

Throwing Dice . . . Drawing Straws

Acts 1:15-26

Introduction

We return today to our study of the “Book of Action” or Acts. Turn to chapter 1, verses 14 through 20.

These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.

At this time Peter stood up in the midst of the brethren (a gathering of about one hundred and twenty persons was there together), and said,

“Brethren, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit foretold by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus.

For he was counted among us and received his portion in this ministry.”

(Now this man acquired a field with the price of his wickedness, and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out.

And it became known to all who were living in Jerusalem; so that in their own language that field was called Hakeldama, that is, Field of Blood.)

“For it is written in the book of Psalms, ‘Let his homestead be made desolate, and let no one dwell in it’ [Psalm 69:25]; and, ‘Let another man take his office.’ [Psalm 109:8]”

The Abdication

Peter gives us the rest of Judas’ story in these verses. We know Judas hung himself, as recorded by Matthew in chapter 27, verse 5. Peter informs us that the rope evidently broke or the knot eventually came loose and his body, perhaps by then distended, fell and burst open in the middle.

One of the saddest biographical phrases related to Judas is in verse 25 of Acts, chapter 1.

. . . this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.

While the choices and decisions of Judas were known to God to the point that those choices fit the sovereign plan of Jesus’ betrayal, this passage emphasizes the awesome consequence of human rebellion. There are one hundred twenty people in the room who are choosing to follow Christ; who are choosing to put their lives on the line for the cause of Christ. There is also the story of another one who chose not to follow Christ. And in the phrase, “. . . Judas turned aside to go to his own place,” Peter is saying, “Judas belonged to hell and hell belonged to Judas.”

My friend, if you have chosen to reject Jesus Christ, you also will eventually go to the place of your own choosing – hell will belong to you and you will belong to hell.

The Agenda

Now that Judas is gone to inherit the place of his choosing, Peter reminds the apostles that they have an agenda item. They need to seek God’s guidance in replacing Judas with another apostle.

You might wonder, “Shouldn’t they have elected the apostle Paul? Shouldn’t he have been that twelfth man?”

I personally do not believe so. It might help to remember that the twelve apostles were primarily representatives of the gospel going to the Jewish nation and its twelve tribes. Revelation, chapter 21, tells that the walls of the new Jerusalem will have twelve foundation stones and upon each stone are the names of twelve men. If you remember, the apostle Paul called himself, in Romans, chapter 11, verse 13, the apostle to whom? The Gentiles. Paul indeed, had a special commissioning and apostolic function to the Gentile peoples. But, the office of apostle was specifically for twelve men who would lay the foundation of the early church.

You will notice as well, that this upper room was bathed in the activity of prayer. That is another reason I do not believe the choice of these apostles was wrong. Verse 14 says,

These . . . were continually devoting themselves to prayer . . .

Verse 24 says that as they chose Judas’s replacement,

. . . they prayed . . .

The Appointment

In the process of the apostles’ desire to fulfill the scripture, we read in verses 23 through 25,

So they put forward two men, Joseph called Barsabbas (who was also called Justus), and Matthias. And they prayed and said, “You, Lord, who know the hearts of all men, show which one of these two You have chosen to occupy this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.”

I love the fact that it is Peter who is the only person in the New Testament who refers to the Lord as the one “who knows the hearts of all men”. The original Greek word for “heart” is “kardio,” from which we get our word “cardiology”. “Kardio” plus “gnosta” or “knowledge” gives us that the Lord is the “heart-knower”.

Peter will use the phrase for the second and only other time in the New Testament, in Acts, chapter 15, verse 8, as he preaches the truth about,

. . . God, who knows the heart . . .

Peter calls God, the “heart-knower”. No one knew that any better than Peter, because God knew Peter’s heart. Peter had said, according to Matthew, chapter 26,

. . . Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away. . . . Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You. . .

But, God the Son knew that Peter’s brave words were really covering up a heart filled with uncertainty and fear.

The resurrected Lord met with Peter on the beach and three times, as recorded in John, chapter 21, asked him,

. . . Simon, son of John, do you love Me? . . .

Peter responded,

. . . Lord, You know all things; . . .

(You know that in spite of my failure and my fear and my denial and my pride),

. . . You know that I love you. . . .

Now, Peter stands and prays, “Lord, both of these men say they will lay down their lives for You; both Justus and Matthias are claiming to want the office that will put their lives in great peril; both of them look and sound good to us, but You know their hearts . . . like You knew mine.”

Continue to verse 26.

And they drew lots for them, and the lot fell to Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

Eusebius tells us that Matthias faithfully served the Lord in Ethiopia and even had travels and ministry in modern day Germany, where his bones are supposedly buried.

The Application – Discovering the Will of God Today

Now the question remains, do we cast lots for church leaders? They did that in the book of Acts.

In the Old Testament, casting lots was a God approved method of discerning His will. Remember, they did not have the indwelling Holy Spirit, who will become our teacher and guide. It is interesting that this event is prior to the Spirit’s indwelling and it is the last recorded biblical event of lot casting.

