

Acts Series Part 2

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[0 : 00] Imagine for a moment being part of that group of disciples returning to Jerusalem, having been witnesses of the ascension of Jesus.

There in the passage that we've read in Acts chapter 1 and verse 12, begins painting that picture of the disciples returning that Sabbath day's walk to Jerusalem, a short walk.

And just imagine if you were part of that group of disciples. The past few weeks have been quite a rollercoaster ride. The drama of the arrest of Jesus, His trial and execution.

The deep despondency that you had experienced following that cruel and horrible death. But then the wonder and the excitement and the joy of being witnesses of the risen Jesus.

And then the honor of being commissioned by Jesus, even in these past few moments, having heard from His mouth these words of commission.

[1 : 13] But then the fear that no doubt was part of being left behind as He ascended into heaven. But also in the midst of all these thoughts and emotions, the expectation of the gift that has been promised.

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you. And even as we think of these words that Jesus addressed to them, and no doubt the expectation that it generated in them, we pose the question, and that's as far as we go.

We pose the question, did they really understand what that meant? Certainly not in all its fullness. And what it would involve. And so even that uncertainty would have generated greater expectation. Well, it will be something special, but what exactly will that be? What will it be like? What will it look like? How will we feel following the receipt of this gift that Jesus has promised, the Holy Spirit coming upon us?

And so again, I say on that short walk back to Jerusalem, the disciples must have been experiencing a veritable cocktail of emotions and feelings and thoughts.

[2 : 27] Now, I've asked you to imagine that. Of course, we're not left simply to imagine or speculate. In his gospel, Luke actually tells us some of the feelings and emotions that the disciples were experiencing.

There in the final chapter of the gospel of Luke, he tells us that the disciples were filled with great joy. Their overwhelming emotion, it would seem, as they returned to Jerusalem was one of great joy.

It says of his disciples, even there as they have witnessed the ascension, that they worshipped him. And I wonder if when it is described that following, being witnesses of Jesus being raised to heaven, whether we might say for the first time as one man united and with all their doubts dispelled, they worshipped him in this way.

So there would have been great expectations, a growing awareness that they were part of something huge, of something of cosmic importance.

Though to others they may have seemed a sorry band, yet they knew that they were part of something very special. And I wonder, as they considered what lay ahead, as they considered what life would be like post-resurrection, and not only post-resurrection, but with the conviction that there Jesus was in heaven, sitting on the throne, surely now everything would go well.

[4 : 00] Surely now the problems that had been part of their daily experience would be left in the past. Surely now they, as the appointed ambassadors of King Jesus, they would transcend the mundane world of problems and difficulties and dilemmas, that is the lot of common people.

Actually, no. Even in those brief ten days between the ascension and Pentecost, they were confronted with a problem. A problem that needed to be recognized, understood, tackled, and resolved.

And as we consider what the disciples do in confronting the problem that was before them, let's do so that we might learn from them.

It is true that the period in redemptive history that we are considering, this very unique period between the ascension of Jesus Christ and the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, this is a unique, it's a non-repeatable chapter in redemptive history.

And yet, there are, in this account that we have read, in this manner in which they resolve the problem that was before them, there are principles of community life and of church life, vis-a-vis the problems that we do face, that we can learn from ourselves, as we too would no doubt have to confront more than our fair share of problems as we live our lives of service to God as a congregation.

[5 : 38] So let's consider this passage that we've read in Acts chapter 1 and verses 12 to the end of the chapter in the following way. First of all, simply to identify what it was, what was the problem that they had before them.

But then to notice that this was a group of people, this was a community of believers who were prepared for the problem. And we'll have to explain what we mean by that in due course.

And then also to see more explicitly how they tackle the problem. So first of all, what is the problem that they have to confront? Well, the problem, to put it as succinctly as possible, the problem is Judas.

Judas is the problem. But of course, this is much more than just a problem. We've read the chapter and we know that of the 12 disciples, well, there are only 11.

