

# Acts

*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8 ESV)*

*And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)*

## **Between Ascension and Pentecost**

**July 10<sup>th</sup>, 2022**

**Acts 1:12-26**

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### **Introduction:**

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to the Book of Acts. We will be picking up in verse 12 of chapter 1.

Not all of you were with us last Sunday, but I'm going to take a moment to bring you up to speed because you won't understand this passage unless you understand where it sits in the overarching story. After Jesus' resurrection, he revealed himself to his disciples for forty days. In that time, he showed his disciples how the Scriptures pointed forward *to* and found their fulfilment *in* him. Then, when those forty days were complete, he gathered his disciples to himself, and he gave them their marching orders. He told them that they would be empowered by the Holy Spirit, and that they would be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. After this, he ascended to his throne. We left off last Sunday with the disciples staring into heaven pondering their impossible assignment.

That brings us to this passage. Our text this morning covers a fascinating moment in time. At Pentecost, the disciples *will* receive the promised anointing of the Holy Spirit! The impossible will be made possible!

But we're not there yet.

Luke decided not to jump ahead. Instead, Luke zooms in on the 10-day period *between* the Ascension and Pentecost. That in and of itself should cause us to lean in and listen close.

At first glance, these events seem entirely uneventful and, one might even say, *ordinary*. But Luke – inspired by the Holy Spirit – saw something significant here, and he means for us to see it too. Look with me to Acts 1:12-26. Hear now God’s holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day’s journey away. <sup>13</sup> And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, 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. <sup>14</sup> All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

<sup>15</sup> In those days Peter stood up among the brothers (the company of persons was in all about 120) and said,<sup>16</sup> “Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus.<sup>17</sup> For he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.” <sup>18</sup> (Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness, and falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. <sup>19</sup> And it became known to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their own language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) <sup>20</sup> “For it is written in the Book of Psalms,

“‘May his camp become desolate,  
and let there be no one to dwell in it’;

and

“‘Let another take his office.’

<sup>21</sup> So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us,<sup>22</sup> beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.” <sup>23</sup> And they put forward two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also called Justus, and Matthias. <sup>24</sup> And they prayed and said, “You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen <sup>25</sup> to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.”<sup>26</sup> And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was numbered with the eleven apostles. (Acts 1:12-26 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Think about this for a moment: How many things happened in the ten days between the Ascension and Pentecost? Quite a few, I would suspect! I for one would like to know what the conversation was like amongst the disciples after they watched Jesus ascend to heaven and then received a

visitation from an angel. I imagine that was a pretty interesting discussion. I would like to know how it was received when the Apostles reported to the rest of the disciples that Jesus – who had just returned to them from the grave – had now disappeared in a cloud of glory.

All of that would have been interesting, but Luke didn't give any word count to those things. Instead, he zoomed in on two seemingly ordinary events – which leads me to believe that they are not nearly as ordinary as they appear at first glance. What does he mean for us to see?

This morning, as we work our way through the text, we're going to defuse one landmine before considering these two events and drawing out two enduring principles from them. First, let's turn our attention to the landmine.

## One Landmine

We could have skimmed past this, but in an age of skepticism, I think it will be worth our time to recognize that this passage contains a detail that is well known by skeptics. You have likely heard it said that the Bible is FILLED with contradictions and discrepancies. The argument goes something like this: “You believe that the Bible is a HOLY BOOK? It can't even keep its own story straight! And the most embarrassing example of the Bible's BLATANT contradiction of itself is the account of the death of Judas!”

To be fair to that accusation, the two accounts that we have of Judas' death DO appear to contradict one another. I wouldn't want you to be blindsided by that, so let's consider the different accounts.

In our passage this morning, we are told that Judas bought a field. We're also told about his death. Quite graphically, we're told that he fell headlong, and his intestines burst out of him. But, in Matthew's Gospel, we find a seemingly different story about *who* bought the field and *how* Judas died. In Matthew 27 we read:

Then when Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he changed his mind and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders,<sup>4</sup> saying, “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.” They said, “What is that to us? See to it yourself.”<sup>5</sup> And throwing down the pieces of silver into the temple, he departed, and **he went and hanged himself.**<sup>6</sup> But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, “It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since it is blood money.”<sup>7</sup> **So they took counsel and**

**bought with them the potter's field as a burial place for strangers.** <sup>8</sup> Therefore that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. (Matthew 27:3-8 ESV)

So, who bought the field? Was it Judas? Or was it the chief priests and elders? And how did Judas die? Did he hang himself? Or did he fall and burst open? The internet skeptic is laughing at this point, because he has just demonstrated how RIDICULOUS it is that you believe the Bible.

