

Betrayal and the Kingdom?

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[0 : 00] Acts chapter 1 reading from verse 12. They all joined together constantly in prayer along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus and with his brothers.

In those days Peter stood up among the believers, a group numbering about 120, and said, Brothers and sisters, the scripture had to be fulfilled in which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus.

He was one of our number and shared in our ministry. With the payment he received for his wickedness, Judas bought a field, and there he fell headlong. His body burst open and all his intestines spilled out.

Everyone in Jerusalem heard about this, so they called that field in their language Akildama, that is, field of blood. For, said Peter, it is written in the book of Psalms, may his place be deserted, let there be no one to dwell in it, and may another take his place of leadership.

Therefore, it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us.

[1 : 39] For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection. So they nominated two men, Joseph, called Barsabbas, also known as Justice, and Matthias.

Then they prayed, Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs.

Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias, so he was added to the eleven apostles. This is the word of the Lord. Thank you, God. Katrina, thanks, Martin, for leading us, and for Tricia, for praying for us.

I won't pray as Tricia's prayed for us, and hopefully that will help us and aid us as we look at this passage this morning. Great. Well, my name's James.

I'm on the staff team here at St. Silas. And if you're new here this morning, it's wonderful to see you here this morning. We've been going through a little series in the book of Acts called Jesus and His Unstoppable Word.

[2 : 39] And the book of Acts tells us it's called Acts of the Apostles. And I've entitled this talk Betrayal and the Kingdom? What do we make of that?

And the sad reality is betrayal's a bit of a part of our life. It's launched a thousand soap opera lines. I'm not really brilliantly up-to-date with soap operas, but I imagine there's a lot of illustrations there. What I do know is, remember that James Bond? Can you remember a little back? I think it was The World Is Not Enough, where 006 turns out to be an evil Russian agent and betrays 007.

Any nods there? No, am I alone on that one? Yes, thanks. Right, great, brilliant. And we see betrayal at the heart of this passage. And betrayal's really what drives this passage.

And we see this in our own lives, don't we? So if we're here this morning as someone who's gone through betrayal, I really pray for God's comfort for you, His care for you, and His looking after you.

[3 : 45] Keep trusting Him. Keep holding on to Him. We might see this at school and what happens in our interactions at school. We might see this at university, how someone really, really lets us down when they should have come through for us.

And we might see this at home, in home lives. And it's the question, and it drives this passage. So by way of context in Acts, Acts is the second half of Luke's big book that he writes, firstly, on the life and times of Jesus in his gospel, and then secondly, on the growth of the early church and of how Jesus acts in that growth.

And so Acts should rarely be called the Acts of Jesus by his Spirit-empowered word. And so the hero of the story is Jesus.

And we saw that great strapline for the book of Acts, Acts 1 verse 8, if you just join me in looking back there. But you'll receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you'll be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Old Jim Deer and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

And that's the strapline. That's the line that governs and guides us through the book of Acts. And what do we see there is that Jesus commissions his apostles to be witnesses of his resurrection.

[5 : 05] That is, that he is alive and that he is ascended, and he is still ruling and acting in his world. And we notice, where does it start?

It starts in Jerusalem. That's the place of God's kings. That is, Jesus is God's king forever. And then what do we see?

Not just Jerusalem, but out to Judea. And what we're talking there is about how Jesus is going to fix and transform God's people into God's kingdom.

He's going to, no longer will they be sidelined, but they'll be glorified and lifted up. And then finally, to the ends of the earth. No longer is this just going to be amongst the Jews, but this is going to go out to all people everywhere.

And we have seen this realized, haven't we? So as we sit here this morning, it's wonderful being in Glasgow. We've got folk from all over the place. You might even spot myself South African. Sorry to be here.

[6 : 04] I'm glad to be here. Hopefully, yeah, I have my commiserations to the Irish. I empathize a lot. You might get that if you support rugby.

And so Luke restates the strapline, this 1 verse 8 strapline, right at the start of Luke's gospel. So he's picking up on Luke's gospel and he's continuing through.

