

GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL BECAUSE JESUS IS LORD OF ALL THINGS

Acts 1:12-26

INTRODUCTION

Most of us do not voluntarily place ourselves in scary and uncertain situations. Except for those few among us who are addicted to the thrill of risk-taking, most of us studiously avoid it. Most of us do not like the nerve-racking, gut-wrenching, pulse quickening effect that new, uncertain and risky situations produce. We only put ourselves in these kinds of situations if it is unavoidable. Now, when a person becomes a Christian, when they join with God's church, they are volunteering for a life of risk taking, joining a community that is called to do difficult and even dangerous acts of love to God and man. This is true because we are called into a life of obedience to Jesus. When a person trusts in Christ they are not merely depending upon Christ to forgive his sins and take him to heaven, but depending upon Christ to show him how to live. It's like when you go to the doctor. After she examines you and diagnoses your disease she then tells you how to be cured of the disease. If you trust the doctor, if you have faith in her, then you will do what she says. If you do not do what she says, then you do not trust in her. Everyone who trusts his or her doctor obeys his or her doctor. So it is with Christ. If you say that you trust him as the Son of God who became man and who lived and died and rose again so that you can be forgiven of your sins and declared perfectly righteous, then you are also a person who does what he says.

As we saw in the opening section of Acts, these eleven apostles are far from perfect men and they do not yet fully comprehend what God is doing through Christ but it is obvious they trust Jesus because in vv. 12-26 we see them obeying Jesus. In v. 4 Jesus commanded them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait for God to fulfill his promise to send the Holy Spirit. In v. 8 he told them that the effect of the coming of the HS would be that they would bear witness to Christ beginning in Jerusalem. What we see in vv. 12-26 is these men and the rest of the church acting in accord with what Jesus said. They return to Jerusalem, they wait and they prepare for their mission of bearing witness. In short they were obedient to Christ because they trusted Christ.

They didn't have to do this. None of these men were from Jerusalem. With the departure of Jesus it would have been fairly easy to return to Galilee and to their former lives. Matthew could have gone back to tax-collecting, Peter, Andrew, James and John could have gone back to the family business of fishing. They could have each gone their own way. But surprisingly they didn't go back to their former lives. I say surprisingly because by staying together they were embracing a very uncertain and risky future together. They knew that they, the apostles, were going to bear witness to the resurrected Christ. They knew also that bearing witness to Christ was not going to be well-received by everyone; especially as they contemplated bearing witness to Christ in Jerusalem where the Jewish religious leaders who had killed Jesus only 43 days earlier were still in control. This is risky business with very uncertain outcomes and yet they are confidently obeying Jesus. The question I have for us this morning is simply this: why did they confidently obey Jesus in spite of the uncertainty and risk that obedience entailed? In seeing how Luke tells us about their obedience we will discover why it is that every Christian confidently obeys Jesus, even when obedience is hazardous.

MAIN POINT

Christians confidently obey Jesus because...

I. He always keeps his promises to his waiting people (vv. 12-14)

The first reason that these 120 people were willing to obey Jesus was because of who they knew Jesus to be and because of what Jesus had promised would happen. They knew that Jesus was the long awaited Messiah and Savior. They knew he was alive and now living in God's very presence as they had seen him in his resurrected glory and watched him ascend to the Father. Therefore, they knew that when this resurrected Christ promised that they would be baptized by the Holy Spirit in a few days and that they would be his witnesses, they knew it

was going to happen. They confidently obeyed because they were absolutely convinced of the trustworthiness of Jesus. They exhibit their faith in Jesus by returning to Jerusalem, by praying and by replacing Judas with another qualified man so that he could "become a witness with us of his resurrection." They expect to be baptized in the Spirit and they expect to bear witness because Jesus said these things would happen and so their conduct is based upon these promises.

What I really want you to see is how they wait. These 120 people, which included the eleven apostles, the women who followed Jesus in his earthly ministry and financially supported he and his disciples (Luke 8:1-3), Mary the mother of Jesus and Jesus' biological brothers, James, Joses, Jude and Simon wait together, "constantly praying with one accord." Jesus had not told them to pray, he just told them to wait, so why are they praying? More importantly, what are they asking God to do? They prayed because they understood what prayer is, which many of us do not. We tend to think of prayer as us talking God into doing our will. The disciples understood that prayer is asking God to do what he has said he wants to do. Jesus promised that the HS was going to come and that they would be witnesses. The fact that God sovereignly does his will does not stop them from praying but causes them to pray because they know that prayer is asking God to do what he has said he is going to do.

