



WAITING AND THE WILL OF GOD

SERIES: THE SPREADING FLAME

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Acts 1:12-26
Second Message
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The book of Acts, the account of the establishment and expansion of the church, is really volume 2 of Luke's history of Christian origins. In our opening study of this book we saw that the Lord's mandate to the apostles was that they his witnesses throughout the world. Further, we learned that the power of the Holy Spirit would be available to them for the work to which he had assigned them.

This second half of Acts 1 covers the ten days during which the disciples waited for the promise of the Holy Spirit. We know that it was ten days because the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, the Feast of Weeks, which was held fifty days after Passover. Since our Lord ascended forty days after the resurrection, which occurred at Passover, there was a ten-day period during which the disciples waited in Jerusalem.

A ten-day wait seems like a waste of time to people of action like us. Why didn't God send the Spirit immediately and get on with the task of preaching the good news? Delays are often wonderful periods of preparation, however. As we look at how these early believers spent this time we will gain insight into how God works in our circumstances.

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they went up to the upper room where they were staying; that is, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas the son of James. These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers. (Acts 1:12-14, NASB)

After the ascension the apostles make their way back to Jerusalem. Luke refers to this as "a Sabbath day's journey." It was about a kilometer, the distance Jews were permitted to travel on the Sabbath. While Luke's gospel says that during this time they were continually praising God at the temple, here he says they were continually devoting themselves to prayer in a home, probably in the same room in which they had shared the last meal with the Lord. So in these early days of the church there was a balance between praise in the temple and prayer in a home.

Luke says two things about their prayer. First, it was *unified*. As we will read in verse 15, about 120 disciples

are gathered together. Eleven of the apostles are there. Only Judas is missing. Jesus' brothers, James and Jude, are there, the same two who gave Jesus so much grief during his ministry. We know them by their letters in the New Testament. His other brothers, Joseph and Simeon, Mary his mother, and perhaps his sister are there as well. Luke says "the women" were there, that group that faithfully ministered to Jesus during his ministry: Mary Magdalene, Mary of Clopas, Susanna, Joanna, Mary of Bethany, Martha, and others.

So this little group, comprised of eleven strong-willed men who argued over who was going to get the best seat in the kingdom, who refused to wash one another's feet, who differed politically and socially, together with Jesus' brothers, who thought he was out of his mind, are now gathered together with ex-prostitutes and sundry others, both rich and poor, chaste and unchaste. The thing they have in common is that their hearts have been changed by their encounters with Jesus.

Amazingly, Luke says they were of "one mind." This phrase translates a word which Luke uses ten times in this book and which occurs only one other time in the NT. It implies more than the fact that they were simply joined together in the same location, doing the same thing (which the NIV translation of "joined together" might imply). They were now unified both in purpose and spirit. Despite their diverse personalities and differing backgrounds they are now unified in their love of Jesus and their focus on him. It wasn't that they all loved the same things, but that they possessed the same love. It wasn't uniformity but harmony that now characterized their prayers. This will be one of their most powerful qualities in their witness.

Secondly, their prayer was *continual*: "they continually devoted themselves to prayer." The premise of this unity and persistence in prayer was the command and the promise of Jesus. He had promised to send them the Spirit soon (1:4, 5, 8). He instructed them to wait for him. We might think that since God promises to do something we don't need to pray about it. But here we see that God's promises do not render prayer meaningless. In fact, as John Stott puts it: "It is his promises that give us the warrant to pray and the confidence that he will hear and answer."¹

The Scriptures was the second element that occupied their time during these ten days.

At this time Peter stood up in the midst of the brethren (a gathering of about one hundred and twenty

persons was there together), and said, "Brethren, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit foretold by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. For he was counted among us and received his share in this ministry." (Now this man acquired a field with the price of his wickedness, and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his intestines gushed out. And it became known to all who were living in Jerusalem; so that in their own language that field was called Hakeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) "For it is written in the book of Psalms, 'Let his homestead be made desolate, and let no one dwell in it'; and, 'Let another man take his office.' (1:15-20)

On this occasion Peter expounded on two of the psalms. We know from the gospels that Jesus interpreted parts of the OT for them during the forty days following the resurrection (Luke 24:25-27). He also "opened their minds" so they could understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:45). Stimulated by Jesus' explanations, they must have spent a great deal of time, not only during these ten days but the entire fifty days, searching the Scriptures to see what was predicted for these days. As a result of their study, they concluded that a replacement should be selected for Judas.

