

The International Lessons.

I.

Acts i. 1-12.

THE ASCENSION OF CHRIST.

1. "The former treatise" is, of course, the third Gospel.
2. "Theophilus." To him also was the Gospel dedicated. But we know no more about him.
3. "After His passion" (ver. 3), that is, "after His suffering." Such is the meaning of the word "passion" in Old English.
4. "The promise of the Father" (ver. 4). This promise is related in John xiv. 16, 26, xv. 26.
5. "Ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost." It will be remembered (the disciples would remember it, at any rate) that John the Baptist spoke of this baptism (Matt. iii. 11). Now at last, and in this strange way, his prophecy was to be fulfilled.
6. "Two men" (ver. 10). They are angels. So, for example, one of the angels at the tomb is called "a young man" (Mark xvi. 5).
7. "A Sabbath day's journey" (ver. 12). In the wilderness the Israelites were forbidden to wander beyond the camp. So a Sabbath day's journey was the distance from the Tabernacle to the farthest part of the camp, afterwards fixed at 2000 cubits, or a little less than a mile.

THE choice of the ninth verse—"while they beheld, He was taken up"—as the Golden Text seems to indicate that the subject of the lesson is the departure of Christ. But the thought of St. Luke in these introductory verses, as well as throughout the whole book, is that He never did depart. "Taken out of their sight" He certainly was for a time, but absent He never was, nor is. "The former treatise have I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus *began* both to do and teach." And so the present treatise is of all that He continued both to do and teach through His instruments the apostles.

The most pregnant verse is the eighth. In its latter half it contains a brief synopsis of this book of the Acts—"Ye shall be witnesses unto me (1) in Jerusalem and in all Judea, (2) and in Samaria, (3) and unto the uttermost part of the earth." Thus the Acts of the Apostles is divided into three parts. And St. Luke purposely tells first of their doings in Jerusalem and Judea, then of their work in Samaria, lastly, of St. Paul's progress to the uttermost parts, and leaves off when he has brought him to the capital of the Gentiles.

The first part of the verse is still more important. It tells *how* they were able to do it. "Ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you." And we have at once a striking illustration of the meaning and the majesty of this "power." On one of the occasions when they

were together before His ascension, the disciples asked Him if the time had now come for making the kingdom of Israel independent of the Romans (ver. 6). They still hankered after temporal sovereignty. They still thought *that* was the kingdom of God. Then came the gift of the Holy Ghost. And immediately after it, St. Peter stood up and preached boldly in the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And the subject of his preaching was the kingdom of God. But what had he now learned of the nature of it? He had learned that it is repentance and the forgiveness of sins. "Repent, and be baptized every one of you for the remission of sins" (Acts ii. 38). And from that time forth there was never a word with any of them about restoring again the kingdom to Israel.

ILLUSTRATIONS.—Ver. 8. Some time ago I was going over a gun-cotton factory, and the proprietor said, "You see it is quite powerless in an open space." And as he spoke he took a cartridge and lit it, and it slowly burned away. "But when it is shut up in some confined space its power is very different. We took a piece like this some time ago, and put it underneath a building that was to be blown up. We lit the fuse, and hurried away into a place of safety. Presently the explosion came and hurled the mass into the air." With the utmost reverence we may say that it is thus the Holy Ghost accomplishes His work. He is here to hurl down the stronghold of sin—but *He waits for the consecrated heart.*—MARK GUY PEARSE.

Ver. 8. We *are* witnesses. The danger is lest we should be witnesses *without* the power. A bad witness has lost many a case. Think if some friend were arrested, and brought before the judge in connection with some suspicious circumstance, the whole question being one as to character; and now I am called as witness. I would die for my friend, for I owe him everything; but alas! I am confused in my statements, and they seem to be contradictory. My friend looks at me, surprised and grieved. The judge shakes his head. The counsel for the prosecution sits down with a smile; it is plain enough that the case has gone as he would have it. Jesus Christ is ever at the bar of public opinion; and whether men shall accept or reject Him depends upon our evidence.—MARK GUY PEARSE.

II.

Acts ii. 1-12.

THE DESCENT OF THE SPIRIT.

1. "Cloven tongues like as of fire" (ver. 3). The word translated "cloven" more probably means distributed or separated; and then the meaning would be, not that the appearance was as of cloven or divided tongues, but that the tongues were so separated or distributed that one appeared to rest on the head of each disciple.

