

THE CENTER OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY IN ACTS:
DELIVERANCE AND DAMNATION DISPLAY THE DIVINE

Presented at the National Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society
November, 2005

© James M. Hamilton Jr., All Rights Reserved

Introduction

Acts 1:1 opens with a reference to what Jesus “began to do and teach”¹ recounted in the Gospel of Luke, indicating that this second volume will carry the narrative of Jesus’ actions and teachings forward. The risen Lord spends some forty days instructing his disciples (1:3–8) before he ascends his throne (1:9–10), where he takes his place at the right hand of God and pours out the Spirit upon his disciples (2:1–4, 33). Clothed in the Third Person with power from on high, these witnesses to the resurrection continue the teaching and healing ministry of Jesus. The signs and wonders done by Jesus continue to be done “through the apostles” (2:43; 4:16). Just as Jesus poured out the Spirit on the Apostles, the Spirit is given to the Samaritans “through the laying on of the Apostles’ hands” (8:18) and to the Gentiles through the preaching of Peter (10:34–48).² Just as God did signs and wonders through Jesus, Barnabas and Paul relate what God did through them (15:12; cf. 21:19). That Jesus continues his ministry through these witnesses to his resurrection seems to inform the prominent theme of things being done or taught in the “name” of Jesus in Acts.³

We could list a number of themes that are emphasized in the book of Acts: the

¹Unless otherwise noted all translations are my own.

²Note the verbal correspondence between Acts 2:11 and 10:46:
2:11 ἀκούομεν λαλούντων αὐτῶν ταῖς ἡμετέραις γλώσσαις τὰ μεγαλεία τοῦ θεοῦ
10:46 ἤκουον γὰρ αὐτῶν λαλούντων γλώσσαις καὶ μεγαλυνόντων τὸν θεόν.

³See Acts 2:38; 3:6, 16 (2x); 4:7, 10, 12, 17, 18, 30; 5:28, 40, 41; 8:12, 16; 9:14, 15, 16, 21, 27, 28; 10:43, 48; 15:17; 16:18; 19:5, 13, 17; 21:13; 22:16.

resurrection of Jesus; human the responsibility for his death; the availability of the forgiveness of sins; the healing ministry of the early church; the opposition to the new movement; and the praise afforded to God and Jesus, to name a just a few. It might seem that these themes are isolated, or perhaps disconnected, but in this essay I will argue that there is an organic connection between them. Moreover, I will seek to show that there is a root from which these branches grow, or, if you prefer, a central theme which holds the others in orbit as planets around the sun. This central theme of Acts, in my judgment, is also the center of biblical theology.

The message of Acts is that Jesus has been raised from the dead, that his Kingdom is inaugurated and soon to be consummated, and that the work of Kingdom building is continuing through the disciples.⁴ As N. T. Wright has argued, “For a first-century Jew, most if not all the works of healing, which form the bulk of Jesus’ mighty works, could be seen as the restoration to membership in Israel of those who, through sickness or whatever, had been excluded as ritually unclean.”⁵ In Luke’s narrative, the Apostles continue to do the mighty deeds of Jesus, and readers of Acts behold the triumph of the Crucified One over the forces of sin and death. These firstfruits of the triumph of the Kingdom of God display the organic connection between the teachings of the Apostles, the signs and wonders God continues to do through them and their associates, and the center of Biblical Theology. I have argued that the glory of God in salvation through judgment is the center of Biblical Theology,⁶ and in this essay I will seek to demonstrate that this theme is also central for the theology of the book of Acts.

We will begin where the early Christian proclamation begins, with the resurrection of

⁴I use the present tense here because when the curtain falls on Luke’s narrative in Acts 28, Paul and others are still proclaiming the Kingdom. Luke’s account ends but the drama continues.

⁵N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 191.

⁶James M. Hamilton Jr., “The Center of Biblical Theology: The Glory of God in Salvation through Judgment?” *TynBul*, forthcoming.

