

Choosing Leaders

Acts 1:12-26 on September 20, 2020
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Please read Acts 1:12-26 before going further in this transcript.

As I first began to dig into this week's text, I began to wonder: Why did Luke include verses 12-26?¹ It seems like it might have made more sense to jump ahead right into Acts 2. After all, that's when the HS comes at Pentecost! That's what we're all waiting for! THAT'S... the exciting stuff! Of all the many things that were going on in the life of the early church, why do we need to know this material? One of the things that Luke records in verses 12-26, are the names of the Apostles. Acts 1:13 says, "Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James." Apparently, that last name there, "Judas," was a pretty common name, because there were actually two guys named "Judas" who were close followers of Jesus. "Judas son of James" was one of them. The other one, was "Judas Iscariot." In other words, there should be 2 Judases in this list. It gets a little awkward at this point. This is the proverbial "elephant in the upper room." Luke reminds all of us about Judas' horrible betrayal of Jesus, and then he tells us how the early church went about choosing a leader to replace Judas. Judas' replacement was a guy named Matthias. But we never hear another word about Matthias after Acts 1. So why, why did Luke feel the need to record vv. 12-26 for us? Good question. I'm glad that you asked. Today, we're going to dig into this text a bit and do some investigating.

Please open your Bible to Acts 1:12. Acts 1:12 begins, "Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city." Practically speaking, verse 12 shows us that these Christ-followers obeyed Christ's instructions from back in verse 4. Jesus had told them, "...Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised...." And in verse 12, we learn that the Apostles went straight back to Jerusalem, which is exactly what Jesus wanted them to do. And in a sense, we are waiting with them for one more week. Lord willing, we'll get to Acts 2 next Sunday.

In verses 12-26, we also learn that the apostles were not idle during this time of obedient waiting.² They were PRAYING while WAITING. Acts 1:14 says, "They all joined together constantly in prayer...." Waiting and praying, NOT a bad way to spend our time. Of course, they also spent some of their time choosing a new leader to replace Judas. And that's pretty much what the bulk of verses 12-26 zero-in on. So, there must be something here that Luke really wanted us to learn from these verses. As we walk through this text together, we're going to discover three important truths about "Choosing Leaders": First of all, **when choosing leaders, we should...**

1 Learn from Judas, that the gospel mission can't be thwarted by any human leader. At this point in history, it would be understandable if the Apostles and the 120 people in the early church felt a little discouraged. After all, Judas Iscariot was one of their own. He'd been with them from the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. Peter says as much in Acts 1:17, "He was one of our number and shared in our ministry." They'd considered Judas a "Brother in the Lord." (Can you think of a Brother or Sister in the Lord who's no longer serving next to you?) For 3 years, they'd traveled around together with Jesus. Just think of all of the experiences that they'd had together: watching Jesus do miracles, listening to His teaching, feeding thousands of people together, and on and on. Judas was there when Jesus walked on water! And when Peter did! Jesus had even sent them out in groups of 2 to do ministry together... I wonder who got paired up with Judas? I also wonder how it might have felt,

¹ Romans 15:4 teaches us..."For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope." So, in general terms, the reason "why" anything was recorded in God's Word was to teach us to endure and to be encouraged. It was written so that we might have hope. Also, 2 Peter 1:20-21 make it clear that the writers of Scripture only wrote down what the Holy Spirit inspired them to write.

² Darrell L. Bock, *Acts: BECNT*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 74

gathering around a table where there used to be 13 place settings? The 12 Apostles + Jesus. If the early disciples were anything like us today, they were probably creatures of habit. Each of them probably had a particular spot at the table where they sat. Now, there were two empty spots, one where Jesus used to sit, and one, where Judas used to sit. Just imagine, after three straight years of meeting together, when all of a sudden, there's an empty space: "Yeah, that's where Judas always used to sit. Right there between James and the other Judas."³ And without saying it out loud, all of them may have been thinking the same thing: "Judas isn't here now, because he BETRAYED us and he RUINED everything!" What a glaring and painful reminder that must have been for them. It's easy to see how that might have been VERY discouraging for them.