You might ask, “But wasn’t it easier back then to determine the path God wanted them to take? Can’t we cast lots, or roll dice, or draw straws?”

Well, when you uncover the agenda of this meeting, you discover that they simply wanted to fulfill the Word of God, as prophesied in the Psalms. Luke records that they were now able to understand that prophesy, since Jesus had opened their minds.

Their desire was also bathed in prayer. In fact, they did not ask the Lord to help them decide which man was the man for the job, they asked the Lord to reveal who His choice was! Verse 24b of Acts, chapter 1, says,

. . . Lord, . . . show which one to these two You have chosen

You might say, “But they still got to throw the dice. That’s not fair.”

I happen to believe that we throw dice too – a lot, only in different ways. We come up with little tests; we devise schemes to discern God’s will. We might say, “Lord, if I get a call at exactly 8:00 p.m. tonight from that company out west that is offering me a lucrative job, I’ll know it’s Your will to take the job.”

What if the phone rings at 7:55 p.m., or it does not ring at all, or the next night it rings at exactly 8:00 p.m., or it rings at 8:00 a.m. the next morning, or the phone rings at 8:00 p.m. and it is from someone out west who has dialed the wrong number? Now what?

Now, I understand that behind our fleece setting and straw drawing and dice throwing practices, is the sincere desire to do what God wants us to do. There is nothing more important to the believer than knowing and doing the will of God. Even Paul wrote to the Ephesians and said, in chapter 5, verse 17,

So then, do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

So, how do we discover the will of the Lord for our decisions and dilemmas?

Negative Reminders

Let me start by giving a couple of negative reminders concerning discovering the will of God.

God does not reveal His will through audible sounds, dreams, or visions

1. First, God does not reveal His will through audible sounds, dreams, or visions.

The Bible is clear that it is complete and capable of equipping the believer for every good work, as II Timothy, chapter 3, verses 16 and 17 tell us.

There is also no doubt that one of God’s methods of leading is through the inward impression of the Holy Spirit through, what we refer to as, the peace of God. In Colossians, chapter 3, verses 15 and 16, we are told to let the peace of Christ “call the shots” and to let the word of Christ dwell within our hearts.

Stay away from the statement, “God spoke to me.”

It seems that God is speaking to everyone these days – from psychics to Shiite Muslims. God does not speak audibly, so quit implying He does. Hebrews, chapter 1, verses 1 and 2, tell us that God spoke in the past through the prophets, but in these last days, has spoken to us by His Son!

So, when someone on TV closes his eyes and says, “God just told me someone out there has a hurt right hand,” take your right hand and turn him off! He is doing nothing more than negating the authority of God’s completed Word and claiming to be a source of new revelation from God.

Discovering God’s will does not always make obedience easier

2. Secondly, discovering God’s will does not always make obedience easier.

One example of this is Gideon. According to Judges, chapter 6, Gideon said, “Lord, if you want me to fight the Midianites, let my fleece be wet with dew and the ground dry.” And, the next morning, his fleece was wet and the ground was dry. “Uh, Lord, if you want me to fight the Midianites, let my fleece be dry and the ground be wet . . .”

Consider as well, the remark of Christ toward His own generation of rebellious religionists. In Matthew, chapter 16, verse 4a, He says,

An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign . . .

Remember also, the rich man who went to Hades and was in torment. Turn to Luke, chapter 16, and look at verses 19 through 31.

Now there was a rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, joyously living in splendor every day.

And a poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores,

and longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man's table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores.

Now the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried.

In Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus in his bosom.

And he cried out and said, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue, for I am in agony in this flame."

But Abraham said, "Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony.

And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, so that those who wish to come over from here to you will not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us."

And he said, "Then I beg you, father, that you send him to my father's house –

for I have five brothers – in order that he may warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment."

But Abraham said, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them."

But he said, "No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!"

But he said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead."

Consider the thousands of people who saw Christ and His apostles perform undeniable miracles, and yet, they still hardened their hearts against Him.

Knowing the Word of God and the will of God does not guarantee obedience to God.

Why not throw dice today?

Let me suggest three things that are wrong with devising quick ways to discern the will of God. We will call them "dice throwing".

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Let us admit that fleeces usually appear when we feel we are out of time to make the decision. We might say, "Lord, we need to know by tomorrow if we're to apply for that job . . . buy that house . . ."

Frankly, we have not given the Spirit of God time to develop in us whatever His will may demand of us.

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Many times we resort to some strange test for the Lord, simply because we do not like what other believers, who are wise in the Lord, are saying to us.

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A young man who wants to marry an unbelieving woman, for example, may lay out a series of fleeces. He might say, "If she comes to church with me . . . if she'll agree to let me read my Bible . . . if she seems sensitive to my convictions . . ."

But God has already said, as we are told in II Corinthians, chapter 6, verse 14,

Do no be bound together with unbelievers; for . . . what fellowship has light with darkness?