Jesus. From there we will take up the cross. I will proceed in this order because it follows the order of the presentation in Acts. The burden of the sermon presented in Acts 2 is the resurrection, and only later is the death of Jesus interpreted. The triumph of God in Christ through the cross and resurrection make the healings recounted in Acts possible (cf. 3:16, where the lame man is healed by faith in Jesus). As the ravages of sin are reversed in these healings, the opposition from those who fight against God (cf. 5:39) is repeatedly thwarted. God delivers through Jesus, and he damns those who gather together against him and his Messiah (cf. Ps 2:2; Acts 4:25–31). The contention of this essay is that the intended result and natural outcome of the resurrection, the forgiveness of sins available through the cross, the healings, and the overcoming of opposition to the church is the ascription of glory to the God (e.g., 2:47; 3:8–10) who has accomplished salvation through judgment. The several direct notices⁷ that God and Jesus receive glory are set forth in Table 1 below.

Table 1: The Glory of God and Jesus in Acts

Glory to God
“we hear them speaking the magnificence of God” 2:11—of those filled with the Spirit on the day of Pentecost
“praising God” 2:47—in a summary description of the early church
“all were glorifying God for what had happened, for the man was more than 40 years old” 4:21—healing of the lame man in 3:1–10
“he saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God” 7:55–56—Stephen as he is martyred
“speaking in tongues and declaring the greatness of God” 10:46—of those filled with the Spirit at Cornelius’ home
“and they glorified God saying, so then also to the Gentiles God has granted repentance unto

⁷Indirect ascriptions of glory to God include the statements that people feared God (2:43; 5:5, 11; 9:31), God’s assertions that he will display wonders (4:30; 5:12; 14:3), all the references to the “name of Jesus” (see note 3 above), and the many statements of Scripture fulfillment, which show that God has kept his word.

life” 11:18—Spirit poured out at Cornelius’ home
“And immediately the angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give the glory to God” 12:23—Herod’s death
“the gentiles were rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord” 13:48—at Pisidian Antioch in response to the gospel coming to them
“they were glorifying God” 21:20—the brothers in Jerusalem hearing Paul’s report
Jesus glorified/exalted/magnified
“having been exalted to the right hand of God” 2:33—Peter speaking of Jesus in his Pentecost sermon
“God made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified” 2:36—Peter speaking of Jesus in his Pentecost sermon
“the God of our fathers glorified his servant Jesus” 3:13—Peter preaching after the healing of the lame man
“God exalted him to his right hand as Champion and Savior” 5:31—Peter and the apostles before the Sanhedrin
“rejoicing . . . that they were counted worthy to be dishonored for the name” 5:41—the apostles after being beaten
“and it came about that there was much joy in that city” 8:8—after Phillip preaches the gospel, does signs, exorcisms, and healings (8:4–7)
“he was going on his way rejoicing” 8:39—the Ethiopian Eunuch after believing and being baptized
“and the name of Jesus was magnified” 19:17—when people hear of the demonic response to the seven sons of Sceva

One of Luke’s missionary companions once declared that since all things are from God, through God, and for God, glory should therefore be ascribed to him forever (Rom 11:36). This perspective seems to have been shared by Luke.

The Resurrection: A False Verdict Overturned

When the apostles reconstitute themselves as a complete 12, they are portrayed as stating that “it is necessary” to have someone take the place of Judas as “a witness to the resurrection”

(1:21–22). It was hardly expected that the Messiah would be crucified by the Romans, and such an end seems to have been taken as evidence that the dead man was not, in fact, the Messiah.⁸ Acts opens in the first weeks, months, and years after the crucifixion that Luke narrated in his first volume. He portrays the early church explaining that the crucifixion of Jesus was an act of wicked injustice. The witnesses to the resurrection hold their contemporaries, along with the leadership of the Jewish people, responsible for the death of Jesus, and they proclaim again and again that after men killed Jesus God raised him up. This proclamation of the resurrection is intended to counter the reproach of the crucifixion.

