

Words and Deeds: Waiting on the Lord
By Jason Huff
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Psalms 130:5-8; James 5:7-8; Acts 1:13-26

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Acts 1:13-26. May God add His richest blessing on His holy, inerrant, and infallible Word. "When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. 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 a hundred and twenty) and said, "Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus-- he was one of our number and shared in this ministry." (With the reward he got for his wickedness, Judas bought a field; 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 Akeldama, 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 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." So they proposed two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) 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."

When we were in Gatlinburg, we had a long wait. We ordered pizza at 6:30. They warned of an hour and a half wait – 8:00. Seemed fine, right? By 9:00, Luigi's had taken their phones off the hook. We started to wonder if we should order dinner somewhere else. Everyone was hungry – we normally eat around 6:00, so this was a rough wait.

At 9:15pm, I'm sitting outside getting colder and colder, a car finally pulls up. It's our pizza. As I'm wondering if it's possible to leave a negative tip, the driver explains. The top-rated pizza place in town had a family emergency, so they're not open. Everybody's business is being driven to Luigi's. Their driver got in a collision. This guy had driven an hour and a half into town to drive for them after not delivering pizzas for a year. It suddenly changed my feelings. Did I like waiting that long? No, it was crazy! But suddenly it made sense. The second best pizza in Gatlinburg is not worth a three hour wait, but at least I understood.

As we started our study of the book of Acts last week, Jesus ascended into heaven. Before He did, He commanded the disciples to go back into Jerusalem and wait there for the gift of the Holy Spirit to be sent to them. We recognized how dangerous Jerusalem might have been for the disciples after Jesus' death. Yet being in the center of God's will is the safest place to be.

This week, we're in the period of waiting after Jesus is taken into heaven and before the Holy Spirit arrives. There's not a whole lot going on, not on the surface. But this might be one of the most important passages in all of Scripture for our modern society. I was convicted by it as I thought about it and studied it this week. It gives us clues about waiting on the Lord, and how doing so is preparation for what God is about to do.

The disciples are now back in Jerusalem. He lists the apostles, the inner circle of Jesus' closest friends, as he did in Luke 6. This creates a question for Luke's readers: what happened to Judas Iscariot? Luke's gospel detailed what Judas did, but not his fate after betraying Jesus. Luke's description is pretty gross, but it explains why Judas isn't listened and what happened to him. The description means to point us back to Scripture and to show that even Jesus' betrayal and death were predicted. Even the gruesomeness of it has a point – God was not surprised at all by Judas' treachery. He incorporated it into His plan for Jesus.

We quickly learn that the apostles are not the only faithful ones waiting in Jerusalem. The women who traveled with them are still there. Jesus' mother is there along with His brothers. In the past, they wondered if Jesus was crazy. They weren't His followers. But after the resurrection, they know their brother really is the Messiah. At least a hundred more believers decided to stay. The early church is really small, but this group will be the first to know the Holy Spirit's power; they'll experience the miracle of His coming we'll study next week.

What do they do while waiting? They're in the upper room a lot, likely the same place they ate the Passover meal with Jesus. They pray together there constantly. It is the main thing they do. Luke uses the phrase "in those days" to separate out the section about Judas from their constant prayer, to emphasize it. It's not the only thing they do, but it's the core thing.

The only other thing they did was to promote a disciple to an apostle. Scripture told of Judas' betrayal, but it also gave them clues as to what to do next. David's psalms told them that Judas' leadership role as one of the inner circle needed to be filled, but his legacy would be wiped out completely. Someone who had been with Jesus since the beginning would step up – not to be "in Judas' place" as a second generation apostle, but a complete and thorough replacement of him. Remember how Jesus said that it would have been better for the person who betrays the Son of Man to have never been born? That's how the apostles treat Judas Iscariot...as if he was never there. In their prayer, they say Judas didn't belong among them.

