the Spirit comes, 3000 people join 120. That is what you call spectacular growth. That is 2000% in a single day. That is the work of the Spirit. He comes and the church flourishes.

II. The Reign of Christ the Lord Over Rising Opposition, 3:1-8:3

Of course, the flourishing of the church attracts a lot of hostile attention, then and now. I've told you that at least one university in China will no longer grant a diploma to any student seen participating in Christian organizations. In a society as obsessed with status as the Chinese are, that is a stunningly brutal punishment. Well, similarly, it doesn't take long before the apostles get in trouble with the Jerusalem authorities and are called on the carpet for preaching. That is the first stage of the opposition. In case you missed what the opposition is about, Luke explains how the disciples at this stage turned to Psalm 2, with its depiction of the nations raging against the LORD and against His Christ. That, say the Christians (and surely Luke agrees with them) is the underlying dynamic here. The reign of Christ is under attack by civil authorities because nothing has changed. The judges of the earth have no desire to submit to Christ's rule, and so they stand against it with all their might. Again, it's about the Kingdom! The Kingdom of Christ is not in vogue with the principalities and powers. It never has been, and it never will be. So this opposition from outside stands against the reign of Christ. Meanwhile, Ananias and Sapphira bring opposition to Christ's rule from inside the church. They have no desire to submit to His

commands about telling the truth and being humble. They would rather lie and be proud of what they didn't give to the church.

The second major threat against the church from the inside is division over charitable work; this is countered by the election of deacons to head up the ministry of giving. This is something to pray about for our own church. We desperately need deacons in this congregation. Is God calling you to serve in that office? The church was weak without them.

Finally, in this section we see the reign of Christ challenged by the attempt to silence Stephen by piling rocks on him. But though they succeed in killing him, they can't do it before he gives a ringing testimony to Christ's reign at the right hand of the Father. The Son of Man standing at the right hand of God — Stephen saw Him. Though they could stone him for it, they couldn't make him un-see it. Christ rules even over opposition, within the church and outside. You can be sure that He is in fact at the right hand of God, ruling. You can be sure of this even though good men like Stephen are killed for saying so. The church can't be killed, because her Lord knows the way out of the grave.

III. The The Reign of Christ the Lord Over Outcasts and Enemies, 8:4-9:31

Well, the next section highlights the victorious reign of Christ even over those who were once far off or downright hostile.

A. Samaria

Thus, Philip preaches in Samaria, the home of the Samaritans who separated from mainstream Judaism long before. The reign of Christ comes even to outcasts.

B. Ethiopian Eunuch

It comes to those far away, too — the eunuch who served the Kandak of the Ethiopians, for instance.

C. Saul

And it comes to Saul. This is the first of the three accounts detailing his conversion in these pages. All of them emphasize the reign of Christ over people who want to be His enemies and stand against Him. Christ ruled over Simon Magus. He ruled over Saul of Tarsus.

IV. The Reign of Christ the Lord Over All Nations, 9:32-12:25

And in fact, He not only reigns despite opposition and over those long separated from His people. He also reigns over the nations. Thus (though we won't treat each of these in detail) we see that the Kingdom expands to Gentiles. Paul may be the apostle to the Gentiles, but Peter was the one to take the good news to Cornelius. This, in turn, leads to the establishment of the church in Antioch — one of the most important churches in Eastern Christianity, and the place from which Paul was later sent out to continue the spread of the Kingdom. Also, the Kingdom of Christ triumphs over the kingdom of Herod as Peter is liberated by supernatural means and brought back to his home church! Already, then, the gospel is spreading beyond the borders of Israel, particularly into Lebanon and Syria.

A. Peter Preaches Christ in Lydda, Joppa, to Cornelius and his Household

B. The Jewish-Gentile Church in Antioch Is Established

C. Peter Is Rescued from "King" Herod Agrippa I and his Prison

V. The Reign of Christ the Lord Proclaimed to the Nations: Part 1, 13:1-16:5

Next comes the famous “missionary journeys” sections of Acts. As Thompson points out, these tell roughly the same story twice: commissioning at an established church, then ministry throughout Asia Minor/Greece, and then a section on nurturing and strengthening the churches planted. Both conclude with an evaluation in Jerusalem. The first evaluation takes the form of the Jerusalem Council, where the question of whether circumcision and the rest of the Levitical practices are necessary for salvation is answered with a resounding “No” — thus opening the church further toward Gentiles and spreading the reign of Christ that much farther.

A. Commission in Antioch, 13:1-3

B. Ministry in Cyprus, Pisidia, Lycaonia, 13:4-14:20

C. Nurturing the Churches, 14:21-28

D. Evaluation in Jerusalem, 15:1-16:5

VI. The Reign of Christ the Lord Proclaimed to the Nations: Part 2, 16:6-21:36

The second of these sections tells a similar story, only instead of the evaluation taking place within a council of apostles and elders, the evaluation instead takes place before a hostile crowd in Jerusalem. Once again, we see the theme of the word leaving Jerusalem. Like Jesus, Paul feels compelled to go up to Jerusalem. There, too, he meets his doom — not a noble martyrdom, but a foolish riot based on a misunderstanding of the gospel. The evaluation is negative, but it is not an evaluation by Christians. It is an evaluation by Jews. They determine that Paul’s theology is incompatible with Judaism, even though he is as much a Jew as they.

This third quarter of Acts once again shows the spread of the Kingdom, as the rule of Christ moves farther and farther even as it is more and more under attack in Jerusalem itself.

A. Commission in Troas, 16:6-10

B. Ministry in Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth, Ephesus, 16:11-19:41

C. Nurturing the Churches, 20:1-21:14

D. Evaluation in Jerusalem, 21:15-36

VII. The Reign of Christ the Lord Vindicated Before the Rulers, 21:37-28:31

The final quarter of the book of Acts contains the accounts of four trials. None of them is exactly successful for Paul, in that he rarely converts anyone and does not manage to get released. On the other hand, he has the opportunity to testify to Christ in all kinds of places — and the consistent testimony of the rulers is not “Wow! We want to be Christians” (that would be a little hard to believe, anyway) but “It would appear that there is nothing illegal about being a Christian.” Hardly a ringing endorsement, but on the other hand, maybe if the civil rulers really love something it may not be the kind of thing you want to embrace heart and soul anyway. The point is that the reign of Christ is not a political power on the same plane as the kingdoms of the earth. You can be a Christian and a Roman. And Paul was both.

A. Trial Before the Crowd in Jerusalem, 21-22

B. Trial Before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, 23

C. Trial Before Felix in Caesarea, 24

D. Trial Before Festus and Herod Agrippa II in Caesarea, 25

E. Final Meeting with Jewish leaders in Rome, 28

So as we continue looking at Acts together, the question emerges: Are you ready to submit to the reign of Christ? Do you want to further that reign by submitting to it yourself? Do you pray for it to spread? Do you believe that Jesus is for all nations, on His terms (not on the terms of your nation, as the Jews who believed in Jesus had to learn over the course of Acts)? Brothers and sisters, we are the ones through whom Jesus reigns. Are you ready for that? Like it or not, you are part of the Jesus administration. You have the Spirit. You have the word. You have the apostles' books. In fact, you're already doing it. So stay in the fight. Keep on worshipping Jesus and submitting to His reign when it looks like He's not really in charge. Acts shows us over and over that even when things aren't going right for us servants of the Kingdom here on earth, the King is alive, well, and ruling for His glory and our good. Trust Him on that. Amen.