But are these *really* irreconcilable differences? Is it *really* impossible to hold these two accounts together? What if we could make a plausible argument that both of these accounts are true, even though they tell the same story from different vantage points?

Technically speaking, both Judas AND the chief priests bought that field. The chief priests were the ones who completed the transaction, but they did it with his money. Both accounts of the purchase line up, they just reflect the different emphasis of each author.

“But what about the DEATH?” you ask. Well – not to be too graphic – but putting the two accounts together, it appears that Judas did hang himself and that, after he had hung there for a few days, his body fell from the tree, and he burst open. It is not surprising that Doctor Luke chose to zoom in on the gory details of the later scene, because Luke was emphasizing God’s judgement against Judas.

Let’s step out of this story for a second. Let me tell you something about the Bible in general. I want you to know that there are reasonable explanations for ALL the apparent discrepancies that are often pointed out. This one is often referred to as the trickiest of the lot, and we just defused it in five minutes.

Would this explanation satisfy the skeptic? No, he’s got a heart that is hard to the gospel, and he has 101 more justifications for why God has no authority over him. But this explanation is for the young believer who is feeling rattled in her faith. Fret not. God can be trusted.

Now, having defused the landmine, we’re going to zoom in on these events that Luke has highlighted and we are going to discover in them two enduring principles.

## **Two Events & Two Enduring Principles**

As I mentioned earlier, lots of interesting things would have happened in the ten-day window between the Ascension and Pentecost, but Luke chose to draw our attention to THESE events. Why is that? Let's consider them now and, by God's grace, let's try to see what we are meant to see. First, Luke zooms in on:

## 1. A prayer meeting

Immediately following Jesus' ascension, Luke wants us to know that the church turned to prayer. We read:

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. <sup>13</sup> And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, 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. <sup>14</sup> **All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer**, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers. (Acts 1:12-14 ESV)

Here, Luke lists 11 of the original 12 disciples. They were joined by women – likely the same women that found the empty tomb – and by Jesus' mother, and by Jesus' brothers. Let's pause here and make a quick observation: During Jesus' earthly ministry, his brothers thought that he had lost his mind! This is not an insignificant detail. Following the resurrection, even the greatest skeptics came to faith. Jesus' brothers – who had at one point accused him of insanity – became worshipers!

This fledgling group of men and women provides us with our first introduction to the church. And, not insignificantly, in our first glimpse of the church we find them gathered together in prayer.

They have just been given an impossible assignment. Their world has just been flipped upside down for the tenth time in two months. They're confused! They're overwhelmed! And so they have committed themselves to prayer.

Luke wants us to see this. And he wants us to see this first.

Later on in this book, we're going to see these same disciples working powerful miracles! We're going to hear them preaching life-transforming sermons! Entire cities are going to fall under conviction! This fledgling church is going to CHANGE THE WORLD!

And, if we saw all of that first, we might come away from this book with the wrong impression. We might give the credit for those powerful works to the wrong person.

Luke won't allow that. So, he starts us here. He draws our attention to an ordinary prayer meeting in an upper room. Men and women with one accord devoting themselves to prayer. Commentator I. Howard Marshall notes:

If the Holy Spirit is the divine gift which empowers and guides the church, the corresponding attitude towards God is *prayer*. It is as the church prays that it receives the Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

This brings us to our first enduring principle:

### **Enduring Principle 1: Prayer precedes every great move of God**

Why doesn't Luke simply skip ahead to the account of Pentecost? He wants us to understand that we don't have Pentecost without this prayer meeting! We don't have the rest of the book of Acts without this prayer meeting! If the disciples had skipped this step – if they had rushed out into Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth without first pleading for the help of the Holy Spirit, then there would be no church in Orillia today!

That's what Luke would have us see! This is not the story of the powerful Apostles. It is the story of our powerful GOD, working by His powerful Spirit, *through* the Apostles, to magnify His Son in the world in a powerful way! As the great preacher E. M. Bounds observes:

The Holy Ghost does not flow through methods but through men. He does not come on machinery but on men. He does not anoint plans but men — **men of prayer**.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Acts* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980), 62.

<sup>2</sup> E. M. Bounds as quoted by John Blanchard, eds. *The Complete Gathered Gold: a Treasury of Quotations for Christians*. Accordance electronic ed. (New York: Evangelical Press, 2006), paragraph 7087.

Here, in this opening scene, any temptation that we might have to exalt the disciples is set aside. Any temptation we might have to ascribe the spread of the early church to their abilities is undermined. The early church knew that they could do nothing without the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

So, let me ask an obvious question: Do we know that?

