

The Old Testament Taken Up in the Book of 'The Acts'

by T. Austin-Sparks

The book of 'The Acts' introduces a new age, marking the passing of natural days and the arrival of a new spiritual day, where the Lordship of the Holy Spirit is established.

Scripture: Acts 2:14

Topics: "The Role of the Holy Spirit", "Spiritual Transformation"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes that Peter's declaration in Acts marks the transition into a new spiritual age, as prophesied by Joel. He explains that the book of Acts is not merely about the activities of the apostles but signifies a profound shift from natural to spiritual realities, where the Holy Spirit governs the new dispensation. Sparks highlights the reversal of Babel at Pentecost, illustrating the universality of salvation for all people, and warns against the dangers of the flesh as seen in the stories of Ananias and Sapphira. He calls for believers to recognize the spiritual principles underlying the new age and to live in accordance with the Holy Spirit's leading. Ultimately, the sermon serves as a reminder of the transformative power of the resurrection and the call to a higher spiritual life.

Transcript

"Peter, standing up with the eleven, lifted up his voice, and spake forth unto them, saying... This is that which hath been spoken through the prophet Joel, And it shall be in the last days, saith God, I will pour forth 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: yea and on my servants and on my handmaidens in those days will I pour forth of my Spirit; and they shall prophesy" (Acts 2:14,16-18).

Not one of us would have any question that Peter was speaking under the government and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Believing that, and having no doubt about it, it is very significant that he should have added something which looks like a quotation but which the prophet quoted did not say. Joel did not say "It shall be in the last days." Joel said, "And it shall come to pass afterward...." The phrase "the last days" is found in other prophets, but not in the passage from which Peter was quoting. It makes no difference to Peter's inspiration, but it gives a significance to which we should pay attention. Under the Holy Spirit's government, Peter used those words "in the last days." We have to know what the Holy Spirit meant, and, seeing that the application was to the time at the beginning of this dispensation, I think we are not wrong in

concluding that He was indicating that a certain time and order had come to an end - the last days of that particular order had come, and now there was an afterward; in other words, a new day, a new age.

Everything in This Age Essentially Spiritual

If that is right, then the book which goes by the title "The Acts" is the book which introduces a new age; it marks the passing of certain days, age-days, and the arrival of a new day, a new age-day. But it not only marks that change, it sets forth the character of the new day. Among the many very important things which the Lord's people need to recognize anew is this - the real Divine nature of the new day which came in with that recorded in this book. The established and accepted title of the book is limiting and, to some extent, misleading. You must remember that the writer of the book never gave it that title. Luke, who wrote it, did not call it "The Acts," nor the "Acts of the Apostles," nor the "Acts of the Holy Spirit." He did not give it a title. If it had a title at all, it is in his introduction, and that purely by inference. "The former treatise I made... concerning all that Jesus began both to do and to teach," and the inference is that this is a further treatise of all that Jesus began to do and teach. I say, the established title, "The Acts," is limiting, and, to some extent, misleading for this reason - that it puts all the emphasis upon activity, and in so doing obscures the nature of the activity, the real character of what had been brought in, the very essence of things; that is, it very largely obscures the fact that this new dispensation is absolutely spiritual in every sense. We know how "the baptism of the Spirit," "the filling of the Spirit," all that is meant by the use of the word "Pentecost", has been taken up by men and interpreted in terms of manifestations, things that can be outwardly noted - activities, works, done in a certain kind of heat and enthusiasm and strength and assertiveness. You know what the general mentality is when mention is made of being filled with the Spirit. At once our minds leap to certain forms of manifestation. But that is not the basic thing. The basic fact is that something has changed altogether, and there is a new character given to the new age; and that is that, for this age, everything is essentially and absolutely spiritual.

First the Natural, Then the Spiritual

I think Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, has - not with this object in view but under the same Spirit's direction and inspiration - given a full summary of what this change-over really is. It occurs in a phrase in 1 Cor. 15:46 - "Howbeit that is not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural; then that which is spiritual."

First that which is natural, afterward that which is spiritual. That is only saying, in other words, that the days which have gone were natural days, the days in which Divine things were manifested naturally, on natural grounds. They could all be grasped by natural apprehension: men could see, men could feel. All that realm of God's activity was possible of observation naturally; but now that has passed.