And in a moment we'll consider why they were of the conviction that it needed to be 12. So this is a problem. They're missing a man. And this man needs to be replaced.

[6 : 44] Judas and his treason and his death is the problem that confronts them. But if we try and place ourselves in their shoes, I hope we can understand that for them, as human beings, flesh and blood like you and me, it's more than just a problem.

You see, what the apostles and indeed all the believers are facing in the case of Judas is a deep personal tragedy. For us, with the luxury afforded to detached observers, we can lose sight of that. We simply think of Judas as that hate figure he has become, if I can use the word I was saying that we shouldn't use carelessly this morning. But Judas for us is that figure.

He has become, his very name has become synonymous with all that is dark and treacherous. But for the apostles, Judas was their friend.

Judas was their trusted friend. Judas was their constant companion. And I pose the question, and I leave you to consider what answer you think is a reasonable one.

[7 : 56] Are they not deeply wounded and profoundly confused by his treason? Are they not grieving his tragic and horrible death?

Are they not grieving the sure knowledge that his eternal destiny is a dark and a solemn one? You see, for these men, these men walking back to Jerusalem, and this group of believers as they consider this question of Judas, it's not just a question.

It's not just a problem to be resolved. It is a deep personal tragedy. And no doubt a tragedy that will have produced in them, in the very depths of their being, that profoundly perplexing question that often assails us.

Why? Why did this happen? Why did Judas do this? And I imagine that they didn't have a full and satisfactory answer to that question.

So this is more than a problem for the believers, more than just a problem for the apostles. But it is a problem. A problem concerning his replacement.

[9 : 07] What are they to do? How can they embark on this mammoth mission that they have been commended? A man down, as it were. Now there seems to be no debate as to the necessity of his being replaced.

This doesn't seem to form part of the discussion. At least we're not given any insight into this being a part of the discussion. Is it necessary for him to be replaced?

It would seem a given for the disciples that Judas needed to be replaced. Now in a moment we'll see the scriptural foundations that Peter presents for that.

But even laying aside the quotations from the Psalms that are found here in this passage, there would seem to have been in the disciples this recognition that the number 12 was significant.

And so for the task that lay ahead of being the pioneers in building the church of Jesus Christ, it was necessary. It was necessary.

[10:11] In the words there of verse 21, therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men. It was necessary for the full complement of disciples to be re-established.

As to the symbolic significance of the number 12, I think it's something that will be familiar to us, the 12 tribes of Israel. And here we have this new Israel being established.

And so the number 12 would seem to have been significant and so necessary for this problem of being a man down to be resolved, a replacement needed to be found.

So therein lies the problem. It's a tragedy. It's a problem that is confronting this nascent church. And as we just fast forward to our day, and as we fast forward to our situation here as a congregation of God's people, what about us?

Well, we too will have problems. Maybe a more honest way of expressing that is we too have problems. Not only imagine that, yes, no doubt, at some point we will have them.

[11:20] We have problems. We too will face with the disciples moments of tragedy, of personal tragedy. We too will be met with deep disappointment, sometimes in the behavior of those who form part of the fellowship.

And we will be disappointed and we will feel let down. And perhaps we will disappoint and let down. situations will confront us that will maybe leave us open-mouthed in dismay.

And we might just ask the question, well, where did that come from? I didn't expect that. I didn't see that coming. But that is the reality. That is what churches face. That is the situation and the situations that will be situations we have to face.

And we ought not to be surprised. There will be situations where we will struggle with the question, why? And not always find an answer. So there is the problem.

But before considering what they do, how they tackle this problem, they're a man down, they need a replacement. Before we consider what they do, let's just notice that this group of believers, these disciples returning to Jerusalem and as they gather then with that wider, broader group of believers, the 120 that are mentioned there in verse 15, let's notice that this is a group of believers who are prepared for the problem.

[12:43] To clarify that a little bit more, I would say that they are prepared for any problem, whatever it might be. What do I mean by that? Well, there are two characteristics of this group of believers presented to us in this passage that I would say are characteristics that allow us to make this point that they were prepared for this problem indeed, for any problem that might come their way.

