

Understanding Jesus' Resurrection through the Lens of the Book of Acts (#2)

By Bob Young

The Jesus Story Is to Be Told

I am restudying Acts—seeking perspective, insights. I want to understand the gospel, the good news of Jesus, the story of the resurrection from the perspective of the early church. This study is based on my study of Acts 1-8. I will pass over many details of those chapters. I mentioned some of them briefly last week. Pentecost, the church, conflict with the Jewish leaders, suffering, Ananias-Sapphira, following Jesus is costly; Stephen—the sentence, the sermon, the stoning; the scattering spreads the gospel far and wide.

Why this study? The Sunday the world identifies as Easter Sunday is coming. People are already anticipating, some are involved in self-denial efforts, churches are making plans. What was Easter like in the early church? The word does not appear in the New Testament (although there is a mistranslation in some English versions in Acts 12.)

This study, at this time, in this season, because the first steps one takes in following Jesus, the first steps of obedience, are a response to and a commitment to live out the Easter story in one's own life. How do we do that? What is it about the Jesus story?

Study #2, the story of Jesus, what happened in the life of the early church?

A first truth, in the teaching and preaching of the early church, the Jesus story was a death and life story. A second truth—the story is to be told! In this lesson, we show how the early church lived out this second truth. We will study a few chapters from Acts, right at the beginning of Acts, Acts 1-8. I will not list the multiplied Scriptures throughout the New Testament that speak to the need to tell the story. (In a longer sermon, numerous Scriptures would be expanded. The notes here are abbreviated.)

- In Acts 2, on the day of Pentecost, the story was told.
- In Acts 3, Peter told the story to those who had seen the crippled man healed. This is, as it were, the second gospel sermon.
- In Acts 4, Peter and John and the apostles were proclaiming Jesus and the resurrection from the dead. When they were commanded not to speak, their response was that they could not help themselves! What would happen in the contemporary church if we could not help ourselves, could not keep from speaking the good news of Jesus? They rejoiced to have the opportunity to speak, and they prayed for even more boldness. This boldness was given to the believers by the Spirit. But it is the apostles to this point that are mentioned as testifying publicly to Jesus' resurrection, perhaps because they are the only "witnesses" available.
- In Acts 5, we again hear apostolic preaching, because it was the apostles who were arrested. But they were miraculously released, they returned to proclaiming Jesus and the resurrection that makes possible new life. Peter and the other apostles responded (v. 29), the apostles were flogged, and rejoiced to be counted worthy of proclaiming. 5:42 appears to refer to the apostles.
- In Acts 6, the apostles chose a ministry in the word and prayer, the word spread, even to the priests.
- In Acts 7, Stephen preaches the first gospel sermon that was not preached by an apostle so far as we know. We are seeing a transition, a shift. Do not miss this. It was the apostles as witnesses who preached in Acts 1-6. Now we have a sermon by Stephen, the result of which is his death. The story of Jesus is a life and death matter.
- In Acts 8, persecution comes to the church, all but the apostles are scattered, and the believers go forth boldly preaching the word, wherever they go!

This next step in the story never ends—in Acts or in the centuries thereafter. This next step is foreshadowed in Acts 1:8, and it continues today. The focus in Acts is mostly on special events, we will talk about some of those events next week. From Acts 8 onward, the story is about Christians sharing the story. Peter will get attention for a time, Paul will get the majority of the attention along with his companions, but a quick reading of Acts reminds that the power that took the gospel to the Roman world and to the then-known world in the first

century was not centered in a few powerful preachers or unique personalities. It was a power that brought the gospel to Samaria through Philip; to Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch by those who were scattered (11:19); to Galatia as those who heard the message continued to spread it; to Asia Minor (several of those who led in the proclamation are mentioned in Paul's letters); to cities in the Roman Empire through Aquila and Priscilla; through Apollos...and the story goes on and on.

Takeaways—

- The story is to be told
- It was first told by the eyewitnesses, the apostles
- Afterward, it was told in every place by every Christian
- We must ask ourselves to what extent the story is still being told by every Christian in every place! Does the answer convict us?

The key phrase: We Cannot Help Ourselves! Acts 4:20

May that become a reality in our lives during this Easter season.