

Everybody's Heart-Knower

“Then they prayed, ‘Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs.’ Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles.” Acts 1:24-26

Between the Ascension and Pentecost, that is, between the promise of the Holy Spirit and the giving of the Holy Spirit, Luke felt it was important to describe the acts of the apostles. This ten day waiting period provides an interesting case study in faithfulness. Luke demonstrates not only a historian’s attention to detail but a concern to set the record straight. What initially may seem unimportant, a mere footnote to the forthcoming experience of Pentecost, upon closer reflection proves significant for several reasons. This section affirms the disciple’s obedience, their commitment to prayer, their acceptance of Peter’s leadership, their capacity to deal with the legacy of Judas, and their dependence on God’s guidance. Luke offers us a valuable perspective in group dynamics and spiritual direction.

Waiting upon God

Learning how to wait upon God became the first priority and the first lesson in the Book of Acts. Before the ascension, Jesus commanded, “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised . . .” (1:4). Luke is careful to describe the apostles’ compliance to this command in remarkable, if not in precise detail. It is as if they retraced their steps back to Jerusalem, up the stairs, to the room where they were staying (whether to the “upper room” (Lk 22:11) or the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark (Acts 12:12), we do not know). The reference to “a Sabbath’s day’s walk from the city” (less than a mile) indicates the distance a devoted Jew was permitted to travel on the Sabbath. Luke’s attention to this scrupulous detail parallels the disciple’s intention to comply exactly with Jesus’ command.

There is no substitute for simple obedience. When life gets difficult and confusing, when the people we have depended on are called away, there is a strong tendency for us to cut loose and do our own thing. Our impulse to do the opposite of what we are commanded to do is strong. It is especially important, when we feel alone or forsaken or abandoned or confused, to put one step in front of the other, in simple obedience. That is what the disciples did and that is what we should do. What’s your next step?

Luke’s narrative description of simple obedience reminds me of my mother in two ways. First, many of us learned to trust in God and obey his word from our mothers. As the apostle Paul said to Timothy, “I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also” (2 Tim 1:5). It is all too easy to wander away from this simple obedience to God and His Word and turn to meaningless talk and

*action (1 Tim 1:6). Due to our wilful predisposition to sin, there is a strong tendency to demean simple obedience simply because our parents taught us to obey. We ought to realize that because we were taught **as children** to obey God's Word does not mean that simple obedience is childish or easy! We do well to recall the words of Proverbs:*

My child, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart, for they will prolong your life many years and bring you prosperity. Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. Then you will win favor and a good name in the sight of God and people. Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and shun evil" (3:1-7).

The second way that this narrative reminds me of my mother relates to her recent death. There is a pattern in these post ascension events that guides us in dealing with grief and loss. The apostles had grown to love and depend upon Jesus and now he was gone. They had a choice, they could flounder in their confusion or follow his commands. They could resent his departure or accept his direction. When a loved one dies we may be tempted out of self-pity to blame God for the loss or to blame ourselves for what we should have done. In this situation, what is needed is simple obedience. For me personally it meant preaching the next Sunday, finishing our study in the Book of Revelation, going to Ghana, in other words, it meant putting one step in front of the other in simple obedience.

For the disciples, the first order of business was to return to Jerusalem and stay together. In other words, no fishing trips, no excursions, no space for independent, individualistic action. The first prerequisite for Christian solidarity was being together in one place. We tend to think of waiting upon God as a private, personal experience, but the apostles experienced waiting upon God as a group effort. Our solitary disposition is in contrast to their solidarity. We can learn from their example. This diverse group of people, made up of head-strong personalities and divergent backgrounds, including Matthew the former tax collector and Simon the political radical, came together as one.

Luke's list of names is the same as it was in his Gospel with a few interesting variations (Lk 6:14-16). Simon becomes Peter and instead of being grouped with his biological brother Andrew he is grouped with the other lead apostle, John. Along with the disciples, Luke refers to the women, presumably meaning Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna (Lk 8:2-3), but he might also be referring to some of the wives of the men. Special mention is made of "Mary the mother of Jesus" and his brothers (Mt 13:55; Mk 6:3). In the past they had been unbelieving (Mk 3:21, 31-34; Jn 7:5), but now they believed and belonged to the intimate group of disciples (1 Cor 15:7). "This is the last mention of Mary in the New Testament, and significantly, our last glimpse of her is, as it were, on her knees" (Williams, 13).