It's a consistent story of how Jesus acts throughout the world. And so the events that lead up to this passage that we're looking at are the end of Luke's gospel.

That's Jesus' betrayal to death. And then he was resurrected and ascended. And he was betrayed by one of his most trusted disciples, Judas.

And so as we approach Acts, we still have this question hanging over us. Was Jesus simply caught off guard by this? Is Jesus really in control when he says that he's God, but he chooses Judas as one of his disciples and apostles?

[7 : 13] And so I'd like to tackle these questions by looking at three character studies that we see in this passage. So firstly there, if you've got your little pink sheet there, the first one there is Judas, the one who goes his own way.

And then we notice, secondly, we're going to look at Peter. And Peter there represents all the disciples. And he's the one who stays devoted and united. And then finally we're going to look at Jesus, the one who knows every heart.

So firstly, Judas, the one who goes his way. And the key verses here is verse 17. I'll just read it for us there. And he was one of our number and shared in our ministry.

And then verse 25, which Judas left to go where he belongs. And literally that's translated as Judas turned, he turned his shoulder, he left, and he goes his own way.

That's the literal translation of that passage. I want to make two observations on Judas there. The first is that Judas was not an outsider. He was not a rogue agent who betrayed Jesus.

[8 : 24] He was the ultimate insider. He was respected, esteemed, valued. He was a leader of the community. So verse 20, he describes him as a person in leadership.

And then elsewhere we read how Judas was in charge of the money bag. He was the treasurer for the disciples. You don't get anyone to be a treasurer. You get someone who's responsible to be a treasurer.

And then we notice that Judas has been with Jesus since the start of Jesus' ministry. He was there when the 70 went out and did all those miracles and cast out all those demons.

Had he stayed faithful, he would have met with the apostles' criteria that they give in verse 22. He would have seen the resurrected and ascended Jesus. And you can imagine how Sunday morning might have gone for Judas.

Judas, what do you think about this? Judas, can you heal my child, please? Did you see how Judas cast out that demon? He's a great man of faith.

[9 : 29] And Judas here looks very impressive. It reminds me of a story of mine, of a friend of mine. At 18, he created an outreach to surfers in our hometown.

By 21, he was leading altar calls to thousands of teens coming in, telling them of Jesus, asking them to give their lives. By 28, he had abandoned his faith. He had divorced his wife and traded it in for a Q5 in an international career with a multinational. Holiday trips to Vermont, summers in Martha's Vineyard. And he'd married an heiress in a Buddhist ceremony.

He looked very impressive, but he had simply walked away. And the second observation that I want to make here is that Judas, rather than trusting Jesus and his word, what does he do?

He goes his own way. And it's really, in 25 there, when we read, he turns the shoulder, literally turns the shoulder.

[10:31] It's an incredibly subtle action, isn't it? It's a turn of the shoulder, a shrug of the shoulder that betrays a heart attitude. It's a roll of the eyes.

I wonder if you've ever had that, when you've said something and someone just rolls their eyes at you. And it speaks volumes, doesn't it? And so if there are any teens here this morning, and you might be tempted to roll your eyes at your parents, and they explode.

It's not because you've simply rolled your eyes. It's because what that action communicates and says. And so Jesus, having revealed where his heart is, what does he do?

He leaves, and he abandons Jesus and the disciples and all his friends. He leaves everything. And for what? He leaves a house, a Q5, a larger house, a field.

And what does he gain? He ends up gaining nothing. I won't read it, but just cast your eyes back to verse 18 and 19. Incredibly shocking verses.

[11:37] My guess is that Judas didn't wake up one morning thinking, ha, do you know what? I'm going to betray Jesus today. But he simply started with a roll of the eyes one day.

And then he left, and he went in his own way. And what was happening there was that he was becoming his own judge of what's good and right for Judas.

And if we're honest here, as we sit here this morning, there's really a little bit of Judas in all of us this morning, in each of our hearts. And if we see this, if we acknowledge this, then we should make every effort to not be like Judas.

We should look to good role models. And so what we should do is we should look to how Peter and the disciples follow Jesus.