Peter quotes from two psalms, 69 and 109. In Psalm 69 they discern information about what happened to Judas, and in the second, Psalm 109, what they should do about it. Psalm 69, which is applied to Jesus five times in the NT, describes David's zeal for God and his house, and how his enemies hated and insulted him without cause. David prays that God's judgment will fall on these wicked men. Now Peter interprets this psalm by applying it to Judas, on whom God's judgment had already come. Verse 20: "Let his homestead be made desolate, and let no one dwell in it." Peter then cites Psalm 109, in which David again has a number of enemies. One of the enemies is singled out, and the writer prays that God would take action against him: "Let another man take his office."

So Peter makes two observations from these psalms: first, that Judas' farm will be desolate, that is, that no one will live on it; and second, that Judas will be replaced by someone else. Remember that Luke wrote this account for Theophilus. This high Roman official was unfamiliar with many of the facts about the life and death of Jesus. Perhaps this is why Luke included this parenthetical section in verses 18-19, describing Judas' hideous death.

It is difficult to know exactly what happened to Judas. The gospels record that he was the treasurer of the apostles. He was a thief who pilfered money from the purse. Evidently he had accepted the idea, current among the Jews of the time, that when Messiah came, he would overthrow the Roman government and establish a kingdom of power and authority, with Israel at the head. Jesus told the apostles that they would sit on

twelve thrones, ruling the twelve tribes. Judas was feathering his nest in anticipation of this, looking forward to that time when he would be in a position of leadership. He had already chosen a plot of ground, perhaps to build a home and retire, when Jesus came to power.

Whether Judas was making payments on this plot or saving to make a cash payment at the end, we do not know. But when he betrayed Jesus, leading the soldiers to the Garden of Gethsemane, he realized the terrible implications of what he had done. It's possible he didn't want Jesus to die. Maybe he thought Jesus would perform a miracle and make himself known to the Chief Priests. When Jesus was arrested and put on trial, Judas went to the Sanhedrin and tried to give the money back, but they wouldn't take it. In response, he flung the pieces of silver on the treasury floor and went out and hanged himself in this field that he had bought. His body must have hung there for a number of days until it broke loose from the rope and fell to the ground. Luke uses the graphic phrase; he "burst open in the middle." Because the field was thus defiled, the Sanhedrin may have taken the thirty pieces of silver and bought the plot from Judas' heirs and turned it into a cemetery. So the prophecy was literally fulfilled. The farm was never inhabited. Notice that Peter bases his statement on Scripture. The psalm predicted that this would occur, and that is exactly what happened.

The apostles concluded from these psalms that they were to replace Judas the betrayer, and that is what they proceeded to do.

"Therefore it is necessary that of the men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us beginning with the baptism of John until the day that He was taken up from us one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection." So they put forward two men, Joseph called Barsabbas (who was also called Justus), and Matthias. And they prayed and said, "You, Lord, who know the hearts of all men, show which one of these two You have chosen to occupy this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place." And they drew lots for them, and the lot fell to Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles. (1:21-26)

Luke includes this story to let his readers know where Matthias, the one who was chosen, came from. The foundation of the church is the apostles and the prophets, and one block had to be replaced. But, having said that, this passage has some important insights about discovering the will of God. This is one of our major concerns in life. We want to know who to marry, what vocation to pursue, or whether we should buy a certain house. How can we know God's will in these matters?

Let's observe what the apostles did in discerning God's will. First, they turned to the Scriptures. In their

study of the psalms they discovered that the Scripture predicted that Judas must be replaced. Secondly, their own intelligence and common sense informed them that if this person was to have the same apostolic ministry, he must have the same qualifications as the others. He must have followed Jesus during his ministry, and be a witness of the resurrection, to which the apostles were called to bear witness.

Sifting through possible candidates who met those qualifications, they came up with two names. It was their conviction that each apostle was individually chosen by the Lord himself. So they prayed, "You, Lord, who know the hearts of all men, show which one of these two You have chosen." Depending on God to make that choice, the apostles chose to cast lots. Casting lots was a method of discerning God's will in the OT (Lev 16:8, Num 26:55, Prov 16:33). They probably used a couple of flat stones, one for Matthias and the other for Barsabbas, to determine who would be chosen. They depended on God to make the choice for them. They said, "Lord, you who know the hearts of all men, show which one of these two you have chosen." In other words, "Lord, you know. Now let us know."