They ate together, slept together and most importantly they prayed together. Luke tells us that "they all joined together constantly in prayer" (1:14). In his Gospel, Luke says that the apostles "returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God" (Lk 24:52-53). Clearly, they saw no need to break with their regular patterns of worship in the

temple. “The believers saw themselves simply as fulfilled Judaism, the beginning of the eschatological Israel. Their practice continued to be that of Jews” (Williams, 12). In fact, one of the reasons that Luke wrote Acts was to commend the followers of Christ to the Roman authorities as proponents of “the purest form of Judaism” (Stott, 27). Jesus Christ came in fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies. To deny his identity as the Messiah was to deny what Judaism stood for. This theme is consistent with the New Testament message. True Judaism is not a matter of ethnicity nor outward ritual, but of inner heartfelt conviction led by the Spirit (Rom 2:29). “If you belong to Christ,” Paul said, “then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal 3:29).

Continuous praise in the Temple was combined with persistent, persevering prayer in the upper room. Simple obedience was followed by constant prayer. They were together not only physically but prayerfully. It is important to understand that the leadership, biblical interpretation, and action that follows flows from this simple obedience and sustained prayer. We learn that the group now numbers 120, which is the minimum number of men required to constitute a new community with a council (Stott, 52; Williams, 13). As in the Gospels, Peter continues as the spokesman and leader.

Peter and Judas

We should pause and reflect on the fact that Peter’s leadership is nothing short of a miracle of reconciling grace. After denying the Lord Jesus three times it seems odd that he should assume the leadership and manifest such boldness. How on earth was Peter qualified to preside over this group of 120 men, plus women, and bring closure to the tragic affair of Judas? Yet Peter’s tone is resolute, his thinking clear and his decision-making bold. From a human standpoint he did not deserve to lead and from a religious point-of-view he had no right to preside, but by the grace of God, a forgiven and restored Peter was called to lead and to bring closure to the Judas saga.

Judas and Peter invite comparison, but their situations were radically different. Jesus exposed Judas, but he warned Peter. He spoke of being betrayed to let Judas know that he was fully aware of his betrayer’s deception and treachery. Judas’ feigned innocence (‘Surely not I, Rabbi?’) thinly concealed a heart that had grown hard and resistant to Jesus. Judas hated Jesus, and Jesus knew it. He pronounced Judas’ verdict even before he committed the act: “Woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born” (Mt 26:23-25). On another occasion he said, “Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil!” (Jn 6:70). After the betrayal, we are told by Matthew, that Judas was “seized with remorse.” He tried to return the thirty pieces of silver. “I have sinned,” he announced, “for I have betrayed innocent blood.” “What is that to us?” the chief priests and elders replied. “That’s your responsibility” (Mt 27:4). There is no indication that Judas had any attachment to Jesus other than a realization in the end that he had wronged an innocent man. He was distraught and in despair. According to Peter, Judas’ remorse stopped short of repentance. His despair did not lead to deliverance and the finality of his suicide sealed his tragic and willful determination.

The difference between Judas and Peter is the difference between exposing a deceptive heart and warning a weak heart. It is the difference between contempt for what Jesus stands for and false confidence in one's ability to stand for Jesus. Treachery is different from timidity. Both may lead to sin, but being hateful is different from being hurtful. Judas wanted to expose Jesus as a fraud, but Peter wanted to be faithful to Jesus. Judas was filled with regret, but Peter was filled with repentance. We are meant to see ourselves in Peter, but no one was ever meant to identify with Judas. Both Peter's ability to lead and the acceptance of his leadership bear testimony to the grace of Christ at work in both his heart and in the hearts of the believers.

In this first of many speeches that Peter makes in the Book of Acts, he turns to the Psalms for God's insight and direction. This is in keeping with their custom of praying the Psalms and relying on the Holy Spirit to draw out the meaning of the biblical text for their situation. Persistent prayer led the apostles to Psalm 69 and the Holy Spirit led Peter to draw a connection between the psalmist's enemies and Judas. It is ironic that the very psalms, the psalms of imprecation, that we most readily distance ourselves from because of the Gospel of Christ's love, are the psalms that Peter used to bring closure to the Judas saga. Peter stood up among the believers and said, "Brothers and sisters, long ago the Holy Spirit spoke through the mouth of David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus, and that Scripture had to be fulfilled. Judas was one of our number and shared in this ministry" (1:16-17; see Jn 13:18; 17:12; Mt 26:47ff). Peter made two points: first, he used the psalm to describe Judas' end; then, he used Psalm 109 to describe what they should do about it. Undoubtedly the disciples had become quite familiar with Psalm 69 because it had been used to describe Jesus' suffering and zeal (Jn 2:17; 15:25; Rom 11:9-11; 15:3). But Peter used it here to make sense of Judas' demise. He quoted verse 25, "May his place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in it." He followed this with a line from Psalm 109:8, "May another take his place of leadership."

