

Our Confidence in Jesus

Acts 1:15-26

If you've been a follower of Christ for any length of time, you've probably experienced things that have shaken you and threatened your confidence in God. Most people I talk with have their "church horror stories." I certainly do. As a twelve-year-old child, I saw the worst sort of racism in my home church in Hattiesburg, Mississippi; it was incredibly disorienting and disheartening. That type of experience can shake our confidence in God.

You have likely been hurt by things that other Christians have said to you and done to you. In our culture, many Christians would say that they've experience more pain and disappointment inside the church than outside the church. I certainly would. And if we don't think carefully about such experiences, they can shake our confidence in God.

Perhaps you've prayed and asked God to do something in your life or in the life of somebody you love; and yet nothing changed or things went from bad to worse. And you conclude that God doesn't take care of you like he promised. A friend of mine once told me how she had done everything God wanted her to do and yet she experienced incredible trauma in a relationship. Her comment was, "If that's how God treats his friends, I'm not sure I want to be his friend." If we're not careful, such experiences can shake our confidence in God.

Just like in our relationships with other people, a lack of confidence (or trust) in God tends to make us pull back from him and play it safe. I bring all of this up because a lack of confidence in God certainly affects what we talked about last week in Acts 1, namely, ***the assignment he's given the church*** of making him known to the end of the earth. If we lack confidence in him, we won't be like the early church and risk reputation, security, and our very lives to make him known.

The same thing was true for Jesus' original disciples. Today's passage highlights that there was one unresolved issue that could have shaken them and threatened their confidence in Jesus and his Jesus' plan for the nations. That issue was ***Judas' betrayal of Jesus***. Judas was one of the twelve disciples in Jesus' inner circle. And yet he had gone to the chief priests and told them that he would deliver Jesus over to them for the right price. They agreed on thirty pieces of silver, the amount a common laborer would make in four months. Judas sold out the Son of God for a rather modest amount of money. In his remorse he took his own life.

This would have been troubling to the remaining disciples for many reasons. I'll name two. First, ***Jesus himself had chosen Judas***. What did that say about Jesus' judgment in picking someone like Judas? Second, ***there were now only eleven apostles***. They needed to choose a replacement for Judas so that they would once again have twelve apostles that could represent the twelve tribes of Israel (see Luke 22:30, Matthew 19:28). What could possibly give them confidence in choosing a replacement?

In Acts 1:15-26 Luke explains how they addressed these two issues. What brought them great confidence can also bring us great confidence as we seek to follow Jesus. He first addresses Judas' betrayal and then Judas' replacement. In doing so Luke gives us two reasons we can have confidence in Jesus (and therefore his plan for the nations).

***The first reason for confidence in Jesus (and his plan for the nations):
God's sovereignty. (Acts 1:15-20a)***

Beginning here in Acts 1, we see that Peter is a transformed man. In the gospel of Luke Peter second-guessed and resisted Jesus' plans. Here we see that he now has a profound understanding of the Scriptures and a deep confidence in Jesus' plan for the nations.

15 In those days Peter stood up among the brothers (the company of persons was in all about 120) and said, 16 "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. 17 For he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry."

Look at verse 16:

16 "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.

Peter says, that "the Scripture ***had to be fulfilled***. . . concerning Judas." Both the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts emphasize that everything written about Jesus in the Hebrew Scriptures ***had to be fulfilled*** (see Luke 4:21, 18:31, 22:37, 24:44, Acts 3:18, 13:27, 29, 33). Sometimes this is called "the divine necessity" - something that had to happen because it was part of the sovereign plan of God. This language is used 40 times in Luke/Acts, stressing that the events of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection happened within the sovereign plan of God.

Peter says that "the Scripture had to be fulfilled, ***which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David*** concerning Judas." Statements like this form our understanding of the the inspiration of Scripture. The Holy Spirit spoke through human authors the message that God wanted communicated. The result is the inspired Word of God.

Here Peter says that the things the Spirit had prompted David to write about ***his enemies*** found their ultimate fulfillment in Judas. We'll discuss two specific Scriptures Peter had in mind when we get to verse 20. But for now, note that Peter wanted those gathered to know that Judas' betrayal was not some unexpected development or a

skeleton in God's closet. As a matter of fact, Peter says, it was a divine necessity that a traitor was numbered among the apostles.