Why? Well, first of all, they are united. They are united. There in verse 14 we read, they all joined together constantly in prayer along with the women and Mary, the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

And focusing on this fact that they were joined together, all joined together constantly. There is in this group of believers a unity of purpose and direction.

There is a unity also that is produced by an appreciation that they are part of a family, a family of faith.

There in verse 15, Peter addresses the believers in this way. Or in verse 16, Now, we've read the Bible many times perhaps, and we see this designation that Peter uses to describe those around him as brothers, and we say, well, yes, that's the way they spoke in them days.

[14:09] But actually, this is the first time that we find this word used to describe the believers. Peter is using language that wasn't the common currency of their conversations.

And it's significant that he uses this language, because what he is saying by addressing the believers in this way is, he's saying, we are a family. We are brothers. We are sisters. We are part of one family.

And we must be a united family. And if we are a united family, then problems will come, like this one and many others. But if we are together, if we are united, if we are conscious that we are part of one family, we will overcome this problem.

We will find a solution. We will not allow this to frustrate us or to hold us back. Brothers, my dear family, the Scripture had to be fulfilled.

So they are united. There is a unity of purpose. There is an objective unity, as they are part of one family of faith. And this finds expression even in what might be a detail, that they are united.

[15:11] Even physically and geographically, they are gathered in one place as they await the day of Pentecost. This group numbering about 120, the composition of which is mentioned, at least in part, in the passage that we've read.

Now, as we say that, that's not to be understood. Just in the passing, we make this point. That's not to suggest that the 120 were necessarily the totality of all the believers in Jesus Christ.

And no doubt there were other believers in Galilee, particularly, one would imagine, who were not in this one place. But there is this group of 120 who are united.

They are part of one family. They are all together, constantly in prayer. And so I say, as a united fellowship, they were well equipped, well prepared for any problem, including the one that they had to confront on this occasion.

And so there is a lesson for us. A united fellowship is a fellowship prepared for problems. Problems there will be. But will they destroy us? Will they hold us back?

[16:21] Will they divide us? Will they frustrate the work that we seek to do? Will not, if we are, a united fellowship. However, a divided fellowship will struggle in the face of problems.

A divided fellowship, even what seems a small and insignificant problem, will become a huge one and will cause all manner of damage and difficulty to us. And so let us ponder on this.

Here is a group of believers. Here is this nascent church prepared for problems because they are united. But not only are they united, but they are united in prayer. Again, there in verse 14, they all join together constantly in prayer.

They are praying. This is an expression of their unity. Or certainly it's a principle manner in which their unity finds expression. And there's a blessed circle, we might say, because that united prayer that reflects and expresses their unity will in turn foster greater and deeper unity.

They pray because they are united, but as they pray together, so their unity grows and deepens and matures. They are praying. Now, at this point, and this I think is important to stress because in a moment we'll mention another point concerning prayer.

[17:38] At this point, all that we are saying is that there is in this group of men and women this spirit of prayer, this attitude of prayer. They are praying people, not praying about the problem, but just plain praying.

They are praying so that when the problem has to be confronted, they are prepared for it. You see, if we wait until the problem comes and then says, oh, well, let's pray about it, but we haven't been praying before, prayer isn't our habit, prayer isn't our custom, then it is possibly too late, though it might seem a very appropriate response.

Oh, let's pray about it. These are people who are already praying and then when the problem comes or they have to confront it, they are equipped to do so. So again, the question for us to ponder as a congregation, are we prepared for the problems that will come?

Because problems there will be. It will not all be plain sailing. Not everything will go as we would hope or as we would like. There will be around the corner unexpected problems. Things will go wrong.

Things will not go as we had anticipated. Opposition there will be. And let's be clear, as we would seek to gain territory for Jesus from Satan, there will be before us spiritual attacks that we will have to confront.