Luke portrays Peter and Paul consistently articulating the responsibility borne by the inhabitants of Jerusalem for the death of Jesus. Implicit in this assertion is the claim that the death of Jesus is not evidence of divine displeasure, and this is supplemented by the asseverations that God planned the events to turn out this way (2:23; 4:28). Further, God attested to Jesus by signs and wonders (2:22). The prayer in Acts 4:30 is that the signs and wonders by which God showed Jesus to be the Messiah would now continue through his name. These statements are accompanied by the declaration that God has raised Jesus from the dead. The crucifixion fails to prove that Jesus was not the Messiah, the people are responsible for it, and God has not only not endorsed the false verdict, he has reversed it by raising Jesus from the dead.⁹ These main elements—that people are responsible for the death of Jesus and that God has raised him from the dead—are asserted side by side five times in the Gospel of Luke and six times in Acts. Table 2 sets these statements of human responsibility for the death of Jesus next to the statements of God’s vindicating resurrection of Jesus.

⁸See the examples of Theudas and Judas the Galilean in Acts 5:37–38.

⁹Luke portrays Stephen describing a similar pattern in the lives of Joseph and Moses (Acts 7:9, 35). Both were rejected by their kinsmen but affirmed by God, providing a typological pattern that would be fulfilled in Jesus. .

Table 2: Wicked Men Killed Jesus and God Raised Him from the Dead

<i>People Responsible for the Death of Jesus</i>	<i>God Raised Jesus from the Dead</i>
1) The Messiah would suffer at the hands of men (Luke 9:22; 18:33; 24:7, 26, 46)	1) And rise from the dead on the third day (Luke 9:22; 18:33; 24:7, 26, 46)
2) You Killed Him (2:23)	2) God raised him (2:24)
3) And you killed the Champion of Life (3:15)	3) Whom God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses (3:15)
4) Jesus the Messiah of Nazareth, whom you crucified (4:10)	4) Whom God raised from the dead (4:10)
5) Whom you put to death (5:30)	5) The God of our Fathers raised Jesus (5:30)
6) Whom also they killed, having hung him upon a tree (10:39)	6) This one God raised on the third day (10:40)
7) They asked Pilate for him to be put to death (13:28)	7) But God raised him from the dead (13:30)

Each of these statements in the Gospel of Luke is presented as having been spoken by Jesus, so that when Peter (Acts 3:15; 4:10; 5:30; 10:39–40) and Paul (13:28–30) both continue to proclaim virtually the same message it is clear that they are continuing the ministry of Jesus. The repeated assertion of human responsibility for the death of Jesus in Acts establishes that God is justly calling men to account for the miscarriage of justice that resulted in the death of the Righteous One. Those who crucified Jesus did what they wanted to do, and what they did was evil. God has not overlooked this fact, and the early church is not silent about it either: “God made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus, whom you crucified” (2:36). Even as the word of condemnation comes to those responsible, however, full pardon is offered. The forgiveness of sins proclaimed by the early church is a forgiveness that comes to people who realize that they stand condemned, repent, and trust in the mercy of God. This forgiveness that follows repentance is first presented as something announced by Jesus (Luke 24:46), and it is offered each time human responsibility for the death of Jesus and God’s response in raising him is stated in Acts. Table 3 below highlights the note of forgiveness sounded in each of the passages cited in Table 2. The only slight deviation is where Acts 4:12 speaks of “salvation” in place of “forgiveness of

sins.”

Table 3: The Offer of Forgiveness

“. . . ‘Thus it has been written that the Messiah should suffer and rise from the dead . . . and for <i>repentance</i> unto <i>forgiveness of sins</i> to be proclaimed in his name to all the nations’ (Luke 24:46–47—this forgiveness is not announced in Luke until after the resurrection)
“And Peter said to them, ‘ <i>Repent!</i> ’ He said, ‘And each one of you must be baptized in the name of Jesus the Messiah <i>for the forgiveness of your sins</i> and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 2:38)
“ <i>Repent</i> , then, and turn so that <i>your sins might be wiped away</i> ” (3:19)
“And there is no <i>salvation</i> in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men in which it is necessary for us <i>to be saved</i> ” (4:12).
“God exalted this one as Champion and Savior to his right hand to grant <i>repentance</i> to Israel and <i>forgiveness of sins</i> ” (5:31).
“In this one all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives <i>forgiveness of sins</i> through his name” (10:43).
“Therefore let it be known to you, men, brothers, that through this one <i>forgiveness of sins</i> is proclaimed to you. . .” (13:38).