A young woman says, "I'm living with my boyfriend – why is that wrong? Our combined incomes are relieving debt. Besides, we've committed

to getting married sometime in the future. Surely God is pleased with that.”

The Bible states, in I Corinthians, chapter 6, verse 18a, to,

Flee fornication . . .

In other words, flee from sexual relations outside of marriage.

A woman says, “I really believe it would be best for me to divorce my husband. We’ve fallen out of love and it’s destroying my life. God seems to be leading me to break it off.”

I Corinthians, chapter 7, verses 10 and 11, state,

But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband . . . and that the husband should not divorce his wife.

Ladies and gentlemen, sometimes our problem is not what we *do not* know about God’s will, but what we *do* know. So, we arrange all sorts of situations and tests for the Lord which simply veil an underlying disobedience to God’s revealed Word.

Positive Principles

Now, what about those issues that are not clear; those situations that are not spelled out in scripture? Instead of rolling the dice, let me suggest a couple of positive principles; two things to believe.

Believe that God has the sovereign right to take His time and that His timing is always perfect

1. First, begin by believing that God has the sovereign right to take His time and that His timing is always perfect.

Our thoughts are not God’s thoughts, which means His timing is not always our timing.

George Mueller wrote of the method he used to discern the will of God in most situations. He developed, what he called, the journal method. He drew a line down the middle of a page and wrote “pros” on one side and “cons” on the other. He called this his balance sheet and from day to day, revised the list as seemed necessary. He wrote, “Nine-tenths of the difficulties are overcome when our hearts are ready to do the Lord’s will, whatever it may be. When one is truly in this state, it is usually but a little way to the knowledge of what His will is.”

Believe that God desires for you to discover His will and that His will is always best

2. Secondly, believe by faith that God desires for you to discover His will and that His will is always best.

God promised in Philippians, chapter 2, verse 13, that,

. . . [He] is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.

Why would God promise to work in your life that which He now makes impossible for you to discover?

The wonderful news is, Jesus did not leave us orphans; He did not leave us on our own. He promised His early disciples that He would send a Helper – to illumine and guide and teach and convict and instruct them, and us. Otherwise, God is saying to every new believer, “Good luck! From here on out, you’re on your own.”

That would be the same as taking a young man who has just decided to become a pilot, and immediately placing him in the cockpit of a jet and saying, “Congratulations on your decision to be a pilot, have a nice flight!”

Paul wrote to the Colossians in chapter 1, verse 9, that God’s desire is for them to be,

. . . filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

These are two things you can believe.

Three Journeys

The last question we will discuss is, “Is there anything I can do to discern the will of God?”

Absolutely. I want to suggest three journeys for you to take in order to be filled with the knowledge and understanding of His will; three trips for the twentieth century believer that replace the lot casting of the first century apostle.

Make a journey to the Word with an open heart

1. First, make a journey to the Word with an open heart.

Psalm, chapter 119, verse 105, says,

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

Now that is good news and bad news. The bad news is that we do not read. God's Word is a brilliant light to light our path from the start to the finish. The good news is that the Word of God provides just enough light – like the light from a lamp – for the next step we need to take.

So, be sure the options you are contemplating; the choices you are considering do not contradict Scripture. The Living Word never contradicts the written Word.

Make a journey to wise believers with open accountability

2. Secondly, make a journey to wise believers with open accountability.

Proverbs, chapter 13, verse 14, says,

The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life, to turn aside from the snares of death.

Then, in verse 20, we are told.

He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm.

Do not go to person after person until you find one that will agree with you. Go to one or two wise believers and then stick with it.

Make a journey to your knees in prayer

3. Thirdly, make a journey to your knees in prayer.

James, chapter 1, verse 5, says,

But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.

In Acts, chapter 1, verse 14, the apostles began their stay with an attitude of continual prayer. In verse 24, they ended the process of discovery by means of prayer.

Our trouble is, we often go to the Lord, not with an open mind that He can fill, but with a speech or a plan that we are hoping He will bless. James is implying that the person who receives wisdom from God is the person who admits he does not have it, "if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God".

While you are asking for wisdom from God, be sure your motive for asking is unselfish and pure. I like the legend of the man who was granted an opportunity to talk face to face with the Lord.

He said, "Lord, how long is a million years to you?"

God responded, "A million years is just a second to me."

"Well, Lord, how much is a million dollars to you?"

The Lord said, "A million dollars is just a nickel to me."

The man thought and then, with a sly grin, said, "Well, Lord, how about giving me a nickel."

The Lord said, "I certainly will; it'll be there in just a second."

James, in his letter, rebukes the believers for asking God for things in prayer so that their fleshly desires could be fulfilled. So, go to God with an open heart that says, "Lord, even in my request, purge my thoughts and motives so that I will be able to say, 'Not my will, but Thine be done.'"

Ladies and gentlemen, we are to pursue God's will by waiting, by praying, by listening to wise counsel, by bathing our search in the Word of God, and through prayer or communion with the Spirit of God, whom we believe and trust as sovereign. Then, with courage, obedience, faith, and submission, we throw the dice away and follow after God!

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