[19:03] And are we prepared for that? Will we be in a position, in a spiritual condition to defend ourselves and to confront and to come out victorious? Will we withstand the problems and the attacks that will no doubt be part of our experience as a congregation?

Well, if we are to, we must be a united people and a praying people. And if we are, then I think we can be confident that we are prepared and that we will withstand.

So, returning to the passage before us, there is a problem. They are a man down. A replacement is needed. But this community that is described to us is a community prepared for such problems.

But there must come a time, and now we turn to consider this, there must come a time for actually tackling the problem. What are they going to do? And so, we come to this third element.

How do they tackle the problem before them? Well, we can say a few things concerning this or in answer to this question, how do they tackle the problem?

[20:10] The first thing that we have to say, it may seem an obvious thing, but I think it is significant and very practical. They confront the problem. In verse 15, in those days, Peter stood up among the believers, a group numbering about 120, and said, Brothers, the Scripture had to be

fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas.

And so, he goes on, and then he continues there in verse 21, having quoted the passages from the book of Psalms, Therefore, it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us. And so, this problem is confronted.

Painful as it must have been to grapple with Judas' treachery and death, they must and they do grasp the nettle. And I say they because it seems to me, and you are free and welcome to consider if you share this perspective.

But it seems to me reasonable to presume that as Peter stands up there, as it is described in verse 15, to announce what is to be done, he is announcing the conclusion of a deliberation that there may well have been among the disciples.

They've been considering these matters, they've been discussing these matters, and so Peter stands and says, this is the situation and this is what we propose to do. And so, they confront the problem, they tackle the problem, they're going to do something about it.

[21 : 43] And even as I say it, I think to myself, well that's pretty obvious, isn't it? There's no great, deep truths there. But might it not be, and again, I throw this out for your consideration, might it not be that we as a church, and maybe I use that term in a broader sense, as a denomination, as the free church, but also we can think of it locally as well, and I ask the question, might it be that we don't overcome our problems as a church, sometimes, because we're simply too gutless to confront them.

We don't want to confront them, we don't want to face them, we don't want to confront them, because we think, well maybe some people will think like this, and other people will think like this, well let's just pretend there isn't a problem, let's just carry on and pretend that everything's just fine, and so we don't confront the problems that we have, and so if we don't confront them, well we can be pretty sure we're not going to solve them.

But here, these group of believers, there is a problem and they confront the problem, and how do they confront the problem? Well, as we read the passage, they turn to the scriptures for answers, where else will they find an answer?

Where else will they discover what they have to do? And that is what they do, they turn to the scriptures, scriptures. There in verse 16, Peter begins his address in this way, Brothers, the scripture had to be fulfilled.

The scripture had to be fulfilled. And so, they have an answer for the question, why, that has been torturing them perhaps, why did this happen?

[23 : 14] Well, Peter says, well this is why it happened. The scripture had to be fulfilled. Does this relieve Judas of moral guilt? By no means. And yet, there is an answer here for them. The scripture had to be fulfilled.

But not only is there an answer to the question, why in the scriptures, there is also an answer to the question, what? What do we do now? How do we seek a replacement? Well, the scriptures will give them an answer to that question also.

And as we read the passage, we notice that Peter quotes from two psalms, one of which we sang before we began the sermon. He quotes there from Psalm 69, the first quote, and also from Psalm 109.

And as we think about that here, we're given, if you wish, the conclusion of what I would imagine were deliberations among the apostles. But as we consider this conclusion that is presented to us, indeed the very psalms that are quoted, I can't help but wonder, well, how did they arrive at this? How did they know that these were the psalms that would give them an answer to their dilemma? How did they know that of all the scriptures, here was the place where there would be answers that they were looking for that they might replace Judas?

[24 : 35] And as I wonder how they came to that conclusion, is it not reasonable to propose that maybe there are three elements here? First of all, the disciples knew that concerning Judas, Jesus had already identified Judas from the book of Psalms.