Table 3 shows that each time the apostles call their contemporaries to account for the death of Jesus they accompany the condemning word with an offer of salvation. The death and resurrection of Jesus results in the proclamation of the forgiveness of sins. Salvation comes through judgment. Those who are guilty are condemned, judged, and if their condemnation brings about repentance and faith, they are saved.

We see the final element of what I am arguing, that salvation through judgment results in glory for God, when we see that in each of the contexts under discussion, those who receive the good news respond by rejoicing in God. Table 4 draws attention to these statements.

Table 4: The Rejoicing of the Redeemed

“And having worshiped him they returned to Jerusalem with great joy” (Luke 24:52)
“And daily they continued in the temple with one accord . . . praising God” (Acts 2:46–47)
“All were praising God for what had happened” (4:21)
“. . . they went to their own and reported . . . and having heard they raised their voice to God with one accord” (4:23–24)
“rejoicing . . . that they were counted worthy to be dishonored for the name” (5:41)

“speaking in tongues and declaring the greatness of God” (10:46)
--

“the gentiles were rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord” (13:48)

It seems that from these texts where the apostles declare that wicked men are responsible for the death of Jesus, that God has raised him from the dead and offers forgiveness to the guilty, and that those who repent and believe then praise God, we can say that in Luke and Acts God is glorified in salvation through judgment.

These explanations of the crucifixion are necessary because of the astonishing nature of the events of the Messiah’s life. Luke not only insists on the innocence of Jesus, he seeks to show that however surprised readers of the OT might be by a crucified Messiah, the OT necessitated just this. In Table 5 below, Luke 24:25–27, Acts 3:18; and 17:2–3 are all quoted. The *necessity* these texts point to results from what the OT indicated would take place. Since the OT predicted this, it had to happen. Indicators of OT prediction and the resulting necessity are italicized in the Table. Statements regarding the suffering of the Messiah are in bold print. Luke puts the statement in Luke 24 on the lips of Jesus, the one in Acts 3 is ascribed to Peter, and the one in Acts 17 describes Paul’s activity, again underscoring the continuity between the message of Jesus, Peter, and Paul.

Table 5: Messiah’s Death and Resurrection Necessitated by Scripture

“And he said to them, ‘O fools and slow in heart to believe in all that the <i>prophets</i> spoke. <i>Were not these things necessary—for the Messiah to suffer</i> and to enter into his glory?’ And beginning from <i>Moses</i> and from <i>all of the prophets</i> he interpreted for them in <i>all the Scriptures</i> the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:25–27).
--

“But God, the things he proclaimed <i>through the mouth of all the prophets</i> for his Messiah to suffer , he <i>fulfilled</i> in this way (Acts 3:18; cf. 3:21).

“And according to custom for Paul, he went to them and upon three Sabbaths disputed with them from <i>the Scriptures</i> , opening and setting side by side that <i>it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer</i> and to rise from the dead, and that this is the Messiah, Jesus, whom I proclaim to you” (Acts 17:2–3).

“. . . I stand testifying to both small and great, saying nothing except what <i>both the prophets and Moses said would take place</i> , that the Messiah would suffer , that being first from the resurrection of the dead he would proclaim light both to the people and to the Gentiles” (Acts 26:22–23).

In Acts salvation through judgment is primarily expressed in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The focus of the early Christian proclamation is on the judgment of God that reverses the evil verdict of those who crucified Jesus. God's justice is manifested as he raises Jesus from the dead and also as he calls the perpetrators of that injustice to account through the preaching of the apostles. God's salvation is put on display in the proclamation that Jesus was raised from the dead. Significantly, this is not a deliverance *from* the cross but a deliverance accomplished *through* the death on the cross. Had there been no death there would have been no resurrection. There are several ways that this salvation through judgment glorifies God. God's power is demonstrated in his victory over sin and death. God's holiness is honored in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus so that forgiveness can be offered to the guilty. God's love is shown in his elaborate plan to reveal himself and save sinners. This salvation through judgment is worked out through the lives of people who are judged for the way they live, become convicted, and are saved through that experience of judgment. God is glorified as those who formerly scorned him show him due reverence. The in-breaking kingdom also manifests deliverance through damnation as the outworkings of the curse—disease, disability, and demonic oppression—are overcome. Here again, the salvation comes through the judgment of the evil forces and the triumph over them accomplished by the victorious Christ.