The logic is that since ***David experienced betrayal*** by a close companion, the ***one who would sit on the throne of David forever also had to be betrayed*** by a close companion. It turns out that Jesus knew exactly what he was doing when he chose Judas to be one of the twelve; Judas' betrayal was simply one of many things that had to happen in God's sovereign plan for Jesus to lay down his life as a ransom for many.

By saying that God was sovereign over Judas' betrayal doesn't imply that Judas wasn't responsible for his actions. To the contrary, he was ***fully*** responsible for what he did. And yet, God was sovereign even over Judas' betrayal. To take it one step further, we read in Luke 22:3 that "Satan [had] entered into Judas Iscariot." And so we also have to conclude that God was sovereign even over Satan.

In verses 18 and 19 Luke makes a parenthetical statement to his readers about Judas to fill in some important details.

18 (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. 19 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.)

The only other account of Judas' death is found in Matthew 27 (vv.3-10). That account differs from this one in several ways. Yet they don't contradict one another; they complement one another. The bottom line is that the 30 pieces of silver paid to Judas were used to purchase a field that became a burial place for strangers. That was "the reward of his wickedness." [See Note #2]

In verse 20 Peter is speaking once again. He mentions two psalms that "had to be fulfilled" through Judas. Since Jesus was the "Son of David" who would sit on his throne forever, it was legitimate to see his experience as the ultimate fulfillment of David's psalms.

20 "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.'

The first Scripture Peter mentions is found in Psalm 69. There David speaks about how he had suffered innocently. People hated him without cause. And so David cries out to God to punish his enemies. In verse 25 he says, "May their camp be a desolation; let no one dwell in their tents." That would be justice for David's enemies.

Here in Acts 1, Peter says that Judas' death was the ultimate fulfillment of David's cry to God for vindication. Like David's enemies, Judas brought innocent suffering upon Jesus. Like David's enemies, Judas hated Jesus without a cause. And Judas fulfilled

the fate that David wanted for his enemies: his camp/field became desolate, a place where nobody lived.

Even though Judas' life and death were supremely tragic, everything that he did and everything that happened to him fell under the umbrella of God's sovereignty. That surely gave confidence to the 120 gathered in Jerusalem. And something similar is true for us: Believing that God is sovereign over the things that have shaken us can give us confidence in him and his plan for the nations.

Let me make clear ***what I don't mean*** when I mention the sovereignty of God. I'm not saying that God orchestrated and carried out the hard things that have happened to you; no, God is not the author of evil things that happen in this world. If others have sinned against you, that's on them, not God. I'm not saying that the suffering you've experienced is trivial or insignificant. I'm not saying that you can always figure out why tragic things have happened to you. In the book of Job, Job was given no explanation for his suffering.

What I am saying is that just like in the case of Judas' betrayal of Jesus, the hard things we've experienced somehow ***fit into his plan for our lives and our witness*** to others. God wasn't negligent or asleep when you experienced the things that shook your world.

When I think back about the tough things I've experienced as a Christian and as a pastor, I would never want to experience them again. At the same time, if I could rewind the clock and somehow not experience them, I wouldn't do it. Why? Because the things God has taught me in the tough times are priceless - things I don't think I would have learned any other way. God has used those experiences to humble me and to refine me. I've experienced the tenderness of God in ways I probably wouldn't have otherwise.

When I was in the middle of some of those situations, I wanted more than anything else for them to be over; it didn't feel like God was sovereign. But in the rearview mirror, I can see God's sovereignty very clearly. And that makes me confident in him and his plan moving forward. And I want other people to experience God's goodness and tenderness the way I have.

If you are in the middle of a situation that's shaken you, this might be hard to hear. But James 1 is true when it says that "the testing of your faith produces endurance." And if you endure/persevere, the hard things you've experienced can become the foundation of our witness to other people. You will be able to speak about the goodness of God with conviction.

If you trust in the sovereignty of God - that he wasn't asleep when you experienced painful/hurtful things - and if learn the lessons he wants to teach you in the midst of your suffering, disappointments, and heartache, you will have a depth of experience that will resonate with believers and unbelievers.