In Acts 1:16 Peter declares, "Brothers and sisters, the Scripture had to be fulfilled in which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus." In other words, well before Judas betrayed Jesus, back before Jesus even chose him to be one of the 12⁴, God knew all about Judas and what He would do. This need to replace Judas didn't mean that God needed to go back to His play book and try to figure out a "Plan B." No earthly leader can ruin God's plan.^{5 6}

As Peter goes on, in Acts 1:20, he applies the truths from the OT Book of Psalms, to their current situation. He lays out God's plan for how they can move on. As much as it probably felt comforting, to restore the group of Apostles to an even Twelve, what was most comforting was knowing that God's plans can't be thwarted. They can't be stopped; they can't even be slowed down by any earthly leader. A guy named Kevin DeYoung says it this way: Verses 12-26 are "...put right here in the Bible for one glorious reason: to show the indestructibility of God's plan, so that we might have confidence in the final triumph of His mission...."⁷ During this potential leadership crisis, Peter rests his hope and his confidence, FIRMLY in the Lord. And in that confidence, he then goes on to lead this gathering of about 120 believers, through a godly process of finding Judas' replacement. They do this PRAYERFULLY, and they do this TOGETHER, in unity. And this leads us to Matthias. When choosing leaders, we should...

2 Learn from Matthias, that we should choose qualified leaders with prayerful dependence.

In its very earliest stages, the early church has its first business meeting. A VERY important business meeting. They begin by nominating two men who met the qualifications. Acts 1:21-22 defines them as "...men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living 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."⁸ So here's a key reason why Luke, under the inspiration of the HS, records verses 12-26: Replacing Judas with Matthias, "emphasizes the importance of apostolic eyewitness testimony to the events of Jesus' life and resurrection." In other words, Matthias was qualified to be nominated for the role and duties of an Apostle. In the weeks and chapters ahead, we will see the Apostles' gospel witness lived out and spoken boldly.

By the way, here's what we mean by Gospel Witness = "personal eyewitness testimony of Jesus' life, ministry, death and resurrection." In other words, Jesus' resurrection is the key historical event to which these eyewitnesses are giving testimony. But, their extended time with Him, during His entire earthly ministry, also lends credibility to their witness.⁹ Now let's be sure to make the connection here, to our own gospel witness, as Christ-followers in 2020. Our gospel witness is directly related to the eyewitness accounts of the Twelve Apostles; we are fellow witnesses to this same Jesus. Here's

³ I'm only guessing at who Judas may have sat between. We don't actually know for sure.

⁴ Notice John 6:70-71.

⁵ "The invoking of Scripture for this horrible event of Judas's defection... shows that Jesus' death and the betrayal of one of the original Twelve, were not outside God's plan or awareness." Darrell L. Bock, *Acts: BECNT*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 82.

⁶ Earthly leaders can no more ruin God's plan, than they can rescue God's plan. In other words, we're not going to find anything particularly special about Matthias. Certainly, Matthias was a great guy; after all, he was a fully devoted follower of Jesus, who met the criteria for becoming the 12th Apostle. But we shouldn't think that he really helped get God out of a jam. That's NOT what's going on here.

⁷ Kevin DeYoung, "Getting the Band Back Together," on September 2, 2012 at University Reformed Church. <http://www.avisualguide.com/sermons/>

⁸ 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 summarizes the gospel this way, "...that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared...."

⁹ See 1 John 1:1-3. See also the discussion by Darrell L. Bock, *Acts: BECNT*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, pp. 87-88.

what we mean by our Gospel Witness = “personal testimony of Jesus’ life, ministry, death and resurrection.” In other words, the distinction between their witness and ours, is their eyewitness attestation. Even so, we testify to these same truths. We give testimony to the same lifechanging TRUTH of the gospel: TRUTH that was authoritatively passed down to us, from the Apostles in God’s written Word. (*In fact, Apostolic authority is one of the keys ways we determined the eligibility for the 27 books that made it into the New Testament canon.*) TRUTH that has transformed our lives, that we give personal testimony to.