Luke has set this scene front and center because this lesson **MUST NOT** be lost on the church!

The only power that we possess comes from God!

Show me your best preacher – he can't change a hard heart. Show me your best program – it can't bring spiritually dead people to life. Show me your church growth strategy, show me your discipleship plan, show me your ten-year vision. If it doesn't begin with prayer – it doesn't matter what it is – I can tell you how it will end! Do we believe this?

I love the way one contemporary author has put it:

If we knew what we accomplish for the sake of the kingdom when we are on our knees, we would be tempted never to rise.<sup>3</sup>

I mentioned it at our Annual General Meeting, and I'll repeat it now. Our theme verse for this year come from Luke 11:1. Lord, teach us to pray.

That's the first event and the first enduring principle that we find in this passage. But there is one more that Luke would have us consider. Second, he draws our attention to:

## **2. An ordination service**

We find this in verses 15-26. The service begins with a sermon by the Apostle Peter. He stands up and announces to the room that the demise of Judas was always part of God's plan. He makes this argument by quoting Psalms 69 and 109. And here, we catch our first glimpse of Peter's new,

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<sup>3</sup> Jason Helopoulos, *Covenantal Baptism* (Phillipsburg, NJ. P & R Publishing, 2021), 81-82.

Christocentric interpretation of the Old Testament. Jesus spent forty days teaching his followers how to read their Bibles, and now Peter is seeing Jesus on every page! As one commentator notes:

If we read Psalm 69 or 109, without the illumination of this interpretation, we should never dream that there was a reference in them to Judas, or that there was a reference in them to the Messiah.<sup>4</sup>

But Peter saw the connection because Jesus transformed the way that he read the Scriptures. Psalm 69 is a Psalm about an innocent sufferer, and Peter identifies Jesus as THE innocent sufferer. Therefore, he has no problem seeing in verse 25 a prophecy pointing forward to Judas. So, he recites:

“‘May his camp become desolate,  
and let there be no one to dwell in it’ (Acts 1:20a ESV)

He says, “Aha! Do you see? Judas has received the judgement that he was promised, just as it was foretold in Psalm 69!” Then, Peter flips ahead to Psalm 109 – an imprecatory Psalm – and he puts the prayer of *this* innocent sufferer into Jesus’ mouth:

“‘Let another take his office.’ (Acts 1:20b ESV)

“Do you see! It is the will of Jesus that we find another to take Judas’ place!” What a change those 40 days made! Peter now sees that the Old Testament is about Jesus!

The application of this sermon leads the church to ordain another Apostle to take the place of Judas. But not just anyone could be an Apostle. Peter describes the qualifications in verses 21-22:

So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us,<sup>22</sup> beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.  
(Acts 1:21-22 ESV)

This new Apostle needed to be an *eyewitness* to the ministry and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>4</sup> G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 19.



Of the men who fit the qualifications, two were set apart: Joseph and Matthias. In the same way that Jesus had chosen the initial 12, the church wanted to ensure that this replacement was also selected by the Lord. The way that they went about discerning his will strikes many today as odd. We read:

“You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen <sup>25</sup> to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.”<sup>26</sup> **And they cast lots for them**, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was numbered with the eleven apostles. (Acts 1:24b-26 ESV)

Casting lots was the equivalent today of rolling dice. Some are a bit put off by this detail, but there is nothing here to suggest in any way that what they did was wrong. They prayed earnestly. They screened the potential candidates. They put forward the two who seemed to be the best. Then, rather than making the final decision on their own, they asked the Lord to choose the final Apostle and they cast the lot. The Jews understood this process to be a way in which they could discern the will of God. As Proverbs 16:33 says:

The lot is cast into the lap,  
but **its every decision is from the Lord**. (Proverbs 16:33 ESV)

So, the lot was cast, and it landed on Matthias. Thus, the 12<sup>th</sup> and final Apostle was ordained, and the Apostles were made whole once again.

But here's a question: Why the need for 12 Apostles? Why didn't they simply proceed with 11 strong? Or, since they had 2 good candidates, why not simply take them both and hedge their bets with a baker's dozen? Why the rigid insistence upon 12?

We won't understand the need for a 12<sup>th</sup> Apostle until we understand what it is that Jesus came to do. Jesus came to judge Judaism for straying so far from God's plan. He came to tear the covenant community down to the studs; to grind them down to a single stone - himself - and then to build them back bigger and better than ever before! So, after cleansing the temple and announcing judgement against the hypocritical religious leaders of Israel, Jesus declared:

“Have you never read in the Scriptures:

“The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone;

this was the Lord's doing,  
and it is marvelous in our eyes’?