This leads us to the second question: What are they praying? A literal translation of the first part of v. 14 says, "These all were continuing with one accord in the prayer..." What is "the" prayer that they were continuing to pray? I think you will find the answer in Luke 11. In Luke 11 one of Jesus' disciples asks Jesus to teach them to pray the way that John the Baptist taught his disciples to pray. In response Jesus told them an abbreviated form of what we know as the Lord's Prayer. In this prayer he instructs his disciples on what God wants to give to them and thus what they are to ask from him. We are to ask that God would cause people to treat him with the honor and respect and love that he deserves, that he would send his kingdom, that he would cause his will to be done on earth as it is in heaven, that he would supply us with our daily bread, that he would forgive our sins and that he would not lead us into temptation but deliver us from the evil one. I don't mean to suggest that these disciples were merely repeating this prayer but that their prayers followed this pattern. They prayed this prayer with one accord, that is, in complete agreement with one another. Another reason I'm pretty confident that "the prayer" they were praying is this prayer is because of the promise Jesus connects to praying this prayer. In Luke 11:13 Jesus finishes his instruction on prayer by saying, "If you then, though you are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?" They knew that the ultimate answer to their request that God glorify his name, send his kingdom, cause his will to be done, provide for their daily needs, forgive their sins and protect them from sin and the devil was to give to them the Holy Spirit, which is exactly what Jesus has just told them that God is going to do in a few days.

We are a praying people because we know that Jesus is going to fulfill all his promises. Jesus doesn't make promises and sovereignly fulfill them so that we will not pray but so that we will pray. So we ask God to do what he has promised to do. The best and greatest thing he has promised to do is to give us the Holy Spirit. If we are a people who are confident that Jesus is going to do what he promises to do then we are to be a people who are continuing in one accord in the prayer. Are you regularly praying with one accord with people from our church? Are you praying with one accord in your families, in your small groups, when you meet for coffee or when you talk with one another after church? Are you asking God to do what he has said he wants to do as summarized in the Lord's Prayer? We prayerfully take risks for the sake of Jesus because we know that Jesus will do as he promises. We express our confidence in Jesus by our praying and acting.

Christians confidently obey Jesus because...

- *He always keeps his promises to his waiting people*
- *And because...*

II. He rules over all things to fulfill his eternal plan (vv. 15-17)

This waiting church is not only praying but they are also thinking about the OT Scriptures in light of the life and teaching and suffering and death and resurrection of Jesus. We know this because of what Peter says as he stands up in the midst of these 120 people. He says it was necessary that Judas, who was one of the 12 chosen apostles, betray Jesus by leading the mob of soldiers and officials to him to arrest him. It was necessary because God the Holy Spirit had spoken through David in the OT Scriptures that he, Judas, was to do it. What Peter is saying is exactly what Jesus said on numerous occasions. In his prayer to the Father in John 17:12 he said, "While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled." Jesus could have kept Judas safe, just like he kept the other disciples safe but he did not because it was God's will that Judas betray Jesus and God had made his will known hundreds of years earlier by declaring it would be so in the Scriptures. The betrayal of Judas was the will of God. This one chosen by Christ to be an apostle, by the decree of God became the betrayer. There has never been a more wicked and evil act done than the betrayal of Jesus by Judas. He had been given so much as one of the chosen twelve apostles and yet he betrayed this one who had shown him such kindness and mercy. What vv. 15-17 say is that the greatest act of human evil ever done was done according to the purpose and will of God.

I know that this kind of talk causes trouble for people. So let me just be clear about what the Bible does not say. God did not do evil. He did not, as it were, hold a gun to Judas' head and force him, against his will to betray Jesus. As John Calvin says in his commentary on this verse, Judas was guilty "not being compelled by the prophecy but by the malice of his own heart." In a way that we do not fully understand, God willed that Judas and no other betray Jesus and Judas willingly, freely, gladly betrayed Jesus. The result is that God is not guilty of doing evil, Judas is; but also, Judas is not merely doing his will but he is also doing God's will. God is so powerful that he can do what we cannot do. He is able to so work to ensure that Judas betrays Jesus and yet Judas alone is guilty of doing evil because he does it willingly. Judas wanted to betray Jesus and God also wanted him to betray Jesus.

Let me show you why this is so important to understand. These disciples know that when they begin to bear witness about Jesus they are going to be harmed by evil people. Jesus promised them in John 16:2, "...a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God." How helpful will it be to know that just as it was God's will that Judas betray Jesus so also it is God's will that James be executed by Herod Antipas and that Stephen be stoned by the furious Jews? How helpful is it to know that this greatest act of evil led to the greatest glory and good in the universe? When you know that the evil that is being done to you is being done according to the wise and loving plan of your heavenly Father for good purposes you will be set free from fear of what man can do to you. This is not simply some irrelevant, hard to understand point of theological controversy but a necessary truth for you and I to hold in order to have a confident, obedient faith in Christ. Evil men and demons are not in control of this world, God is. Therefore, we do not need to fear what will be done to us but we can confidently obey Jesus because he sovereignly rules over everything, even the evil deeds of evil people and demons.