And they really contrasted to Judas in this passage. So that's our second point there. Peter, the one who stays devoted and united. And I wonder if you might just look down at verse 14, where we find the disciples there.

[12:43] And I've taken Peter as a representative of that. I'll just read it for us. And I want us just to notice here their obedience, their devotion, their unity, and their dependence.

And so we notice their obedience. What do they do? They go back to Jerusalem as Jesus has instructed them. And then we notice their devotion. How are they praying?

They're praying constantly to Jesus. They held Jesus in high regard because they knew that he was resurrected and ascended.

They knew that Jesus was very much alive. And out of this devotion flows a unity. They all joined together. They met regularly as one body.

And here I just want to make a couple of observations on this. So sometimes we make a great deal of our freedom in Christ. We use that. And we use that freedom as a reason for not meeting together on Sundays.

[13:54] But I wonder if it might be reasonable to ask and perhaps helpful for us to look at our hearts and ask the question, are we using our freedom in Christ to advance our devotion or are we using that freedom to hinder our devotion to Christ?

Are we as devoted to Jesus in the use of our freedom as we should be? And secondly, the second observation there is that sometimes we miss church.

Why? Well, it's because we have been given great gifts. We've been given financial independence. We've been given success. Do we use those gifts that God has given us to fan and to flame devotion?

Or are we using those gifts as a wet towel on the fire of devotion? As a means of giving up, meeting together, and encouraging one another's.

And then thirdly, it might be that we might be doing all of this, but then the temptation for us is that we hinder devotion by being self-righteous in all the good works that we're doing there.

[15:01] And we should really avoid that as well. And then the fourth, finally, thing to notice there in how Peter is and what he's like, so we've considered his obedience, his unity, his devotion, we notice there his utter dependence on the Lord Jesus.

What are the disciples doing? They meet together in prayer. And I wonder if you thought, who is it they are praying to? Well, my bet is that they're praying to the ascended Lord Jesus.

And the point is here is not that Peter and the disciples and all these things, that they were perfect or that they had arrived, but rather they had responded to the Lord Jesus in repentance and faith as forgiven sinners.

And as much as we might want to hold up Peter and the disciples as a model to be followed, what do we remember about them? Where were they two months before these events?

Well, they had abandoned Jesus. Peter had disowned Jesus three times. But the purpose of Acts is to remind us that Jesus fixes and transforms broken and half-hearted people.

[16:21] And that includes Peter and the disciples there. And it includes us here today. And the great promise and hope is, and having this great promise and hope does not let us off the hook in asking ourselves, how do I need to turn away from being like Jesus?

And how do I need to turn to being like Peter and the disciples, knowing that I'm forgiven, repenting of my sins, trusting Jesus more and more, fanning into flame devotion and unity and obedience?

So it might mean making it a priority to come to church on Sunday. It might mean making it a priority to meet in the midweek gatherings.

It might mean stepping back from the gossip or the peer pressure at school or the university and the workplace. And the reason for this is our third character study there that's given our reading.

That is, Jesus is the one who knows every heart. So just look down at verse 24 and then, or verse 21 and 22 and then verse 24.

[17:33] I'll just read it for us. Therefore, it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time. The Lord Jesus was living among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us.

For one of these must become a witness of his resurrection. And then verse 24. Then they prayed, Lord, you know everyone's heart.

Show us which of these two you have chosen. Now, notice Jesus might have been ascended, but he is very much at the heart of this passage.

And we see this in their concern to choose a replacement for Judas. In keeping with the apostolic commission that's given in 1 verse 8.

Being a witness to Jesus. Look at their criteria for how they choose Judas' replacement. They don't go for someone who's particularly gifted.

[18:33] They don't consider giftedness. And they don't consider ability. Do they meet, and they don't consider whether or not they meet our equality and diversity criteria.

And they don't look to the person's impressiveness. But they ask the question, are they suited to be a witness with us of Jesus' resurrection?

That Jesus is ascended. That is, will they be in fellowship with the apostles? And then, do they know and believe that the Lord Jesus is alive?

And that he is resurrected and ascended. And notice in this passage how God abundantly supplies for them. He doesn't just give them one suitable candidate.