The Cross: The Display of God's Justice

There is a prior salvation through judgment on which the salvation through judgment experienced by the repentant is based. This is the salvation accomplished by Jesus on the cross, as he is judged by the holiness of God on behalf of his people. Jesus is judged, and he suffers the penalty due his people that they might be saved. He is damned and they are delivered. Luke established this interpretation of the death of Jesus in his Gospel as he portrayed Jesus explaining his death to his disciples on the night he was betrayed. There we read, "And having taken bread, having given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them saying, 'This is my body which is given for you; this do in remembrance of me.' And the cup likewise after the supper, saying, 'This cup is

the New Covenant in my blood which is poured out for you” (Luke 22:19–20). This presents the death of Jesus on the cross as him *being given on behalf of* (ὑπέρ) his disciples. The fact that it is the *New Covenant* in the *blood of Jesus* matches the way that the *Old Covenant* was also entered into with *the blood of sacrificial animals* (Exod 24:5–8).

Jesus’ death on the cross is the place where God’s justice is satisfied so that those who are represented by Jesus can be forgiven. This understanding of the cross is also articulated in Acts 8 when Philip explains Isaiah 53 to the Ethiopian eunuch (8:30–35). Several features of the context in Acts 8 indicate that the Eunuch is reading more than the isolated verses of Isaiah that Luke cites. While Luke only quotes Isaiah 53:7b–8a the whole passage, and perhaps the whole section of Isaiah, is in view.¹⁰ Right before Phillip arrived at his chariot to hear him reading Isaiah 53:7b–8a, the Eunuch would have been reading the words, “to whom it has not been proclaimed concerning him, they will see, and those who have not heard, they will understand” (Isa 52:15b).¹¹ He would have read,

He bore our sins and was pained for us And he was wounded on account of our sins and he was made weak on account of our sins; the punishment of our peace was upon him, by his stripes we are healed. We all like sheep have gone astray, a man has wandered in his

¹⁰(1) Luke describes Phillip coming on the Eunuch “reading Isaiah the prophet” (ἀνεγίνωσκεν τὸν προφήτην Ἰσαΐαν [8:28]; αὐτοῦ ἀναγινώσκοντος Ἰσαΐαν τὸν προφήτην [8:30]). In verse 28 the verb “reading” is an imperfect, and in verse 30 it is a participle, both of which communicate ongoing action. (2) If the Eunuch is reading before Phillip arrives and hears the words quoted by Luke, he has presumably read all of Isaiah to that point, and has probably just read the whole passage beginning from Isa 52:13. (3) The Eunuch’s question regarding who the prophet is speaking of (Acts 8:34) appears to be informed by the use of the word “servant” in Isa 40–66, where at points the servant appears to be the nation, at points an individual, and at points Isaiah himself. The Eunuch’s question naturally arises in the mind of an attentive reader of these chapters of Isaiah. (4) Before quoting Isa 53:7a–8b, Luke states, “Now the *passage* of Scripture which he was reading was this” (Acts 8:32). The term translated “passage,” περιοχή, refers to a “section of a book” (LSJ, 1381; cf. BDAG, 803).

¹¹Here I have translated the Greek of Isaiah presented in the Rahlfs text (*Septuaginta*, ed. Alfred Rahlfs [Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1935, 1979]). The wording of Acts 8:32–33 in the NA²⁷, except for the bracketed pronoun, corresponds exactly to the wording of the Rahlfs text of Isa 53:7b–8a. Unless otherwise noted, all reference to the Greek OT in this essay are to the Rahlfs text.

own way; and the Lord gave him over for our sins (53:4a, 5–6).

