

The Compass

Week 24

OT Readings: 1 Kings 8:1-18:46

NT Readings: Acts 7:51-11:30

Things to Watch for in Your Readings this Week

Old Testament

- 1 Kings 8-11 will continue the story through the end of Solomon's reign. Pay attention to the temple dedication, what does it tell you about what Solomon's understanding of God's purpose for the temple and for Israel?¹
- 1 Kings 11 is a significant moment in Israel's life. Solomon introduces the worship of false gods alongside YHWH and sets in motion the idolatry which will plague God's people for the next four hundred years.
- 1 Kings 12. The kingdom will divide into Israel, the Northern Kingdom and Judah, the Southern Kingdom. The story will now alternate between these two kingdoms and their kings. The Northern will never have a good king, the Southern only a few.
- 1 Kings 17 introduces Elijah, who like the prophets before and after him are God's voice to both kings and people.

New Testament

- Stephen's martyrdom will spark a reaction against the church in Jerusalem. The persecution that follows will scatter Jesus' followers and with them, the truth of Jesus.²
- Saul (Paul) is introduced (Acts 8:3) and then his conversion recounted in Acts 9. He will play an increasingly prominent role in Luke's account of the Jesus movement.³
- Two more accounts are given of the Spirit's coming on groups of people in this week's readings, Samaria (8) and Cornelius' household (10-11). What is similar in the accounts? What questions come to mind?⁴ Notice the movement toward the inclusion of all peoples (Acts 2:21, 39), including Samaritans and Gentiles.
- Acts 10-11 is an interesting account of how God works to bring together the pieces of the puzzle to accomplish His purposes. What do you see? How did it all work? What can you learn about cooperating with the Spirit?
- Acts 9:31 is one of those five summary verses in Acts. I find it to be Luke's explanation of why the early church was able to advance as it did – they lived in “the fear (reverence) of the Lord and the ‘alongsidedness’ (encouragement) of the Spirit.”⁵

Highlight of the Week: Who is God?

Acts 11:15-18. The Peter-Cornelius story of Acts 10-11 reveals a God who includes all and desires all to be part of His ever expanding family in the world. In these verses, Peter is retelling the story to Jewish Christians in Jerusalem who having heard about Peter's visit to “uncircumcised men” are challenging him about such a course of action (11:1-3). How often do our religious blinders keep us from seeing what God is doing right in front of us? But perhaps we shouldn't be too hard on them, they were trying to get their heads around this new thing God was doing.

Yet, all that was happening was none other than the fulfillment of God's heart and longing from the very beginning of His redemptive purpose. God says to Abraham, “all the families of the earth will be blessed in you” (Gen. 12:3, 22:18.) The intensity of the Holy Spirit's desire to include all is seen in what happens in Acts 10:44-48. Peter is still talking away to these Gentiles when the Holy Spirit interrupts him – how rude! Yet, I wonder if for the Spirit it was “enough talk!” as He falls upon these Gentiles bringing them close in His embrace.⁶

Application: “What about me? How does this apply?”

Acts 8:29, 11:12, etc. If we read too casually we miss the obvious: these believers claimed to be spoken to *directly* by the Spirit - often “in the moment” and they responded immediately with obedience. Apparently they saw the Spirit as worthy of obedience, i.e., they responded to Him as if He was God! What are to make of this?

Acts 1:2 is insightful, “He (Jesus) gave instructions to them *by the Holy Spirit.*”⁷ I had often thought that Jesus was with the disciples essentially 24/7 in those forty days after His resurrection and before His ascension. However, the Bible seems to indicate otherwise. He seems to have been “in and out,” so to speak. In the meantime, they were *learning how to* hear the voice of the Spirit for themselves. Amazing! They had to learn how to hear God’s voice, just like we do! And apparently they learned to do so rather well.

The bottom line is this: unless we learn to hear and respond to the Spirit in the same way as they did we cannot expect to see God do the things He did in Acts. Let me put it another way, it is *absolutely necessary* as followers of Jesus to hear the Spirit’s voice and act upon it if we would call ourselves followers; it cannot be optional for us if we are to have a *living* relationship with God.⁸ Are you listening? Are you hearing? Are you responding? What is He saying to you now, in this very moment?