The Establishment of the Lordship of the Holy Spirit

"And it shall come to pass afterward..."; "afterward that which is spiritual." That represents a Divine order and an established economy in the arrangement of this world's history. First that which is natural in everything, afterward that which is spiritual: and this book (we will use its accepted title, "The Acts") is the afterward that is spiritual. And one of the most wonderful things is that this book comprehends the Old Testament and changes it right over into the spiritual realm. The fact that this new day as ushered in and set forth in this book is a spiritual day is shown in quite a number of ways in the book itself - pre-eminently, of course, by the fact that, as never before, the Lordship of the Holy Spirit is established. He, in sovereignty, comes and takes charge of everything in relation to Divine purposes. He assumes the

custodianship of God's eternal purposes and takes them into His own hands - and that in a very mighty way. He does demonstrate that He has assumed charge of God's interests in His Son; and if you can withstand a mighty rushing wind (Acts 2:2) you can withstand that sovereignty of the Holy Spirit. But in other ways His sovereignty is seen - amongst them, the way in which the Old Testament is taken up and reproduced spiritually, in some matters reversed, in others transferred. We shall see that in a moment. Again, in the swift challenge at the beginning, which the flesh and the natural life met; the Holy Spirit is in charge, and He immediately demonstrates that here flesh must not encroach and the natural life has no place. In the case of Ananias and Sapphira it is shown that things are spiritual now and the flesh and the Spirit are in deadly combat. It is a new spiritual age that has come in, and here that which is natural has passed. First that which is natural; afterward that which is spiritual.

The Deepening Hiddenness of the Lord's Ways

Another thing not recognized as fully and clearly as it should be is the deepening hiddenness of the Lord's ways. Have you noticed this, that, whereas at the beginning there were manifestations in many directions, in many manners, plain and obvious, as you move through this book you find that the Lord is going deeper and deeper, and those things are not so obvious and conspicuous as they once were? Early in the book, you can bring the sick and just lay them on the ground, and the very shadow of Peter passing by heals them. But "Trophimus I left sick" (2 Tim. 4:20): "Epaphroditus was sick nigh unto death" (Phil. 2:27): "We despaired even of life: yea, we ourselves have had the sentence of death within ourselves" (2 Cor. 1:9), says Paul. The Lord's ways are getting deeper. First that which is natural; afterward, that which is spiritual. That opens the door to a very large field.

"The Acts" a Book of Spiritual Principles

Then there is the fact that this is a book of spiritual principles, not necessarily to be taken and imitated, but demanding that we know the principle which lies behind what is happening, and stand in possession of that principle. In that connection, let us remember that this book called "The Acts" was not written until all Paul's letters had been written and circulated. There had been some thirty-five years of missionary activity, preaching, and teaching through the Apostolic letters before "The Acts" was written, or before any one of the Gospels was written, and that to me is of tremendous significance. You see, they had received the teaching, they had the spiritual interpretation and meaning, and then they got the historical record of what happened. It would be good for us to stay with that alone as one thing for an hour. You can understand why Paul wrote to the Corinthians as he did about the manifestations. They were taken up by the acts, the happenings, the events, the outward things. He wrote to seek to get them to the inside of them, and to show that what mattered was not the things in the first instance, but the spirit behind, and that love is far more important than outward manifestations and gifts.

Well, you see, all this is a very strong foundation for this conclusion, that a new kind of day has come in, that things now are essentially spiritual. "Afterward that which is spiritual."

The Creations: Redemption by Resurrection

That is a general setting forth of the situation. Let us begin to get inside of that and break it up. We said that this book comprehends the Old Testament and does two things with it. It reverses some things, and it transfers others from one realm to another. I will explain that in a moment. First of all, this book comprehends what we have at the beginning of Genesis - the creation. The creation, as we have it in the natural in Genesis, is a work of natural redemption, the redeeming of a creation from corruption, from

death, from chaos; and that redemption of the creation at the beginning of the natural was through resurrection. We can say quite truly that it was a raising of the natural from a death, from a grave, bringing it up in resurrection. "First that which is natural; then that which is spiritual." The beginning of things here in "Acts" is redemption through resurrection. The great note of "Acts," of all Apostolic preaching, is the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

Now you see a little more value in what I said just now about the letters having been written before. The people who would read the historic account of things in "Acts" had already received 1 Cor. 15 and the doctrine of the resurrection in Romans 6. They knew the doctrine of the resurrection of Christ, that it was not only for us but included us, that we were raised together with Him, that a new creation was brought into being in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, that we were begotten again unto a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Pet. 1:3). The fact of the resurrection is then set forth in the historic account as the great, all-governing reality. It is a new creation, it is a redemption that is in Christ Jesus. You break that up again and you see that inside of the redemption there is the means employed. Firstly, light and life - two great redeeming powers and influences. Oh, these representatives, the twelve - twelve is the number that speaks of representation - are themselves the embodiment of this. Look at them before Christ rose, and if ever men were in the dark they were - groping as blind in the darkness. See those on the road to Emmaus, and all the rest - dark, blind, despairing, and for them the atmosphere was filled with death. He had died; it was the end of everything. But look at them here! Why, truly, those who sat in darkness have seen a great light! They have emerged, the light has broken and, in Christ, has dawned upon their darkness; they see it all and they are out! Life with light has brought them into a new world, but it is spiritual light, it is spiritual life, it is not capable of being apprehended except in a spiritual way. People can listen, can see that something has happened to them, and still be unaffected until the same mighty influence gets to work upon themselves. It is something that is wholly and solely spiritual, and the flesh cannot take hold of it. Let Simon the sorcerer try to get this on natural grounds! He will find himself under terrible judgment (Acts 8:9-24). This is something which can be had only by the Spirit. It is light and life of a new order altogether; the flesh cannot enter into this. "First that which is natural; then that which is spiritual."