***The second reason for confidence in Jesus (and his plan for the nations):
God's leading. Acts 1:20b-26***

The second Scripture that “had to be fulfilled” is found in the second half of verse 20:

20 “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.’

“Let another take his office,” is found in the middle of a block of verses in Psalm 109 in which David is crying out for vengeance against his enemies. In Psalm 109:8 he says, “May his days be few; may another take his office.” Peter understands that this will be fulfilled when another took Judas’ office of apostle.

Peter lays out the qualifications for Judas’ replacement in verses 21 and 22.

21 So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, 22 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.”

Notice Peter’s concern at the end of verse 22: he wanted someone who was qualified to be “a witness to [Jesus’] resurrection.” They needed to pick someone who would have firsthand knowledge of Jesus’ entire ministry, including his post-resurrection appearances. These qualifications would ensure that the Christian faith was consistent with the teaching and purposes of Jesus.

As we’ll see in coming weeks, the apostles were Jesus’ official representatives and spokesmen. Throughout the book of Acts they would “define and defend the gospel” (as David Gooding puts it in his commentary on Acts). In chapter 15, for example, when the infant church needed a ruling on how much of the Law the Gentiles needed to keep, the apostles were consulted.

Notice the process for finding Judas’ replacement. They first put forward two qualified men.

23 And they put forward two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also called Justus, and Matthias.

Next notice ***that*** they prayed and ***what*** they prayed.

24 And they prayed and said, “You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen 25 to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.”

They believed that the Lord - probably a reference to Jesus - had chosen one of these men to take Judas' place. Just as the Lord had chosen Judas, he had also chosen Judas' replacement. The 120 gathered were **confident that God would lead them**.

And they believed he would lead them through the "casting of lots" - a method used on many occasions in the old covenant.

26 And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.

Proverbs 16:33 says that "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord." The conviction was that God would sovereignly make his will known. The lot fell to Matthias, so he was the 12th apostle.

So what do we do with this example of casting lots? The book of Acts (like all narratives) is descriptive, not prescriptive. In other words, it describes what happened; it doesn't prescribe what has to happen. Just because they chose lots to replace Judas doesn't mean we should cast lots or that we can't cast lots when we have two equal choices from our point of view. Having said that, we don't have any other examples in the new covenant of casting lots. The norm in the rest of Acts and the rest of the New Testament is to pray for wisdom and trust that God will lead through the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Like the early church, we can be **confident in God's leading** when we **pray in faith**. As I mentioned last week, we will never be like the disciples in Acts unless we are people who pray. And so we end up this morning just like we did last Sunday morning - with a challenge to be people who pray, confident that God will answer. What in today's passage and message got your attention? Pray about that.

- * Perhaps you have unresolved issues that have shaken you, and you're in danger of losing your confidence in Jesus and his plan for the nations. Pray about that. . . talk with someone you trust and let them pray with you.
- * Perhaps you have no idea how God might use you to be a witness to people near and far. In other words, you're just like the original disciples in Acts 1. Imitate them and pray, trusting that God will lead.

Note #1: The New Testament writers commonly used the term brothers to refer to a group of believers that included both men and women. We know from verse 14 that that's certainly the case when Peter addresses these 120 believers. He wanted them to know that Judas' betrayal of Jesus wasn't a mistake and that it certainly wasn't some failure on the part of Jesus.

Note #2: In Matthew 27 we read that when Judas saw that Jesus had been condemned to death he went back to the chief priests and said, “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.” Of course they didn’t care. So Judas threw down the 30 pieces of silver and went out and hanged himself. Matthew records that the counsel took that money and bought a field to be used as a burial place for strangers. People gave it the nickname “Field of Blood,” probably because it was bought with “blood money.”

To harmonize Matthew’s account in his gospel with Luke’s account here, we have to say that when Judas hanged himself, he experienced the bloody death described here. Perhaps when his body was cut down it burst open as Luke describes. And Judas “acquired [this] field” (as Luke mentions) when the Jewish counsel bought it with the blood money he had returned to them. The bottom line is that this “field of blood” was the “reward of his wickedness.” [The reward of wickedness is always brutal like that.]