Christians confidently obey Jesus because...

- *He always keeps his promises to his waiting people*
- *He rules over all things to fulfill his eternal plan*
- *And because...*

III. He executes perfect justice (vv. 18-20, 25)

Verses 18 and 19 are a parenthetical description by Luke for us readers of what happened to Judas. The first half of the verse refers to the fact that the thirty pieces of silver which the Jewish religious leaders paid to Judas to betray Jesus and which Judas in a fit of remorse threw into the temple were used to buy a field in which to bury poor people. The second half of the verse refers to Judas' death in very graphic, gruesome language. Judas, if you will remember, hanged himself and when his bloated body was cut down it fell headlong and burst

open. Verse 19 then refers to the fact that the local people called this cemetery "Field of Blood" both because of how Judas died and because the money used to buy it was "blood money." In other words, Luke is letting us know that it was common knowledge that the priests had paid Judas to betray Jesus. His wicked act and the priest's vicious hatred against the innocent Jesus were immortalized in the common name given to the cemetery by the people.

Luke, after inserting this description of Judas' demise continues with Peter's speech in which he quotes two verses from two Psalms. His point is that the Holy Spirit, by the mouth of David spoke about this betrayal of Judas and what would happen to him hundreds of years in advance. Both Psalm 69 and Psalm 109 are descriptions of the suffering of God's Messiah at the hands of wicked men and then the Messiah's prayer that God would destroy his enemies. These are both graphic descriptions of the punishment that God will bring upon those who oppose and harm the Messiah and his people. You heard a portion of Psalm 109 read. Listen to this brief portion of Psalm 69, "Pour out your wrath on them; let your fierce anger overtake them. May their place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in their tents. For they persecute those you wound and talk about the pain of those you hurt. Charge them with crime upon crime; do not let them share in your salvation. May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be listed with the righteous."

We have recorded in these Psalms God's hatred and animosity against all those who oppose the Lord Jesus Christ and his people. It is an absolute certainty that all who remain in opposition and indifference to Jesus and his church will suffer the fate of Judas. The point of Luke's graphic language is to emphasize the horror of God's judgment on the disobedient. He is reflecting the horrific language of the OT prophets which is an accurate description of the justice of God, his anger against those who refuse to bend the knee to Jesus and who persist in preferring the pleasures of sin and of this world to him. In v. 25, in prayer, the apostles say that Judas turned aside from the apostolic ministry "to go where he belongs." This is an indirect way of referring to hell. The place he belongs as the just punishment for his act of betrayal is eternal, conscious punishment in hell. Again, all the graphic language in the OT and in the words of Jesus and here by Luke describing God's wrath against the wicked is meant to terrify us and to show how hostility and indifference to Jesus and his church are hell-deserving sins.

There are several effects that the knowledge of God's just anger, especially as it was expressed towards Judas, ought to have in our lives. First, Judas should always stand as a warning to every professing Christian that we must persevere in our faith. If Judas who was chosen by Christ to be one of his 12 apostles and who lived with Jesus for three years and who performed miracles and preached the gospel could have been a false Christian then we must not be complacent in our own faith. We must not take our sins lightly. We must flee quickly to Christ in repentance and in faith when we sin. We must seek the help of our brothers and sisters to fight against our sin. We should fear God's wrath far more than we fear the embarrassment of others knowing about our sins. Second, we do not need to fear what man can do to us. We need not fear being treated unjustly. God sees and God knows and he will justly punish all sin, either in his son or by pouring out his wrath on the unrepentant in hell forever. Third, we do not need to take revenge. We do not need to hate those who harm us. We can love our enemies and bless those who curse us because God, the perfect judge, will execute his perfect justice on the wicked. We can entrust ourselves and our enemies into the hands of God who is taking note of those who seek to harm us. We can obey Christ even if it exposes us to being harmed by evil men because we know that God will execute perfect justice on those who harm us.

Christians confidently obey Jesus because...

- *He always keeps his promises to his waiting people*
- *He rules over all things to fulfill his eternal plan*
- *He executes perfect justice*
- *And because...*

IV. He leads his people (vv. 20-26)

Peter and the other apostles and the rest of the church knew that it was the will of Jesus that they choose another man to take the place of Judas. How did they know this was the will of God? First of all, Jesus had originally chosen twelve men to be his apostles. He had told these twelve, as recorded in Luke 22:29-30, "And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." They understood that they, by the authority of Jesus, were the foundation upon which true Israel, believing, elect Israel, the church was to be built. They had been given the very authority of Christ as the foundation stones of the true temple of God, the church of Jesus. So just as there were twelve sons of Isaac who were the foundation of the twelve tribes of national, ethnic Israel, so there must be twelve "sons of Jesus" who are the foundation of the new visible people of God, the church.

