

# ***Sabbath School Today***

## **With the 1888 Message Dynamic**

### ***The Book of Acts***

#### **Lesson 3. Life in the Early Church**

In the space of a few weeks the most significant events in human history had happened: Jesus completed His ministry, was crucified, was resurrected, and had ascended to heaven. His confused and frightened followers huddled together as Jesus had instructed them to do. They used their time wisely, probably searching the Scriptures then available to understand how Christ had perfectly fulfilled all the Messianic prophecies. We can almost imagine the men who walked with Christ on the Emmaus Road repeating everything they could remember of how He had explained the Scriptures to them.

No matter how compelling, the method of using various texts to prove theological points, argument alone is inadequate. Preaching never reaches the heart without the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus knew that and told His disciples “I will not leave you as orphans” (John 14:18, *New American Standard Bible*; “comfortless” in the *King James Version*). Jesus promised, “I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not behold Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you” (John 14:16, 17). Ezekiel had predicted this centuries before: “And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances” (Eze. 36:27).

The Ezekiel passage defines the process of God’s way to achieve righteousness in sinful humans and shows the essential role of the Holy Spirit in this process. Thus, Pentecost fulfilled both the Ezekiel prophecy as well as Christ’s promise that the Holy Spirit would go from “abides with you” to “will be in you.”

The early believers had achieved a level of unity during their study time in the upper room waiting for Pentecost. However once the Holy Spirit was given, more study was necessary to fully understand Christ’s mission, even though most of them had witnessed what He had done. As our lesson notes (page 24), the character of worship in the early church was based on their Jewish origins. Especially for those living in Jerusalem, going to the temple to worship would have been logical. God gave them time and circumstances that allowed them to devote study to the grand implications of the cross and how the Jewish sacrificial system fit into this picture.

The practice of Judaism had become so formalized that adherents had lost sight of the significance of the sacrificial system. It was not seen as a system designed to typify the ultimate sacrifice of Christ, but as a means of manipulating God. The Jews believed that the act of bringing a sacrifice was what saved, not the ultimate Sacrifice to which it

pointed. Their ancestors had made that old covenant mistake centuries before when they told Moses at Sinai that “everything you say we will do,” the implication being that then God was obligated to do what He promised.

The ingrained thinking of the early Christians had been formed in Judaism and needed clarifying. They needed to understand that the sacrificial system was never given as a method of “works righteousness,” but was meant to constantly remind people of their need for the living sacrifice that Christ made with His own body. Their misunderstanding of Christ’s mission was grounded in their misunderstanding of God’s promises made to Abraham.

“God promised a great household to Abraham. But this house was to be built upon the Lord, and Abraham so understood it, and began at once to build. Jesus Christ is the foundation, for ‘other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.’ 1 Cor. 3:11. The house of Abraham is the house of God, which is ‘built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone.’ Eph. 2:20.” [1]

In His promises to Abraham, God also promised that Abram would inherit the land. It was one of the most valued promises to the Jews who were attacked through the centuries by nations wanting to take their land. It was convenient to forget that they failed to follow God’s directive to completely clear the land on God’s schedule. Instead, they compromised and intermarried, placing obstacles in the way of following God’s commands completely.

There is another aspect that is more subtle, but is important to all Christians including those of our day. The disciples had asked Christ when He would be “restoring the kingdom to Israel” (Acts 1:6). By this it can be fairly implied that they included both Abraham’s posterity and the land God promised to him. But Abraham had been dead for a long time, and therefore could not benefit from any fulfillment of the promise unless he and his sleeping progeny were resurrected.

“What does this demonstrate?—Simply this, that the promise in the fifteenth chapter of Genesis, that Abraham and his seed should possess the land, had reference to the resurrection of the dead, and to nothing short of that. ... Even if Abraham be left out of the question, yet the fact remains that the promise to the seed must include all of the seed, and not a part merely. ... In thus referring to this promise, which was well known to the Jews, Stephen showed them most plainly that it could be fulfilled only by the resurrection of the dead through Jesus. ... If he [Abraham] had expected to receive it in this present life, he would have been disappointed if he had come to his death without having it fulfilled. But God plainly told him that he must die before it was fulfilled. Therefore since Abraham believed God, it is very clear that he understood about the resurrection, and that he believed it. The resurrection of the dead, ... was ever the center of the hope of the true children of Abraham.” [2]

God explained to Abraham that Israel was not to possess the land of promise until the iniquity of the Amorites was not then full. “That shows that God would give the Amorites time to repent, or, failing that, to fill up the measure of their iniquity, and thus demonstrate their unfitness to possess the land. And that teaches us further that the land which God promised to Abraham and his seed could be possessed only by righteous people.” [3]

This complex but important concept needed to be understood by the early believers, and especially those of our day. The early believers were partially motivated by a sense of urgency since they believed Christ’s return was to happen very soon. They were eager to study and understand so the message could be given to the entire world.

The message was that of the cross of Christ and the principle that righteousness could come only through the faith of Jesus accepted by His followers. That fire, kindled at Pentecost, began to dwindle as the years came and went and people were distracted with the routines of living life and the hostility that the message always produces in some. The Lord rekindled the fire by sending the 1888 “messengers” (A. T. Jones and E. J. Waggoner) with their greater understanding of righteousness by faith, and for a while people were again interested in studying the message in its many facets, but the passage of time tends to dampen fervor.

The early pioneers of the message of righteousness by faith in the Seventh-day Adventist Church are all sleeping now. Yet, God waits to return. Why? If God was unwilling to take the land from the pagan Amorites in Abraham’s day and the pagan Romans in the apostolic time, perhaps He is waiting for all those that will come to repentance to have the opportunity. Just as it was not the will of God that Israel should wander 40 years in the wilderness before entering the promised land, it is not His will today to delay His coming. But in mercy to the world, Jesus does delay His coming that sinners may hear the message of the gospel of righteousness by faith and if they are willing, come to repentance.

“For forty years did unbelief, murmuring, and rebellion shut out ancient Israel from the land of Canaan. The same sins have delayed the entrance of modern Israel into the heavenly Canaan. In neither case were the promises of God at fault. It is the unbelief, the worldliness, unconsecration, and strife among the Lord’s professed people that have kept us in this world of sin and sorrow so many years.” [4]

“Had the purpose of God been carried out by His people in giving to the world the message of mercy, Christ would, ere this, have come to the earth, and the saints would have received their welcome into the city of God.” [5]

Like the early church believers, it takes time and effort to study the various facets of the message given by the 1888 “messengers,” but the salvation of souls is what is at stake. Let us continue studying this “most precious message” so the world can hear it, come to repentance, and Christ can end the delay.

—Arlene Hill

**Endnotes:**

[1] E. J. Waggoner, *The Everlasting Covenant: God's Promises to Us*, p. 54; Glad Tidings ed., 2002.

[2] Ibid., pp. 56, 57.

[3] Ibid., p. 58.

[4] Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book one, p. 69.

[5] Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, p. 450.

**Notes:**

Pastor Paul Penno's video of this lesson is on the Internet at:

<https://youtu.be/BkwEtimpAYI>

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