In John chapter 13 and verse 18, if you'll just bear with me a moment as we try and put these pieces together, really what I'm trying to do here is discover, well, how is it that the disciples were able to identify these particular psalms and passages as containing an answer to the problem that they had before them?

Well, the first element I'm suggesting is that the disciples knew that Jesus himself had turned to the psalter in order to explain Judas' actions. There in John chapter 13 and verse 18, we read, and here Jesus is speaking, predicting his betrayal, I am not referring to all of you, I know those I have chosen, but this is to fulfill the scriptures.

He who shares my bread has lifted up his heel against me. And Jesus there quotes from Psalm 41 and verse 9, and so these men are thinking, well, what do we do? Where do we turn to?

How will we get answers to this problem that we have? Well, Jesus went to the psalter. Jesus found in the psalter answers to Judas' actions may be there. We will find answers that we need to confront this situation, to know how we are to replace them.

[26 : 02] And so they turned to the psalter, they turned to the psalms and searched the psalms that might there be there the answers that they need. And so there is this knowledge of how Jesus had responded to Judas and how he had identified Judas in the psalter.

But there is also the effort that they must put in. They must study the scriptures. They must consider and look for the answers in the scriptures. And I have no doubt that that is something they would have been doing in these days.

But of course, alone, they would not have been able to come to identify in this clear and inspired way the passages that were needful for the situation before them.

They needed and they were granted no doubt the direction of the same Spirit who had spoken through David. Is it not significant that when Peter addresses the disciples there in verse 15 or in verse 16, sorry, brothers, the scriptures had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David.

How Peter explicitly makes reference to how the Holy Spirit had spoken through the mouth of David. And we can be sure that as these disciples considered what Jesus had done, as they turned to the scriptures, as they searched the scriptures, so they knew and enjoyed the direction of that same Holy Spirit as they honed in, as they came to identify these particular passages as passages that spoke concerning Judas and that spoke concerning how he was to be replaced.

[27 : 37] So they turned to the scriptures for answers and the manner in which they do so is instructive for us. We too can consider all that we have learned in the past, all that the church has discovered in the past concerning what the scriptures teach us.

We too can read of Jesus and all that he would speak to us and teach us as we read of him in the Gospels. We too can turn to the scriptures and study them and seek to find answers in them but we too as we do so require that direction of the very author of scriptures, the Holy Spirit himself that he would guide and direct us and show us in the scriptures the answers that we are looking for.

So they confront their problem. They do so turning to the scriptures and looking in the scriptures for answers and so we must do the same. But what else do they do? Well they pray.

They pray about their problem. I've already talked about prayer but the point I was making when I talked about prayer a few moments ago was that they were a praying community in a more general sense. But here the point that is being made is that concerning this specific issue they commend it to God in prayer.

That is mentioned explicitly in verse 24 really coming to the end of the process having proposed to men we read in verse 24 then they prayed. but we can be sure that this was not the first time that they had prayed concerning this matter.

[29 : 04] We can be sure that from the very beginning of their study and their deliberations and their conversation concerning what are we going to do prayer would have been central to their approach. Prayer would have been central to their seeking an answer to the problem before them.

So too for us as we are confronted with problems in our life as a congregation may prayer be ever that to which we turn well may God be ever the one to whom we turn in prayer.

But then one final thing that we can say concerning their tackling of the problem and it is this that they act. They are willing to confront the problem they turn to the scriptures and they look for answers they pray about it they seek direction but they act.

From verse 21 through to the end of the chapter they move into that phase as it were. Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men. There is a scriptural foundation for what they are doing.

They know that this must be done. They know what it is they have to do and they proceed to act to choose a replacement for Judas. And as we consider the manner in which they acted there is maybe just a couple of elements that we could highlight that may be helpful to us as we would apply these things to ourselves that they would be helpful for us.

[30 : 28] As they act and as they make their choice just notice one or two elements. First of all that in the choice that they make they make their choice based on established criteria.