Their method wasn't important. They were not counting on that to determine God's will. They were counting on the sovereignty of God; it didn't make any difference which the method they chose. They could have drawn straws or used some other means, because they were not trusting the method; they were trusting God. This is the key for determining the will of God in all things. David Roper put it this way: "The will of God is not hard to discover. He will let you know it. It is his problem to let us know his will, not our problem to discover it."²

Many Christians are uncomfortable with the mysteries of life. They would rather trust some plan or scheme to find God's will rather than trust God. They want a program to follow rather than a person to trust. But when we do that, we are no longer walking by faith. We are not trusting God, but some method to lead us.

In fact, when they are examined in context, many of the texts which people make use of to find guidance are not about guidance at all. They deal with character, and are promised to us if we trust God to lead us to righteousness. Wherever that phrase "the will of God" is used in the NT, the author is not talking about guidance, but godliness. In Romans 12, Ephesians 5 and 1 Thessalonians 4, the apostle is referring to character. It is God's will that we be holy.

Almost all of God's will is revealed for us in the Scriptures. It has to do with the kind of people we should be, the kind of character we are to manifest. What about the decisions we have to make that aren't referred to in the Scripture? I believe that God cares much more about the process that he does the end result. He is more concerned with the elements that go into making the decision than the decision itself.

It is a matter of concern that people become absorbed with a particular method for finding God's will. Some who ask for godly counsel say that what their counselors advise is God's will. That seems wise. Proverbs says there is safety in a multitude of counselors. But the problem with putting too much faith in that method is that people can be wrong. Jeremiah says that the heart of man is deceitful and desperately wicked. Men are fallible. People make mistakes. Even godly men make mistakes. The elders of this church seek the mind of the Lord on any given issue that concerns this body, and we must be unanimous in all our decisions. But even unanimity is not infallible. We have made some wrong decisions. That doesn't surprise you, but you may be surprised to know that we know that. C. S. Lewis said, "No combination of bad eggs will ever make a good omelet." I am not saying we shouldn't seek godly counsel. We must realize that others can be wrong, even when they agree together.

Other Christians look to circumstances to determine their decisions. Seeing an open door, they feel they should walk through it. A closed door indicates they should back away. But maybe the door is just stuck; it needs a little push. Maybe it's just closed, not locked. If Paul relied on this method, he would not have taken the gospel to Europe. So circumstances can't be the answer to finding God's will.

Others feel they know God's will by the "peaceful feeling" they get in their hearts. If they are restless about a matter, then it isn't God's will. But when we talk about making a decision based on the "peace of God," oftentimes we are making a subjective decision based on the feeling of the moment. And feelings can be swayed by many different factors — fear, low self-esteem, sickness, etc. I don't think I have ever made a major decision without having doubts later, much to the chagrin of my wife.

Are we left completely to ourselves in these matters? No, on the contrary, God is with us to give us direction as we go. He wants to help us more than we'll ever know. He promises to keep and protect and direct us. If you want God's will, you will know it.

The apostles' model is helpful. For them, everything began with the Scriptures. That is how they determined they needed another apostle in the first place. That is where we must begin too, in the Scriptures, because almost all of God's will is revealed for us. It is concerned with the kind of people we are. Many times we don't need any other direction. I don't need to pray about whether it's right for me to leave my wife. That issue is settled: God hates divorce. Some spouses say they feel God is leading them out of their marriage because he doesn't want them to be unhappy and they feel so free and wonderful with some other person. That is utterly wrong. When Scripture speaks clearly on an issue, we don't need another method to find the will of God. We don't need to pray about whether to cheat on our income tax. As for those issues that are not revealed, we

have the promise that God will lead us. The method is not as important as our desire to trust God in making that decision.

This is the last time in Scripture where lots are cast. After the Spirit is given, the apostles no longer look for guidance; they trust the guide. How much more helpful it is when you call a friend to ask for directions and he tells you that he is going to the same place, so he will pick you up and you can go together.

We don't have to worry about God's will. The apostle Paul assures us that it is "God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure" (Phil 2:13).

1. John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1990), 34.

2. David Roper, *Judas' Successor*, a message delivered at Cole Community Church, Boise, ID, May 16, 1982.

I am indebted to my friend David Roper for his insights on the will of God in the message noted above. My best thoughts are his.

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