Acts 1:23-24 goes on to tell us, “So they nominated two men: Joseph called BarSABas¹⁰ (also known as Justus) and Matthias. Then they prayed, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen.” The important thing to note here is their prayerful dependence. Back in v. 14 we learned about the early church’s practice of joining together CONSTANTLY in PRAYER.¹¹ Now, in keeping with this practice, they pray some more. So, they nominate two qualified candidates, they pray, and then... they cast lots. Now, if we hadn’t already read the Scripture, we probably wouldn’t have seen that one coming: nominate > pray > cast lots. So, what does it mean to cast lots? Basically, it’s sort of like putting names in a hat and drawing one out. In Acts 1, each of their names was probably written on a rock or a piece of wood, then placed in some kind of a bag or jar. Then, after PRAYER, and ONLY AFTER prayer... then one of the names was drawn out. (or probably dumped out or cast out) Proverbs 16:33 says, “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.” More important than the specific equipment that we being used, was the prayerful dependence behind casting lots: this decision belongs to God, NOT to us.^{12 13}

So, should our church cast lots, when we choose new leaders at our Congregational Meeting on Oct. 25? Well, no, not necessarily. The fact is, there are many decisions made throughout the NT that make no mention of casting lots. Casting lots was simply one way to prayerfully invite God to make His will clear. But Acts 1 isn’t suggesting that this is the primary or long-term model for making these kinds of choices.¹⁴ In fact, it’s worth noting that in the New Testament, casting lots is never mentioned again after the HS comes.¹⁵ (From then on, He gives us discernment) Regardless of the means we use, (casting lots, voting, or whatever else), we need to approach our leadership decisions with prayerful dependence on God. In the words of Acts 1:24, we need to pray, “Lord, please show us.”

Well this group of 120 fully devoted followers of Jesus, were obediently waiting for the gift that God had promised. So, even as they navigated the difficult reality of Judas’ failed leadership, and even as they celebrated the newly elected Matthias, there was never a question as to who their ULTIMATE leader was. When choosing leaders, we should...

3 Learn from Jesus, that He’s the leader we should focus on following. Last week we talked about the importance of FOCUSING on our gospel witness. When we get our focus off of Jesus, as our ULTIMATE leader, we lose FOCUS on our gospel witness. We aren’t all that different than early disciples. Just like them, from time to time, we will have to wrestle with the failure of earthly, ministry leaders. Many of us are all too aware of the recent resignation of Liberty University President, Jerry Falwell Jr. With his fall from leadership, we are reminded once again of the limits of human leaders. There are unfortunate and painful consequences for the people around these leaders. But, this is certainly not the first time that a ministry leader has fallen, and it’s probably not the last time.¹⁶ So let’s remind ourselves NEVER to pin our hopes on any particular earthly leader. Whether it’s an education leader, a church leader, a government leader, a business leader, or whoever else it may

¹⁰ “Bar SAB us”

¹¹ 1 Thessalonians 5:17 is arguably the 2nd shortest verse in the Bible, “pray continually.” (Right behind John 11:35)

¹² The only other place in the New Testament that mentions casting lots, is the soldiers dividing up Jesus’ clothes at the foot of the cross (Luke 23:34). So, apparently, this wasn’t just a Jewish thing but more of a cultural thing at the time as well.

¹³ In the case of choosing between Matthias and Justus, “The lot may have prevented rivalry or done away with any need to campaign for the post.” Darrell L. Bock, *Acts: BECNT*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 79.

¹⁴ For example, there is no mention of casting lots in Acts 6:1-7.

¹⁵ Darrell L. Bock, quoting A. Fernando in *Acts: BECNT*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 90.

¹⁶ When one leader flounders and flails, God will simply raise us another in his or her place.

be.¹⁷ Jesus didn't appoint the 12 Apostles so that we would follow THEM instead of HIM.¹⁸ He appointed them to be eyewitnesses. But their leadership was never intended to replace Jesus' ULTIMATE leadership. Jesus alone is head of the church.¹⁹

Given the current political climate in the U.S., it seems reasonable to stop at this point, and make at least a brief comment about the upcoming election in November. While I fully admit that the focus of Acts 1 is NOT on choosing POLITICAL leaders, many of the ideas that we've talked about today, do apply.²⁰ Please let me offer just **2 simple words of encouragement:**

1. Let's practice prayerful dependence whenever we vote. Whether it's voting on church leaders, political leaders, or whatever else it may be, let's make sure that we do it prayerfully. There's no verse in the Bible that says believers have to vote; but God's Word does encourage us, to seek the peace and prosperity of the place where we live.²¹ One important way, that we can do that, is by helping to elect the right men/women into leadership. My 2nd word of encouragement is this:

