

THREE PIVOTAL POINTS

IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

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There are three pivotal points, three critical milestones, in the Book of Acts which, if properly understood, shed light on the outworking of the purposes of God there recorded. First there is the *outpouring of the Holy Spirit*, then there is the *outbreak against Stephen* (often overlooked but an event of tremendous significance), and finally the *outgoing to the Gentiles* through Paul's ministry. Consider each briefly.

THE OUTPOURING OF THE SPIRIT

Speaking "as the Spirit gave [him] utterance," Peter explained the events surrounding the day of Pentecost by saying:

"...Ye men of Judaea, and all ye that dwell at Jerusalem, be this known unto you, and hearken to my words:

For these are not drunken, as ye suppose, seeing it is but the third hour of the day.

But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel;

And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, *I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh*: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams:

And on my servants and on my handmaidens *I will pour out in those days of my Spirit*; and they shall prophesy:

And I will shew wonders in heaven above, and signs in the earth beneath; blood, and fire, and vapour of smoke:

The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before that

great and notable day of the Lord come:

And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved." (Acts 2:14-21)

Notice carefully the two distinct "I will" statements: "I will pour out of my Spirit" and "I will shew wonders in heaven above, and signs in the earth beneath." In other words, God had promised to (1) pour out His Spirit and then (2) send His wrath.

Peter's message very clearly points out that this is exactly the program in place during early Acts. The Spirit of God had indeed been poured out to call the nation Israel to repentance and prepare them for their coming kingdom. Surely the wrath could not be far behind, coming as it was to "purge out the rebel" from the wayward nation (see Acts 3:19-24 and Ezekiel 20:33-48). Thus he exhorts them:

"Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, he hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear." (Acts 2:33)

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit was proof that the Lord Jesus had been exalted to the Father's right hand. Having there "received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, He hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear." But there is more:

"For David is not ascended into the heavens: but he saith himself, the LORD said unto my Lord, *Sit thou on my right hand,*

Until I make thy foes thy footstool.

Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ." (vs. 34-36)

While the outpouring of the Spirit testified to the fact that the Lord Jesus was the Messiah seated at the Father's right hand, it is clear He sat there as a royal *exile*. But this was only to be *temporary*.

Quoting Psalm 110:1, Peter points out that God the Father had, as it were, said to God the Son, *Come and sit at my right hand in the heavens until it is time for you to return in wrath and in judgment to make your foes your footstool.*

The prophetic order was clear: *first* the Spirit was to be poured out, *then* Christ was to return to pour out his wrath upon His enemies. Hence Peter's warning to Israel:

"For Moses truly said unto the fathers, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear in all things whatsoever he shall say unto you.

And it shall come to pass, that *every soul, which will not hear that prophet, shall be destroyed from among the people.*" (Acts 3:22, 23)

Thus the Book of Acts begins with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit to gather the Little Flock, the believing remnant to whom the kingdom was to be given (Luke 12:32). This takes place against the backdrop of warning that God's wrath was on its way, as the stage has been fully set for the tribulation to begin. With this in mind, we move to the next pivotal event:

THE OUTBREAK AGAINST STEPHEN

As Stephen stood before the religious council of Israel, he accused them of resisting the witness of the ourpoured Spirit so vividly on display in their midst:

"Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, *ye do always resist the Holy Ghost*: as your fathers did, so do ye." (Acts 7:51)

Their response was that of further resistance and rejection, going so far as to gather a "stoning committee" to silence Stephen's Spirit-filled witness against them. The events which follow are of special significance:

"When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth.

But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and *Jesus standing on the right hand of God,*

And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and *the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.*" (Acts 7:54-56)

Don't read over this too lightly, for a tremendous change has taken place: At Pentecost, Peter warns them that Christ had sat down in heaven at the Father's right hand until that time came for Him to return in wrath and destroy His enemies. In Acts 7, Stephen sees Christ standing - no longer seated but now standing on the right hand of God.

There is only one scriptural explanation for the change in His posture: the time for the outpouring of His wrath had arrived. Our Lord was standing to do what Psalm 110:1 warned He would do: "make His foes His footstool." In the words of Isaiah 3:13:

"The Lord standeth up to plead, and standeth to judge the people."

But what happened at that critical juncture? Why wasn't the wrath poured out? Why even yet hasn't Christ returned to subdue His enemies and establish His kingdom? These questions find their answers in Paul's subsequent ministry:

THE OUTGOING TO THE GENTILES

The explanation for the delay in the outpouring of God's wrath is found in Romans 5:20's declaration, that "where sin abounded, grace did much more abound."

At the *very moment* when the prophetic clock had reached the hour of judgment, God in His grace *interrupted* the prophetic program by ushering in an *unprophesied* program--a previously unknown purpose called "the mystery," a purpose which had been "kept secret since the world began" but which now was to be made known. (Rom. 16:25, Eph. 3:1-9)

Thus, while in Acts 7 we see Christ standing at the Father's right hand ready to return in wrath and destroy His enemies, in Acts 9 we see him reach down and save, rather than destroy, the very leader of the world's rebellion against Him. And more: not only does He save Saul of Tarsus by His grace, but He then sends him forth--no longer to be Saul the opponent, but now to become Paul the

Apostle. He thus says to Ananias,

"...he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel." (Acts 9:15)

Paul's own account of His commission from Christ is equally clear:

"...And he said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest.

But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee." (Acts 26:15, 16)

Thus Paul goes forth as "the Apostle of the Gentiles"-- a new apostle sent forth with a *new* revelation concerning a *new* program and a *new* dispensation, the dispensation of the grace of God.

The prophetic program was based on salvation and blessing going to the Gentiles *through* redeemed Israel (Gen. 22:18, Isa. 59:20-60:3, Luke 24:47, Acts 3:25, 26, etc.). We see Paul going to the Gentiles, however, not in fulfillment of the prophetic order, but *in spite* of Israel's rejection and unbelief.

Although Israel had rejected her Messiah both in His incarnation and resurrection, God had a secret purpose to accomplish through Christ which was then revealed to and through Paul. Just as the prophetic clouds of judgment lay heaviest on the horizon, God in His infinite grace and manifold wisdom interrupted prophecy--that which had been "spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began"--in order to usher in His secret purpose: the mystery, which was "kept secret since the world began."

Far from being the fulfillment of the prophesied Pentecostal program, the outgoing to the Gentiles under Paul's ministry was the result of the *new*, secret program revealed to and through him. Hence he writes:

"I say then, Have they [Israel] stumbled that they should fall? God forbid: but rather through their fall salvation is come unto the Gentiles, for to provoke

them to jealousy.

Now if the fall of them be the riches of the world, and the diminishing of them the riches of the Gentiles, how much more their fulness?

For I speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify mine office." (Rom. 11:11-13)

CONCLUSION

These three pivotal events demonstrate Luke's purpose in the Acts record to present the fall of Israel and God's *reason* for sending salvation to the Gentiles through Paul and apart from Israel and her program.

Rather than setting forth, as is commonly supposed, a pattern for us to follow in the dispensation of grace, the Book of Acts explains why the program that was begun in its early chapters has passed away. It demonstrates how God interrupted that program-- just at the point when prophecy called for His wrath to be poured out-- by inaugurating a new program of "grace and peace."

It confirms historically the declaration of the epistles of Paul: that the fulfillment of prophecy has for the present given way to the unfolding of the secret purpose of God's grace--all revealed through the message committed to Paul by our ascended Lord from heaven's glory.