2. "Out of every nation under heaven" (ver. 4). This is a common form of expression. Compare—"There went out to Him Jerusalem and all Judæa." The feast of Pentecost fell at a time when travelling was least dangerous, so that probably a larger number of Jews resident in foreign lands went up to it than even to the Passover.

THE promise of last lesson is fulfilled in this. "After that the Holy Ghost is come upon you"—these were the words (Acts i. 8). The disciples could not understand it. And now it has come they scarcely understand it more.

Outwardly there was a sound and a sight. The sound was "as of a rushing mighty wind." That does not tell what it was. It does not say it was a rushing mighty wind, but such a sound as such a wind produces. The sight was "tongues, parting asunder, like as of fire." Not tongues of fire, but the spiritual reality took on the outward appearance of material tongues of flame.

That was all; and that was only for a moment. For, like the greatest gifts of God to men always, it is by its effects that it is to be known. In itself it cannot be known. It is of the nature of life, this Pentecostal gift, and have not men always had to fall back upon what life does, when they tried to tell us what it is? Now, its immediate effect was as strange and unexpected as its own coming. The disciples began to speak in languages they had never learned. And this does not seem to have been given them for the purpose of preaching the gospel in other lands. The one disciple who went farthest afield was St. Paul, and he was not one of them now, nor does he ever seem to have found persons who could not understand him when he spoke in Greek. The full meaning of the gift we will never know; but it seems to have been for a testimony to the unbelievers, and for communion with the Father.

But that was only its immediate and most conspicuous effect. The greatest event in historical Christianity did not exhaust itself in the "gift of tongues." What was the promise? "Ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you; and ye shall be witnesses unto Me." And immediately we perceive the promise fulfilled. For the story goes on to say that when the multitudes gathered together, Peter rose up and spoke to them. He laid no stress on the gift of tongues, but he spoke as a witness for Jesus Christ, and he spoke with a power he had never known before.

ILLUSTRATION.—Ver. 4. What the sun effects with regard to the earth, the Spirit of God produces in the world of souls. I read once of a poor, lonely girl, who lived in a narrow lane of Paris. The girl possessed a rose in a little flower-pot; it was her only joy. But the houses in the lane were so high that the whole year round no sunbeam entered her little chamber, and therefore she took her flower-pot into the open square, and placed it on the ground,

and stood by, while it drank in the light and heat of the sun! You may be living in the smoke and dust of daily cares, in the tumult of crowded busy life. You require solitude. Seek to open thy soul in prayer, that the Spirit may shine in as the ray of sun into the opening flower-bud.

III.

Acts ii. 37-47.

THE FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH.

1. "In the name of Jesus Christ" (ver. 38). The full formula is, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (Matt. xxviii. 19). St. Peter (or St. Luke reporting him) names only the Person with whom he is immediately most concerned.

2. "The gift of the Holy Ghost" (ver. 38). The word for "gift" is general, not the same as in the "gift of tongues."

3. "This untoward generation" (ver. 40). The same word is translated elsewhere "crooked."

4. "Such as should be saved" (ver. 47). Literally, "Such as were being saved." Professor Rawson Lumby explains it to mean, "the work of whose salvation was begun but needed perseverance; who had set foot in the way and were heirs through hope of ultimate salvation."

In this picture of the First Christian Church two things are described—the entrance into it, and the way of life within it. Both are described very briefly, but also very clearly.

"Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost" (ver. 38)—that is the description in St. Peter's words of the mode of entrance. It contains four things—repentance, baptism, forgiveness, and the gift of the Spirit. And it is to be noticed, as in striking contrast to the older ideas of salvation by good works, that the person has only one of them to do himself—repent. And even that is a *turning away from* what he has been doing before, not the doing of something new. In reality it is all free gift; in St. Peter's as in St. Paul's language. "Not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, lest any man should boast."