Difficult Question of the Week

Acts 8:6-8. 9:32-43. Etc. Q. “Is the book of Acts *normal* Christianity? Should we *expect* this level of God’s supernatural activity to be at work in our lives and churches?”

I will say for myself that I find Acts enormously exciting and at the same time, enormously challenging. What should we expect God to be doing today, **now**? At the outset we must recognize that the kinds of things we see read about in Acts are happening today in many places in the world. We simply cannot ignore the facts.⁹

Perhaps the key question is this: Where do we go to determine what our expectations should be? We certainly cannot decide based upon our own experience, or more to the point, our *lack* of experience with God’s power and presence. In the end, the *only* reference point we have is the Bible itself. What would the Bible, specifically the book of Acts, have us expect of God? I would suggest at a minimum *far more than we are presently expecting and experiencing*.

There is a story told of a Chinese Christian who came to America and commented, “It is amazing what American Christians have accomplished without the Holy Spirit.” It wasn’t meant to be a compliment. While an analysis of why we expect so little is beyond the space we have, we must at the very least go back to our Acts reading again and ask God to give us a fresh picture of what is possible when God’s people live in a radically normal place with Him; what might be possible? When we see Him in His majesty, power and compassion, when we are seized afresh with His heart for the brokenness around us and when we become truly aware of our powerlessness and inability to do anything that matters without Him, then and only then, will we humble ourselves in such a way that we will begin to be desperate for His presence and power and not be satisfied with less. Then, and only then, will we be safe with the kind of power He would release through us to bring healing and wholeness to our families, communities, nation.

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¹ While Solomon’s reign is considered the golden age of Israel’s history, it was also a “golden opportunity” to reveal God to the world, see 1 Kings 8:41-44, 10:24. The Queen of Sheba is an illustration of this missional prospect actually occurring (1 Kings 10). Solomon failed at the single critical point when he introduced false gods into Israel’s life; now what would the nations see?

² See Acts 8:4 and 11:19. The apostles are excepted (8:2). It is clear later in Acts is that the local church in Jerusalem is intact.

³ As you read Acts you can see the progression from Jerusalem and toward Rome. Luke, by focusing on Paul, is following only one stream of the much larger story of the early Jesus Movement.

⁴ We now have three of the five references to the Spirit’s coming on groups, the remaining are Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:52 – though no details are given) and Ephesus (Acts 19:1-7).

⁵ The word translated “encouragement” is the Greek *paraklesis* and is closely related to the word used for the Spirit Himself, *parakletos*. While it can mean encouragement or comfort, neither are hardly strong enough to communicate the kind of relationship the Spirit had with these early believers and the powerful results that followed. If the Parakletos, the Holy Spirit, is one who “comes alongside” someone, then it might be possible to understand *paraklesis* as “alongsidedness.” Thus, these early believers succeeded in advancing the kingdom in their generation because they gave the Lord the foremost place, they revered Him, followed Him, trusted Him, obeyed Him; *and* they lived out their daily lives closely connected to and joined together with the Spirit who directed, empowered and enabled them in every way. They walked in the “alongsidedness” of the Spirit.

⁶ A possibility here is that “fell upon” (Greek - *epiipto*) means “to fall upon in an embrace.” The same word is used to describe the father “falling upon” the prodigal son when he returns home. My question here (and the key interpretive question) is whether that could be Luke’s intent in the use of this word. IF Luke is attempting to describe an experienced awareness of God’s love (Rom. 5:5) or if this is how the early believers described their experience, then it is possible. An argument against this usage is that Luke would not have had this in his mind and that he is simply borrowing OT language to describe the Spirit’s presence. See Roger Stronstad, *The Charismatic Theology of St. Luke*,

⁷ I owe this thought to Dallas Willard, *Hearing God* (IVP, 1999). This is a must read book better understand how God speaks and how we can learn to hear Him.

⁸ Attempting relationship with God without hearing His voice is nothing more than dead religion.

⁹ There are theological positions that hold that the miraculous ended in the first century and that we should not expect such to continue today (sometimes called “cessationism”). I find NO Biblical basis for such a position; Asians, Africans and Latin Americans would be perplexed by such an idea given that God is doing “Acts like things” in their regions of the world.