There on verse 22 as they consider who it would be that could replace Judas. Judas. Really we would need to read from verse 24. Verse 21 Therefore 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. It's often stated and the point is made that one of the conditions for apostleship was that the apostle had to be a witness of the resurrection but as we read these words we find that it's more demanding one who had been with us from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us.

And so there are these criteria that they have been guided to discern and to understand. This is something that must be true of whoever it is will replace Judas.

And as we notice that and it's maybe not particularly relevant for us I don't think maybe we're in danger of being led astray as perhaps others in other circumstances might be concerning this but it's worth making the point let's be very careful not only careful but recognize the folly of those who even today speak of their so-called apostles.

[32 : 03] You know we hear of churches where apostle this and apostle that and so we're assured that oh there's plenty of apostles wandering in our world and churches today and we say well that cannot be certainly not the apostles as understood in this passage before us.

There was criteria that needed to be met in order for one to replace Judas as an apostle. It's also just worth noting as a of anecdotal or of curiosity interest or perhaps a little more than that is that though Judas was replaced because of the untimely manner in which he ceased to be an apostle that he ceased to be a disciple through his treason and death.

It's interesting that James one of the twelve when he died a martyr's death he was not replaced because clearly it was seen that his time had come and there was no need for him to be replaced that also just by the buying.

So they make their choice they act they make their choice and they do so on the basis of established criteria but also worth noting that in the final analysis though they have their candidates as it were in this case two men are proposed they choose to leave the final decision to the Lord then they prayed Lord you know everyone's heart show us which of these two you have chosen and well the manner in which they decide between the two is what for us seems a rather strange or curious manner they cast lots and the lot fell to Matthias but it was clear that they were fully confident that the falling of the lot would be directed by God himself that the man of God's choosing would be appointed now I don't really want to dwell on these details simply to make the point that in the final analysis they leave the decision to the Lord and there is one final thing that I want to mention it's in a sense not in any way central to the passage and yet maybe there's a truth here that might be of encouragement to us this evening

I wonder if you have ever given consideration to this passage or this incident this election if you wish not really an election this process of replacing Judas and well the lot fell to Matthias so Matthias was granted that honor that privilege of being the one to replace Judas I wonder if you've ever thought about poor justice I wonder how he felt when the lot fell on Matthias he was obviously a good man he had been chosen as one who met the criteria he is obviously one that the other eleven apostles would have been more than happy to be number twelve and yet here it was they got down to the last two and the lot falls on Matthias I wonder how justice felt I don't know but I just wonder I wonder how he felt but I think even in his being set aside for this task there is maybe a final lesson for us

[35 : 11] I was reading on this passage comments that were made by Bishop Tom Wright and he interestingly focuses in on justice and he says the following part of Christian obedience right from the beginning was the call to play apparently great parts without pride and apparently small parts without shame so a justice he wasn't to be an apostle but we can be sure that he had his part to play we can be sure that he was still just as much part of this community of believers just as much part just as much a task to perform what it was we don't know but he I am sure performed it as we were considering in the way and diligently even if he wasn't to be an apostle maybe for us in our Christian service there can be disappointments things that we would have liked to do places we'd have liked to go responsibilities we would have liked to be given and it was not to be that was not what God wanted for us well maybe we can just learn from justice

God decides God is the one who determines the fall of the lots and he is the one who determines what we will do and how we will do it and where we will go and what a task we will be given let's take that final lesson even from this seemingly very marginal character in this account well as we conclude there was a problem painful and difficult though it was this problem is resolved and it's resolved in a God directed and God glorifying way the team is complete once again and the stage is set for all that awaits and well we began but I encouraged you at the beginning to try and imagine how the disciples were feeling as they made their walk back to Jerusalem and as we close imagine how they felt as Matthias was added to their number as the problem before them was confronted and resolved and once again they could be confident that they were in the full complement of apostles necessary for what lay before them but we don't just need to imagine how it feels to confront and to resolve problems rather let us experience how it feels as we together as God's people in this place confront and overcome all the problems the devil may well we are sure try to throw in our direction well let us pray bye