The way of life within the First Christian Church is described in the 42nd verse: "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers" (R.V.). Here again are four things named. 1. *The Apostles' Teaching*. We have just had a specimen from the lips of St. Peter. But the teaching now referred to would be more in the way of "edification" than of "conviction." No doubt the facts of the life of Christ, His death, resurrection, and ascension, and the *meaning* of these facts, were the subject of this teaching. 2. *The Fellowship*, or rather the communion. It

refers to that "having all things common" of the 4th verse. 3. *The Breaking of the Bread.* This, no doubt, means the Lord's Supper. It was partaken of "from house to house," or rather, perhaps, "at home," as the Revised Version has it. This home was, no doubt, the "upper room," which was still large enough for this purpose, and not too large to be called a home. 4. *The Prayers.* From this expression it has been concluded that there was already some recognised form of prayer in the Christian Church. But that impression is almost certainly mistaken. The phrase does convey the thought that prayer was a regular and most frequent exercise. But the prayers specially referred to were, no doubt, the regular prayers in the temple. In the next chapter we are told that Peter and John went to the temple "at the hour of prayer."

ILLUSTRATIONS.—"At home" (ver. 46, R.V.). This effort to realise on a wide scale the intensest and most perfect type of all society, the family, as a true expression for the new sacred bond of brotherhood which would knit them to the Father through the Elder Brother, appears to me to explain nearly everything which is peculiar in the arrangements of that primitive time.—J. OSWALD DYKES.

"With gladness and singleness of heart" (ver. 46). I have called this the Church's "golden age." It was its infancy, and the beauty of it is the beauty of childhood. Simplicity marked it, called in our Bible "singleness of heart"; a gracious, childlike absorption in one happy thought, careless of the future; a simplicity, which is to the sterner discipline of the Church's after history as infancy is to manhood. Shall we sigh over the disappearance of these primitive infantile beauties? There is reason that we should, if in their stead we have reached nothing manlier or more noble.—J. OSWALD DYKES.

IV.

Acts iii. 1-16.

THE LAME MAN HEALED.

1. "The hour of prayer." Morning, noon, and evening, or (roughly) nine o'clock, twelve, and three o'clock—these were the hours of prayer.

2. "His feet and ankle bones" (ver. 7). The words here used both for "feet" and "ankle bones" are technical medical expressions. St. Luke was a physician.

3. "And he leaping up" (ver. 8). It is a literal fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy (xxxv. 8): "Then shall the lame man leap as an hart."

4. "His Son Jesus" (ver. 13). The word should probably be translated "Servant," a recollection of the "Servant of the Lord" of Isaiah.

5. "Yea, the faith which is by Him" (ver. 16). That is to say, the very faith was itself the gift of Jesus Christ.

At many a beautiful gate in eastern lands to-day there may be found just such a scene as this, friends bringing the beggar to lie there, lame, blind, or leprous. And the lower gift of gold or silver they may still get flung at them by the rich man passing out and in, as no doubt even Lazarus sometimes got from the rich man of the parable. But in process of time they die as Lazarus died, without the gift of healing.

For the gift of healing is not God's noblest gift. It may not be a gift from God at all. And this story is not told because a lame man was miraculously healed.

There is a phrase which three times occurs in the story. That phrase contains its secret. First, St. Peter uses it when he speaks to the lame man: "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk." Then he twice uses it in one sentence when he begins to address the people: "His name through faith in His name hath made this man strong." Now Hebrews like St. Peter were fond of speaking in this way. For the name had a meaning in Hebrew. The name of a person was an effort to express that person's character. That is why the name of the God of Israel was looked upon with so much reverence that they dared not even pronounce it, and now we cannot tell what the true pronunciation was—Jehovah, Yahaveh, Yahveh—we cannot tell. So when St. Peter said, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk," he meant, "by the power or holiness of Jesus Christ," as he plainly tells us in the twelfth verse.

Then this miracle is recorded—

1. Because it was done by the power of that Jesus of Nazareth whom the Jews had killed. It was a proof to them (and it is a proof to us now) that He had risen from the dead.

2. It is recorded because He who has thus been proved to have risen from the dead is able to save to the uttermost all them that come unto God by Him. St. Peter was not content to tell the people that it was the power of Jesus that had healed the man. He makes that only a stepping-stone to the higher truth that that same Jesus has power to heal their (and our) spiritual diseases. That is why the story is told.

ILLUSTRATION.—Ver. 2. A story is told of a Bohemian reformer, a friend of Luther's. The city swarmed with the sick and destitute. They lay about the doors of the church. Canon Hess expostulated with the city authorities. They gave no heed. At last the Canon shut the church doors, and refused to preach. Questioned as to why he so acted, he replied: "The sick are lying on the threshold of your church, and Jesus Christ cannot come in without trampling upon them. Take them away and I will preach." Within two months a hospital was built, and the work of God revived.—NEHEMIAH CURNOCK.