John Walton has recently proposed a stimulating ancient Near-Eastern background for this text,¹² and this background fits very well with the interpretation of the text Luke shows Phillip giving to the Ethiopian Eunuch. Just as the substitute king ritual of the ancient Near-East satisfied the wrath of the god(s) against the king and the people he represented, so Isaiah 53 seems to be interpreted by the early Christians as an indication that Israel’s King Messiah suffered for his people. The view that the death of Jesus is interpreted through Isaiah 53 is expressed as Luke recounts that “having begun from that Scripture Phillip proclaimed the gospel of Jesus to him” (Acts 8:35).

Other points of contact between Acts and Isaiah 53 include Acts 3:16, where Luke recounts Peter claiming that “The God of our fathers glorified (ἐδόξασεν) his servant (τὸν παῖδα αὐτοῦ) Jesus whom you handed over (παρεδώκατε). . .” This matches Isaiah 52:13, where we read, “Behold my servant (ὁ παῖς μου) will be wise and exalted and greatly glorified (δοξασθήσεται).” Isaiah 53:6 and 12 use the verb “handed over” (παρέδωκεν [v.6], παρεδόθη [v.12, 2x]) with reference to the servant being delivered up for the sins of his people.¹³ Later in the speech Luke has Peter saying, “Having raised up his servant (τὸν παῖδα αὐτοῦ), God sent him to you first, blessing you when each one of you turns from your sins” (3:26). The verbal connection to Isaiah through the use of the term παῖς¹⁴ is here accompanied by the thematic link to the references to what the servant would accomplish by his death in Isaiah 53:10c–12,

¹²John H. Walton, “The Imagery of the Substitute King Ritual in Isaiah’s Fourth Servant Song,” *JBL* 122 (2003): 734–43.

¹³In Isaiah 53:6 the Lord “handed over” the servant, while in Acts 3:13 Luke shows Peter charging the people who gather to hear what he has to say with “handing over” Jesus. This tension is also present in Acts 2:23, where the killing of Jesus by the people is stated to be “by the ordained plan and foreknowledge of God.” God ordained the crucifixion but the people are nevertheless responsible for it. That Isaiah 53:6 attributes the handing over to God is reflected in Romans 3:25 where Paul states that God put Jesus forward as a sacrifice of propitiation.

¹⁴This term is also used of Jesus in Acts 4:27 and 30.

And the Lord was pleased to take from the pain of his soul, to show to him light and to form for understanding, for the Righteous one (δίκαιον) to justify (δικαιῶσαι) serving well for the many, and he himself will bear their sins. On account of this he will inherit many and he will divide plunder with the strong, because his soul was given over to death, and he was reckoned among the lawless; and he bore the sins of many and on account of their sins he was handed over.

Just as the servant will see “light,” Jesus was raised up (Isa 53:11; Acts 3:26). Just as the servant would serve the many, Jesus blesses those who repent at Peter’s word (Isa 53:11; Acts 3:26). The servant is referred to as “the Righteous one” in Isaiah 53:11 and Luke has Jesus referred to as “the Righteous one” in Acts 3:14 and 22:14.

The statement in Isaiah 53:11 that the Lord was pleased “for the Righteous one to justify, serving well the many,” also corresponds to the words Luke shows Paul proclaiming in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch. In Acts 13:38–39 we read, “Let it be known to you, men who are brothers, that on account of this one forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and from all which you were not able to be justified (δικαιωθῆναι) in the law of Moses, in this one everyone who believes is justified (δικαιοῦται).”

The forgiveness of sins proclaimed by the early church in Acts (2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18) is available because of the death of Jesus. God’s justice is demonstrated as the due penalty for sin is paid and the sins of those who believe in Jesus are borne by him on the cross. The salvation proclaimed by the early church is available because of the judgment of sin at the cross. Salvation comes through judgment for the glory of God as his righteousness is upheld and his mercy is freely offered.