The Instrument of the Creations - The Spirit

The means - light and life. And then the instrument - "and the Spirit of God brooded upon the face of the deep" (Genesis 1:2). We can say that the Spirit of God was the Executive of the Godhead in the redemption of the natural creation. Here, "Acts" brings in that Divine agent again; the Spirit of God bringing out of the dark and out of death into the new life of this new creation in Christ Jesus. It is spiritual.

The Object of the Creations - A Man

And then the object. What was the object of the natural creation? Unto what was it? Well, the object was man, a man whom God had in His eye, a man according to God's mind. Everything was brought into being, and the climax of all was man. First that which was natural - and it failed; afterward that which is spiritual. And here is the man in Christ, the new creation, and he is a new order of man. It is simple and elementary, but it helps us to recognise that we have come into a new day of a different character; it is spiritual now. This book has taken up the very beginning in the natural, and carried it over, passed it through, into the spiritual; and it is saying as clearly and forcefully as anything can be said, This is the true! The natural breaks down and fails, it is transient, it does not abide; the spiritual is eternal, established forever.

Place alongside that word from 1 Cor. 15:46 another one from 2 Tim. 1:10 "...our Saviour Christ Jesus... abolished death, and brought life and incorruption to light through the gospel." That is something for us to take hold of. We are all so conscious in this world and in ourselves of the corruptible side. Yes, it is there; but through the Gospel life and incorruption have been brought to light. One of the things said so early in this book is a prophecy taken from the Old Testament and applied to the Lord Jesus "It was not possible that he should be holden of death" (Acts 2:24). Why? Because the word had said "...neither wilt thou give thy Holy One to see corruption" (Acts 2:27). "Life and incorruption through the Gospel." And that life is ours; that life within us, in our renewed spirit, is the germ of a spiritual body which is at the other end of the course; first the natural, then that which is spiritual, and in 1 Cor. 15:46 the application is to the body. There are natural bodies - not that which is spiritual is first, but that which is natural; then that which is spiritual. "To each seed a body of its own" (1 Cor. 15:38).

Well, the object in view is a man who can never see corruption, an incorruptible humanity. Oh thank God that the Lord Jesus walked through this world for thirty-three years and was never in the slightest degree corrupted; although Satan and all his powers and agents, demoniacal and human, sought to corrupt that Divine One in some way, to ensnare and entrap Him into a taint, a corruption, He was never corrupted in any sense; He triumphed. He went through death and the grave itself and saw no corruption. Thank God, I say, for that, because He is the Firstborn among many brethren who will be indwelt by that same incorruptible life, and who will be eventually that humanity in God's universe for which the universe was created. An incorruptible humanity - that is the prospect. And that is the Gospel - something more than a gospel of just being forgiven; it is a marvellous Gospel that is brought to light. The object - a man; but that kind of man.

The Reversal of Babel

I dare not take all the fragments of the Old Testament that this book of "Acts" brings into view from the creation. Immediately, without any loss of time, it leaps over to what comes some distance on in the book of Genesis; and here it is not a transferring, it is a reversing. I refer to Babel. You remember what was said about Babel. "And the whole earth was of one language and of one speech" (Gen. 11:1) and in that oneness they formed a confederacy to build their tower, to be independent of God, to make a name for themselves; to glorify, to deify a fallen, corrupted manhood. They challenged heaven in their unity, and God said, "Let us go down and there confound their language"; and there came confusion of tongues. He broke them up with His curse so that they understood not one another, and therefore could not work together, could no longer go on in their evil oneness. We know it very well today. Pentecost leaps right in there. There were gathered in Jerusalem that day men out of every nation under heaven. Their countries are tabulated; the Holy Spirit takes great care to see that they are all mentioned. And then a mighty thing happens, a miracle is wrought by the Holy Ghost and the diversity of the tongues of that great concourse is transcended in a moment, so that men exclaim with astonishment "Are not all these which speak Galilaeans? And how hear we, every man in our own language..." (Acts 2:7,8). What is the meaning of this? Babel is reversed. The declaration is made - through the victory of Calvary, in the power of the Holy Spirit, the curse is dealt with, and there is a oneness in the Spirit possible for all men, that they can understand the wonderful things of God. God has set His spiritual principle right there at the beginning in this most powerful way, and He has said in an acted principle that in Christ Jesus there is a universality of oneness of a heavenly and spiritual order which cannot be found outside; which is Calvary's answer to Babel.