V.

ACTS iv. 1-18.

PETER AND JOHN BEFORE THE COUNCIL.

1. "They preached through Jesus the resurrection from the dead" (ver. 2). The apostles made Christ's resurrection the leading topic of their preaching, because to establish that was to confirm all that Jesus claimed to be—Messiah and Son of God. But if Jesus rose from the dead, then the doctrine of the Sadducees, that there was no resurrection, was at once disproved. So they were "grieved." They were more grieved that their opinions should be proved false than they were rejoiced that the truth of the resurrection was established.

2. "Unlearned and ignorant men" (ver. 13). The Revisers have left these words, but they are certainly misleading. They do not mean unlearned and ignorant in general and in any exceptional degree. They mean no more than that Peter and John had not the *special* learning of a scribe or other official interpreter of the law.

AGAIN there is one significant phrase in this lesson, round which the whole meaning and beauty of it revolves. It is the words "filled with the Holy Ghost." If we think of Peter on the night of the betrayal, terrified by the casual question of a serving-girl into a flat denial of his Lord, and now listen to him in the presence of the whole body of the rulers of the Jews, how shall we account for the change in him? This is the explanation—"filled with the Holy Ghost." Jesus said, "Ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you." And here is St. Peter an evident witness to the fulfilment of the promise. No bolder speech was ever made in all the history of Christianity than this speech when it stood for the first time face to face with its adversaries. "Be it known unto you all, and to all the people

of Israel, that in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom ye crucified, whom God raised from the dead, even in Him doth this man stand here before you whole."

Watch the words, "Jesus Christ of Nazareth," and "whom ye crucified." He is neither ashamed of his Master's humble origin, nor afraid to bring the guilt of His death directly home to the authors of it. We ask for evidences of the truth of Christianity. Take Peter in the court of the High Priest's house on the night of the betrayal, and Peter in almost the very same spot this early morning. The difference is enormous. And nothing will explain it but that between these two there falls the gift of Pentecost.

ILLUSTRATIONS.—Ver. 13. It is not strange that the Bible should be full of the histories of men who are distinguished by the quality of boldness. Abraham leaving his country and people to found a nation in a distant land; David going forth alone to meet the giant; Daniel in the wild beasts' den; Paul giving up family and friends because he could not be disobedient to the heavenly vision; to say nothing of the faithful rank and file of the earth, the "seven thousand," the glorious minority who in all times remain God's witnesses. If our first needful prayer is, "Lord, increase our faith," the next is, "Lord, increase in us boldness," that we may not fear what man can *do to us*, nor what man can *say of us*.—ALFRED AINGER.

Ver. 13. The word translated "ignorant" means literally "a private person," one without special office or calling, or the culture which they imply; what in English might be called "a common man." It appears again in 1 Cor. xiv. 16, 23, 24, with the same meaning. Its later history is curious enough to be worth noting. The Vulgate, instead of translating the Greek word, reproduced it, with scarcely an alteration, as *idiota*. It thus passed into modern European languages with the idea of ignorance and incapacity closely attached to it, and so acquired its later sense of "idiot."

Contributed Notes.

Note on Psalm xlv. 16.

THIS is clearly a case in which a grammatical misunderstanding has created an exegetical difficulty, and where the origin of the grammatical mistake itself is to be sought in the masoretic punctuation of the Hebrew text. In all MSS. and pointed Hebrew Bibles the first part of Psalm xlv. 16 is pointed as follows: תחת אבותיך יהיו בניך, thus taking the pronominal suffix expressed in English by "*thy* fathers," "*thy* children" as a masculine; and all the commentators I have consulted (includ-

ing Delitzsch, Perowne, and Cheyne) first of all, unquestioningly, adopt the masoretic pointing of the text, and then set themselves the rather difficult task of explaining the allusion suggested by it. The fact, however, seems to be that there is no difficulty at all in the original Hebrew text, and that the true pronunciation of the words in question is תחת אבותיך יהיו בניך, the pronominal suffix being feminine and not masculine. To this conclusion I am led by the versions. The Peshitta, which is an older authority than the masoretic punctuation, translates the suffix as a feminine