Joseph Barsabbas and Matthias

Luke preserves the thirty second sound bite and sums up the actions the disciples felt led to take in order to bring closure and move forward. It is likely that Peter talked much longer than a few seconds and that he elaborated on the meaning of each of these psalms. What is important, however, is that Peter after much prayer felt led by the Holy Spirit to bring a verdict on Judas' actions and fill his position. Presumably the apostles saw this as "old business," something to be completed before the next phase of God's work. Some have argued that this was another case of Peter's well intentioned, but missed-guided action, but it is hard to make this case when Luke emphasizes Peter and the apostles' simple obedience, persistent prayer, and Spirit-led biblical interpretation.

Waiting upon God led them to take this action. The apostles wanted to honor Jesus' precedent-setting selection of 12 disciples, which was symbolic of the 12 tribes of Israel and consistent with their representation of the eschatological Israel. "If the early church was to be accepted as enjoying direct continuity with, indeed as being the fulfillment of, Old Testament Israel, the number of founders must not be depleted" (Stott, 57). The qualifications were simple: "It is

necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection" (Acts 1:21).

Two men were nominated to join the eleven, Joseph Barsabbas, nicknamed Justus, and Matthias. Then they prayed, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs" (1:24-25). Literally, they called the Lord Jesus everybody's 'heart-knower' (*kardiagnostes*). The phrase recalls the word of the Lord to Samuel, when he said, ". . .the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart" (1 Sam 16:7). It is important to see that this process is both deliberate and intentionally random. Both men were qualified and carefully selected out of a large group of possible nominees. There may have been very little or nothing to choose between Joseph and Matthias (Bruce, 51). Instead of voting, they cast lots. Following their careful deliberation and continuous prayer, they intentionally sought to make room for God's choice through their random action. The advantage of the process was to follow God's direction as far as determining and matching qualifications to the nominees and then turning the final choice over to the Lord. Their action was in keeping with Proverbs 16:33, which says, "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord" or, as the Message translates it, "Make your motions and cast your votes, but God has the final say." It is interesting to note that in the first chapter of Luke's Gospel, Zechariah was *chosen by lot* to serve in the temple (Lk 1:9).

After doing their part, the disciples made a point of reminding themselves that the final decision was in God's hands. This is true for us, as well. In ways that we tend to forget, our lives are governed by the sovereign will of God. It is ironic, isn't it, that we do not choose the very people that have such a profound influence over our lives. We don't get to choose our mothers. We have no vote. It is a relationship that is given to us, not earned or chosen by us. We are not the atomistic, individualistic particle of being, in need of self-definition, that the postmodernist says we are. We are born or adopted into families and given mothers without ever casting a vote. It seems to me that we can resent this state of affairs or rest in God's sovereignty and turn to the Lord for his grace and mercy. What we do know is that in Christ, God loves us and seeks our salvation. What was said to ancient Israel in the days of Jeremiah still applies to the people of God today:

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you," declares the Lord, "I will bring you back from captivity" (Jer 29:11-14).

I imagine that neither Matthias nor Joseph's lives changed much because of the decision to replace Judas. Neither one was ever mentioned again, but nor were most of the other eleven disciples ever mentioned again, including Mary. By the time James was executed it was considered unnecessary to fill his position (Acts 12:2). The emerging Body of Christ replaced a self-perpetuating twelve man apostleship. I doubt if Joseph felt snubbed and went off disappointed and upset that he had not been selected. It was true then as it is today, that there are

plenty of opportunities for bearing witness and serving Christ and His Kingdom.

Some question the selection of Matthias. Campbell Morgan wrote, “The election of Matthias was wrong. . . .He was a good man, but the wrong man for this position. . . .I am not prepared to omit Paul from the twelve, believing that he was God’s man for filling the gap” (Morgan, 19-20, quoted in Stott, 58). Of course Paul did not qualify to be the twelfth apostle because he had not been with the disciples “the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us” (1:21). Others are dismissive of the process, claiming that such a method would be inappropriate today, because the Spirit has been given to the Church. I am not so sure about that. I believe that the apostles’ action was exemplary from beginning to end. They practiced simple obedience, persistent prayer, true solidarity, Spirit-led biblical interpretation, common sense in determining qualifications and wisdom in selecting the nominees. If, after all that, they pray once again, and turn the matter over to the Lord for the final determination instead of having the last word by their vote, who can fault them? We may assume more than we should when it comes to decision-making. Perhaps, we would do well to follow the example of the apostles, who placed their trust in the Lord, everybody’s heart-knower.

This deference to the Lord is critical, because we know he seeks people “after his own heart” (1 Sam 13:14; Acts 13:22). Perhaps, we need to be more cognizant of this when discerning God’s will on our relationships. This is critical as well in our self-understanding. “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps 139:23-24).