<sup>43</sup> Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. (Matthew 21:42-43 ESV)

“I am taking the kingdom from you! I am tearing down this abomination that you have built! Upon myself, I am going to rebuild the covenant community as it was always intended to be, because a season of fruitfulness is coming, and you are not ready.”

The Israel of God needed to be healthy enough, strong enough and flexible enough to accommodate the influx of the nations that had been foretold throughout the ages. That is what we are being prepared for here.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, just as Israel was made up of 12 tribes, Jesus called 12 Apostles and he gave them the kingdom. In Luke 22, Jesus makes this connection in his own words. Speaking to the Apostles, he says:

I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom,<sup>30</sup> that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones **judging the twelve tribes of Israel**. (Luke 22:29-30 ESV)

Jesus said, “YOU twelve are the NEW twelve.” Therefore, when the disciples looked around the room and realized that there were only 11 Apostles, they were right to identify a problem. As one commentator notes:

The twelfefold witness was required if early Jewish Christianity was to represent itself to the Jewish nation as the culmination of Israel’s hope and the true people of Israel’s Messiah.<sup>6</sup>

We often talk about the *discontinuity* between the Old Covenant and the New, and rightfully so. But we must be careful not to *overstate* the difference so as to separate them entirely. Yes, Jesus came to give Judaism an overhaul. Yes, he came to tear down a religious structure that had become unrecognizable from what it was intended to be. Yes.

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<sup>5</sup> Credit to Paul Carter who suggested this paragraph in advance of the preaching workshop.

<sup>6</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary (John - Acts)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelein, vol. 9, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 265.

But what he proceeded to build was that which had been planned from the very beginning! Jesus chose 12 Apostles so as to clearly demonstrate the continuity with Israel. He wanted the Jews to see that this wasn't a NEW thing – it was the TRUE thing! The promised Messiah had come!

The Apostles didn't want to lose that continuity. So they didn't move forward with 11 or 13. They insisted upon 12.

With that in mind, as we conclude, I want to zoom out and highlight one more enduring principle:

### **Enduring Principle 2: God renovates before He builds**

Think about this: Could there have been a widespread conversion of the nations in the Judaism of Jesus' day? The court of the gentiles – the section of the temple that God had designated as a place of prayer for the nations – had been transformed into a marketplace! The people of God had missed the mark so HORRIFICLY that they had *literally constructed a barrier* to keep the nations from coming to God!

Therefore, before God could build, He needed to tear down.

Let's think about our church and let's ask ourselves some probing questions. Is there anything in us that serves as a barrier for what God would do in this city? If 100 lost people were saved and joined our congregation next Sunday, would we be ready? Obviously, we would face the practical issues of parking and seating and the like, but I'm not talking about that. I'm asking a deeper, heart-level question. So, for example:

Would those 100 people be made to feel that they are members of the family of God? Or would they find us to be exclusive and unapproachable?

Would those 100 people find a church that is patient and ready to help them navigate through their young faith journey? Or would they constantly feel like the "mature" Christians in the congregation were judging them for not fitting the mold?

If God saved and added 100 immature, brand-spanking-new baby Christians to our midst, would we recognize that as the miraculous blessing that it is? Or would we quickly resent them for the change that they would inevitably bring to the comfortable church life that we've come to know and love?

It's worth asking the question. Devout, God-fearing Jews became very comfortable walking past the money traders in the court of the Gentiles. They were there to worship God, but they were blind to the way that they had lost sight of God's plan for the world.

Let's ask some probing questions now on a personal level. Are there things in your life that would keep you from being used by the Lord? Things that need to be renovated before He can build?

Before God uses you to lead that Bible study, expect Him to deal with that addiction.

Before God increases your effectiveness in evangelism, expect Him to expose that anger.

Before God mobilizes you for mission, expect Him to address that anxiety.

R.C. Sproule wisely wrote:

From brokenness to mission is the human pattern.<sup>7</sup>

In this passage, we see the torn-down, start-it-from-scratch, foundation of the church. We see them together in a small room, humbly pleading with the Lord to send His power. We see them studying the Scriptures and seeking the will of God for their next steps. We see a people who are finally ready to be used by the Lord to change the world.

We're going to see some exciting things, but if WE ever want to be used by the Lord to accomplish exciting things, it's important that we see this first. THIS is where powerful ministry starts. THIS is where revivals in the city start. And this is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>7</sup> R.C. Sproule, *The Holiness of God*, (Sanford, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2010), 40.