But he gives them two suitable candidates that they must choose from. And so they have to cast lots. And the question that drives this reading that we'll return to is what are we to make of Judas' betrayal?

[19:38] And what does that say about God's kingdom and God's king? Look how Peter responds in verse 16 to that question. So what's Luke's encouragement to us as he writes this passage about Judas' betrayal?

How does Luke answer? He says, don't worry. It was part of God's plan. You see, Jesus spoke of this through his Holy Spirit in the Scriptures through his great-grandfather David years and years and years ago.

And we see this throughout the Acts of the Apostles. The repeated structure in Acts is we see some events. And then we see the take-home point stated in Luke's purpose statement after that.

So the events here have been Jesus' betrayal, his death, ascension, resurrection. And then Luke gives the purpose statement in that verse there, that the Scriptures had to be fulfilled, that this was

part of God's plan, even this really, really bad act.

God's plan of his Spirit-empowered word going out and expanding Jesus' kingdom despite opposition. So we might have times in our life when we go through terrible betrayal.

[21 : 20] We might wonder, what's going on here? One thing that we can have confidence, even in the midst of those terrible times of betrayal, is that God is still in charge.

And therefore, we should not lose hope. And we should not give up on God. And so, in conclusion, I think, I wonder if I could draw out two conclusions from all of this.

The first is that Jesus knows our hearts. If he knows our hearts, will we choose to be devoted to Jesus in our hearts?

See, look at the disciples' prayer. I've read it out, but I'll read it out again, verse 24. Lord, you know everyone's hearts. See, we might come to church, and we might be smiling on the outside, but struggling on the inside.

We might have heard the worst news in the world this morning. Life might be really, really good for us. We might have heard some really tough things, like we heard in our prayers this morning.

[22 : 24] We might be indifferent to the Lord Jesus. We might be rolling our eyes at him inwardly. We might be anywhere this morning.

But Jesus is the one who knows every heart. You see, we might play church games, but God knows where our hearts is.

And for some of us, that is really, really good news. He knows those secret devotions that we've done, those secret things that we've done to serve and follow him and love him as our personal Lord and Savior.

But for others of us, that might be an encouragement for us to seek to be more devoted to the Lord Jesus, to turn to him afresh in repentance and faith.

And as I stand here, I don't know your hearts. I don't. But Jesus knows all hearts. And Luke writes to a church years after the fact, who are perhaps going slightly off the boil.

[23 : 27] They might be sitting up in the saddle slightly. And he acknowledges that they might very well choose to reject Jesus. And so time and again, in the book of Acts, what do we see?

We see people rejecting Jesus and opposing his word. But Luke writes to encourage us in the Lord Jesus and to stir us up to action.

And why? And that is the second implication that we have from this passage, is that people may reject Jesus, but Jesus is still the ascended Lord of the universe.

Jesus' word still goes out unstopably. And this is what Luke wants us to understand. You see, Jesus is not like Boris Johnson.

There's quite a good chance Boris won't be in charge at the end of the week. Jesus still will be in charge at the end of this week. See, Boris' word might seem a bit shaky and flaky, but Jesus' word goes out unstopably.

[24 : 32] What Jesus says goes. Jesus is constant and unchangeable. Consider how magnificent his control and his mastery in the events of this passage really is.

He goes through the worst betrayal in history. All his friends abandon him, and yet he still is in charge. He looks defeated, and he's resurrected and ascended as Lord.

His word is still fulfilled. And God uses that in the greatest good to send that word out to all the nations, that all people might come to him in repentance and faith.

And as the disciples choose, Matthias, seeking God's guidance through prayer and scripture, the scene is set for the rest of the book of Acts, for the Spirit to come and empower this explosion of gospel good going out into the world.

Isn't that a great thing for our hearts to land and rejoice in this morning? Let me pray for us as we close. Father, we confess that many times we don't know what to do with betrayal.

[25 : 44] But Jesus, we acknowledge that you conquered betrayal, that your word still goes out faithfully. We pray that we might live faithful lives devoted to you, seeking to share that good news with our neighbors day by day.

In Jesus' name. Amen.