Now, you do not interpret that naturally, but spiritually. People are always pressing for the natural interpretation. Tongues! Whatever God may do sovereignly in His will in that matter, the fact is this - that very often Satan has simulated that very work, and the result has been more confusion among the saints, and the essential law of oneness has not been established. The test is whether this brings saints into the realisation of their absolute oneness in Christ, or does this make more confusion? That is a very good test as to whether it belongs to that which is natural or to that which is spiritual. When the Holy Spirit really has His place and His way, He brings into a universality in Christ. It does not matter what you are naturally, of what nation or tribe or kindred or people or colour or language, it does not matter at all where you come from or what you are, whether of high degree or low; when the Holy Spirit gets possession, there is a universality in Christ, a blessed spiritual oneness, which is God's answer to the world and to the enemy; God's counter, through Calvary, to Babel.

I know the Church has a long way to go to enter into that, and how great the difficulties are in this matter of so many tongues amongst the Lord's people, all saying different and contradictory things; nevertheless, I hold to this basic law, that, if men were governed by the Spirit, they would say the same thing, they would arrive at the same conclusion; and it is only the intrusion of the natural - either natural judgment, intellect, taking hold of the things of God, or natural desires and inclinations and propensities and wishes and feelings - that results in this confusion of tongues among the Lord's people. If the natural life, mind, heart and will really did come under the power of the Cross and we came on to the ground where we are dead to ourselves and alive only in the spirit, we should be saying and thinking the same thing.

God has simple and very real - even if small and limited - testimonies where He has those who are led by the Spirit; He is able to say the same thing to them and the results are very fruitful. Desolation goes out and fruitfulness comes in when the mind of the Spirit possesses the children of God. They say the same thing; they are able to say - And the Lord said that to me as well! There is a lot in that.

Well, you see very early in this book a very big thing is taken up from the Old Testament and reversed. "First that which is natural: then that which is spiritual." The universality of the Spirit is declared. And, remember, with this goes the universality of the Church. The true Church is of this order.

And then, of course, in "Acts" we have the initiation of the universality of salvation; that is, initiation in the practical sense. Salvation is universal from the beginning, but here was the initiation of its outworking - for Jew and Gentile. Presently we move from Jerusalem up to Caesarea, and something happens in a Gentile company almost identical with what happened in a Jewish company - the Spirit falls, and that universality of the Spirit shows itself now in this, that God is no respecter of persons. All can be saved, Jew and Gentile. Salvation is inclusive; God has no favourites in the matter of salvation.

The Spiritual Principle Behind Achan and Ananias and Sapphira

Time permits us to touch on only one other thing, which is quite simple in itself. It is very soon in this book that we come upon that tragic incident of Ananias and Sapphira. We have now leapt a long way ahead in the Old Testament. Historically, there is much between what we have just said and this point, but no doubt here is a correspondence in spiritual principle. You remember Achan, and the Babylonish garment and the wedge of gold hidden in his tent. But that is not the whole point. When did it happen? That is the vital point. It happened when Israel had passed through Jordan, in which they, in type, for ever parted with the carnal life. The passage of Jordan in type was that side of their union with Christ which spoke of death to the carnal life which had been predominant in the wilderness. It had all been the flesh, carnality, all

through those years, and at last that had to be done away with, lock, stock and barrel. Jordan drew the line between the life of God's people carnally and their life spiritually. Over Jordan, the Spirit of God takes charge as Captain of the host of the Lord, and is the energy of everything from that time onward, testifying to the fact that here the flesh has given place to the Spirit, and they are now typically on spiritual ground. Achan contradicts that, the carnal life breaks out again, and swift and radical judgment takes place. Because we pass into a new day, O Ananias and Sapphira, what you might have done when you lived in the flesh you cannot do now. That is the meaning. You have come into another realm, the realm of things spiritual, and having been buried with Christ and raised with Him, you are supposed to have repudiated all the work of the flesh and its ambitions.

"Acts" being a book of principles shows what God's full thought is for life in the Spirit. This is seen on both its positive side and its negative. Ananias and Sapphira are examples of the negative aspect, showing what the Lord's attitude is toward a calculated action in the flesh when against such the Spirit has been so manifestly in action.

This, then, is a solemn appeal for life on a higher level, but it carries with it a curtailment of certain liberties. For all the values of such a life may the Lord give us the required empowerment and grace.

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