2. Let's not allow voting to divide us from one another. (Whether we're democrat, republican, 3rd Party, or don't even vote.) Let's make sure that our Christian testimony of love and unity remains strong throughout each/every election cycle. Last week I mentioned Jesus' beautiful prayer for oneness in John 17. Jesus prayed for us, that our unity would be a testimony to the watching world.²² The first three chapters of 1 Corinthians give a strong inditement against quarrelling in the church, over human leaders. After rebuking them for three straight chapters, here's how Paul concludes this section in 1 Corinthians 3:21-23, "So then, no more boasting about human leaders! All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and **you are of Christ**, and Christ is of God." Brother or Sister, together, we are of Christ. That's what matters most. Jesus is the leader that all of us need to focus on. So, let's not allow voting to divide us from one another. Instead, let's FOCUS on "becoming fully devoted followers of Jesus together."²³

Well, as we wrap up today, I want to point out an intriguing, little snippet at the end of Acts 1:14, "They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers." Whose brothers? "His brothers" is a reference to Jesus' brothers, who were part of the early church.²⁴ The reason that this is so intriguing, is that for a long time, Jesus' brothers didn't follow Him. In fact, John 7:5 tells us plainly, "For even his own brothers did not believe in him."²⁵ ²⁶ But by the time we get to Acts 1:14, we find Jesus' brothers listed among the 120 believers who were gathered together for prayer.²⁷ I share this because it's worth noticing, that sometimes the people who SEEM closest to Jesus, STILL haven't decided to follow Jesus. Perhaps even people who have been coming to church for a long time. Perhaps even people who have been watching the livestream for a long time. So, how about you: when it comes to choosing leaders, have you chosen to follow Jesus? And if you have chosen to follow Jesus, is He the leader you are focused on following, above ALL your other earthly leaders?

¹⁷ Last week we talked about how Acts is the sequel to Luke's Gospel. It's the continuing story of Jesus' continuing ministry. Acts invites us to CONTINUE following Jesus, just like the early disciples did. Jesus is the only one worthy of following with our full devotion. Certainly not Judas, but not Matthias either, nor any of the other apostles either. Not any earthly leader, because our ultimate allegiance is to being a fully devoted follower of Jesus.

¹⁸ However, consider Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 11:1, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ."

¹⁹ See Matthew 16:18 but also Ephesians 1:19b-23.

²⁰ I have no interest in promoting any particular candidate or political party. The fact is, it's up to each one of us, in prayerful dependence, to decide who we should vote for. And frankly, whether we even vote at all.

²¹ In addition to 1 Timothy 2:1-4, see also Ezra 6:10 and Jeremiah 29:7.

²² See John 17:21 and the surrounding context.

²³ No matter who wins or loses the upcoming elections in November, let's find encouragement in the fact, that throughout all of the many changes in our earthly leaders, Jesus never changes. Jesus is our Lord and Leader both now and forevermore.

²⁴ I'll admit, I've always been intrigued by Jesus' brothers. Can you imagine what it must have been like for them growing up with Jesus as their big brother? Or we could probably say their half-brother.

²⁵ Consider also Mark 3:20-35, 6:1-3 and Luke 8:19-21. It's interesting to read the book of James, written by Jesus' brother James. Also note references to Jesus' brother James in Matthew 13:55; 1 Corinthians 15:7; Galatians 1:19, 2:9 and Acts 12:17, 15:13, and 21:18. (Note: The Apostle James was not Jesus' brother. He was martyred in Acts 12:2.)

²⁶ In fact, 12 chapters later, when Jesus was hanging on the cross, and his mother Mary was there, none of Jesus' brothers are with their mom. John 19:26-27 tells us, "When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, "Woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home." This reference to "the disciple whom he loved" is John's way of referring to himself. But the point to notice here, is that Jesus' own brothers didn't come to the cross and keep vigil with their mother. So, either Jesus' brothers feared persecution, or they still didn't believe. In other words, it seems likely that they still hadn't chosen to follow Jesus as their leader.

²⁷ Their change of heart is likely due to the irrefutable evidence of seeing the risen Christ. 1 Corinthians 15:7 says Jesus appeared to his brother James.