Second, they saw in Psalm 109:8 a command by the Lord Jesus to replace Judas, the betrayer whose habitation, whose place among the twelve was now deserted. They believed it was God's will to replace Judas because the Holy Spirit had spoken about his replacement in the Scriptures. So on the basis of God's revealed will in the Scripture they knew that they needed to find a twelfth man to join with them in bearing witness to the resurrected Christ. The next question they faced was who should replace Judas? Look at how they determined this. First, they, by common consent determined that the man who would join them must have witnessed not only the resurrection but the entire earthly ministry of Jesus, beginning with the ministry of John the Baptist. They knew this is what Jesus would want and they knew it by the use of their own united reasoning abilities. As they inquired among the 120 people gathered there they determined that there were two men who fulfilled this requirement: Joseph, nicknamed Barsabbas and whose Latin name was Justus and a disciple named Matthias. Notice that no one asked these men if they felt "called" to be an apostle. The group nominated them.

But, how to determine which of these Jesus would want? They realized at this point that only Jesus himself would know which man was fit to be an apostle. They knew that just as Jesus had directly called each of the eleven to be his apostles out of a much larger group of disciples, so he needed to directly call one of these two. How to do this? The process they determined to use was prayer followed by the casting of lots. In other words, they would draw straws. Their confidence that Jesus would reveal his will through the casting of lots was based upon a long history of using this method to determine God's will throughout the OT. The high priest cast lots every year on the Day of Atonement to decide between the two goats, which would be the scapegoat and which would be killed and its blood carried into the Most Holy Place. Indeed Proverbs 16:33 says, "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD." So they prayed to the Lord Jesus who knows the hearts of every human being to make a determination as to which of these men he would choose to fill up the apostleship.

At this point we are confronted with something we are going to be confronted with time and again as we read the book of Acts. While Acts is not primarily a handbook on how to run a local church but rather a description of how the Triune God is fulfilling his promises to save his people scattered throughout the world, yet, there is an example being set forth here. However, which part of what we observe are we to emulate? Should we select our elders and make other decisions by the casting of lots? I have a good friend who is a pastor in the Reformed Church of America and they do use lots in the selecting of elders. The congregation nominates men and then they pray and draw straws to determine who Jesus chooses. Does this passage teach us to do this?

I would say we should not use lots and that the RCA has made a mistake to use this process. First, we are observing a unique, unrepeatable event in the history of the church. Second, we are observing the final event in the OC, prior to the coming of the Holy Spirit into the world. Third, in the book of Acts there are a number of stories regarding the selection of leaders in the local church and in no case is the casting of lots mentioned. Thus, I conclude that the casting of lots belongs to the OC which has been supplanted by the NC presence of the Holy Spirit. Especially when we observe that the casting of lots was so connected to the priesthood and the sacrificial system I think we should conclude that this is not a method we should use in discerning the will of God for us.

There are several things we can learn about Jesus' leadership of the church in this passage. First and foremost, his will is known through his word. The replacement of Judas was only done because the revealed word of God through Jesus and through the OT said it was to be done. Second, his will is made known in and through the gathered, praying church. Contrary to how most American Christians think about knowing the will of God, it is not by private revelation but in the context of the gathered community we discern the will of our Lord. Third, his will is revealed through the leaders of the church leading and using the authority Jesus gave to them. Peter, the chief apostle began the discussion and led it through to its conclusion. Fourth, Jesus uses the reasoning of the group as they evaluate circumstances and the past work of God. They knew the job of apostle required witness bearing and thus they knew they needed an eyewitness to those events about which they were to bear witness. Finally, they knew that only the Lord Jesus himself could see into the hearts of men and so they trusted his sovereign power to make the final decision, in their case, prior to the coming of the HS, through the casting of lots. In our case we trust his leadership through the HS directing our leaders in their decision making and through our voting on various issues.

Christians confidently obey Jesus because...

- *He always keeps his promises to his waiting people*
- *He rules over all things to fulfill his eternal plan*
- *He executes perfect justice*
- *He leads his people*

© Copyright 2008 John Swanson.

You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that:

- (1) you credit the author,
- (2) any modifications are clearly marked,
- (3) you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, and
- (4) you do not make more than 1,000 copies.

If you would like to post this material to the web, or if your intended use is other than outlined above, please contact River Hills Community Church, 2843 West Court Street, Janesville, WI 53545. (608) 758-0943. mail@riverhillsonline.org