Healings and Mighty Works: Deliverance and Damnation

In biblical theology, the activity of unclean spirits, the corruption, decay, and death of the human body, and the ravages of the forces of nature are all outworkings of the alienation introduced by the rebellion of creatures against the Creator. Genesis 3:15 recounts the words of God’s judgment against the serpent. In this judgment, however, we also receive intonations of a promise of life that would overcome death. Though God had promised that the man would die in

the day he ate of the tree, in the announcement that the woman's seed would crush the head of the serpent Adam hears a promise of life and so he names Eve the mother of all living (Gen 3:20). There appears to have been some hope for a reversal of the other curses as well, as evidenced by the response at the birth of Noah. Echoing the language of the curse in Genesis 3:17, Lamech is presented as saying, "This one will give us rest from our work and from the pain of our hands from the ground which Yahweh cursed" (Gen 5:29).

As Jesus comes driving out unclean spirits, healing, and even overcoming death in the Gospel of Luke, it seems the hope for the one who would open the way to Eden has been realized.¹⁵ He is crucified, but death has no power to hold him (Acts 2:24). He ascends his throne and continues the work of inaugurating his Kingdom through his witnesses. Thus it is that the apostles and their associates drive out unclean spirits (e.g. Phillip, 8:6; Paul, 18:12), heal the lame (Peter, 9:34; Paul, 14:8–10), and raise the dead (Peter, 9:40; Paul, 20:9–10). These mighty works point to the salvation that has come through the judgment of the forces of evil and death. Jesus the Risen Lord has triumphed over them, and the exercise of his authority over the forces he has judged results in praise for God from those who are redeemed from the futility of the fallen order (see Tables 1 and 4 above for texts).

Fighting against God: Vain Opposition to the Messiah's Kingdom

Yet another way in which God triumphs in judgment in Acts has to do with those who, in the words of Gamaliel, find themselves "fighting against God" (Acts 5:39). This motif of those who fight against God by opposing the church can be seen in the opposition to and martyrdom of Stephen (6:9–8:1). The opposition scatters the church, and leading the charge against the Messiah and his people is Saul (8:3; 9:1–2, 4–5). Herod joins the campaign by killing James and imprisoning Peter (12:1–3). The Jews also oppose the new movement when Paul begins to

¹⁵Jesus is presented saying to the thief on the cross, "Today you will be with me in paradise," (Luke 23:43), and παράδεισος can refer to the Garden of Eden (BDAG, s.v.).

proclaim Jesus as Messiah (13:45; 14:19 etc.).

The opposition to the early church reveals the outcome of all attempts to fight against God. The relentless growth of the church is due to the fact that God is the one adding to its numbers (see 1:15; 2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:1, 7). The scattering of believers from Jerusalem results in the Samaritans (8:12) and the Ethiopian Eunuch (8:27–38) coming to faith.¹⁶ Saul's opposition to the church results in his conversion (9:1–22). Herod's attempt to take glory that belongs to God results in his death (12:23). Tellingly, Luke follows the notice of Herod's death with the statement that the Word of God continued to triumph (12:24). Fighting against God results in conversion in Saul's case, and death in Herod's. The war on God has no chance of success. The Jews try to no avail to stop the advance of the gospel by opposing Paul. The Romans lock him up, but the Word continues to roam freely as jailers get converted (16:25–34) and people come to where Paul is to hear the good news of the Kingdom (28:30–31).

Conclusion: The Glory of God in Salvation through Judgment

God's justice is seen in his righteous reversal of the unjust condemnation of Jesus, in his just calling to account of those who perpetrated that crime, and in the proclamation that forgiveness of sins is available through Jesus. Forgiveness is available through Jesus because Jesus has satisfied God's justice in his death on the cross.

Thus, the justice of God is of a piece with the salvation of God. God demonstrates his mercy by making a way for sins to be forgiven through the death of Jesus. Upholding his justice through the death of Jesus, God can extend mercy to guilty people who deserve only justice. This mercy is offered to those who crucified the Messiah, and the redemptive mercy of God is put on display through the healings and teachings that the witnesses to the resurrection do in Acts.

God's justice and his mercy balance one another. The justice keeps the mercy from becoming insipid sentimentality, while the mercy keeps the justice from crushing all with just

¹⁶See also 10:44–48; 11:21, 24; 12:24; 13:43, 48–49; 14:1, 21; 16:5; 18:10; 19:20.

punishment. Justice and mercy serve a higher aim, as well, for both display God and evoke the glory that God rightly deserves. Deliverance and damnation display the Divine.