The process they use to choose the next apostle is strange to us. There are two candidates they all agree upon: Barsabbas and Matthias. Beyond that, though, they don't know who to choose. They pray and say, "God, you know everyone's heart, and You know Your choice for this. So show us." But they don't expect a miraculous word or sign from God. They cast lots.

Casting lots was kind of like rolling dice. We don't know exactly what they used, but it was a way of determining what God wanted when no one was really certain. God actually commands the use of lots a few different times in the Old Testament. There was nothing wrong with it to determine God's will.

Yet her, right before the Holy Spirit comes, is the very last time they use lots. Once the Spirit arrives, the believers have the ability to make good decisions because God is there with them. It's not to say that lots might not come in handy in our big decisions too, but it seems that God wants us simply to make good choices that honor Him as we listen to the Spirit.

It's also curious that after this point, even though the lot falls to Matthias, we never hear anything more about him. Even the legends about what he did were inconsistent. Was he meant to become an apostle? Absolutely. But nothing makes him stand out or gives us the idea that we should cast lots when we have the Spirit guiding us.

Ultimately, that's not what this passage is about. Sometimes we have to deal with the details before we get to the heart of what God is saying to us. And the heart of this passage is waiting on the Lord...waiting for God to do what He's promised, or waiting to hear from Him.

Scripture says money is the root of all kinds of evil – not all evil, but a lot of it. I think a close second, working hand in hand with money, is impatience. Many of the Commandments deal with things that come down to impatience – theft, coveting, Sabbath-breaking, sometimes even murder and adultery, are about wanting a good thing at the wrong time, and rather than waiting, doing what we want to do instead.

Many huge sins committed in Scripture were due to a lack of patience. Abraham has Ishmael through his wife's servant girl because he and Sarah are impatient with God's promise. The Muslim peoples claim their heritage through Ishmael. Moses is up on the mountain with God 40 days, and the Israelites were impatient; they said, "We don't know what's happened to him." They demanded the high priest, Aaron, give them something to worship – the golden calf.

King Saul, first king of Israel, loses the kingdom, loses the royal line, because of his impatience. The priest Samuel is supposed to give an offering to God before battle. Nobody's seen him and the battle is looming. So Saul, even though he's not a priest, even though he has no authority to make the sacrifice, does it anyway. He thinks as king he can do what he wants. That's when God takes away the kingdom, eventually giving it to David.

So many of Israel's sins come down to wanting God's blessing without God's timing. And it's true for me, and I'm guessing it's true for you. When I think about my life and the sins I most regret, the things that I am most ashamed of, most of them track their way back to impatience, wanting my own timing rather than God's timing.

And if it was true that Israel was impatient, we're much more so. Impatience is the definition of modern American society. I'm amazed any more when people let me into traffic. If a movie isn't out on DVD a few weeks after it's in the theaters, it's forgotten. News stories last for hours, not days or weeks. We expect our food served fast even at places that aren't fast food. Every report is due yesterday; every repairman is late. I'm just thankful that all of you don't walk out of church precisely at 11:30! Our lives are impossible because we're so busy.

The Christian church used to think of Sunday as the new Sabbath. Although people made up bad rules about it, that you could do nothing but sit and church and eat, there was an understanding that God intended for us to stop, to slow down, to have time meant for Him. Now the only place closed on Sundays is Chik-Fil-A, and events start at noon Sunday or even earlier.

We must slow down. God will not be rushed. But we really don't have a clue what to do when we slow down and wait on God. We haven't been taught to do it. If we slow down, we immediately fill our time with movies or sports or games or anything to break the awkward tension. That's something we need to learn. And that's what this passage starts to show to us.

The first step in slowing down and waiting on the Lord is prayer. The disciples had no idea when the Holy Spirit was going to come. Jesus said "soon," but many things that God says "soon" about happen in someone else's lifetime. They knew they couldn't proceed without the Holy Spirit, and Jesus had commanded them to wait. So they spend their time in prayer. For a whole week, that's what they do. They don't plan anything or figure out missionary travels or write the gospels. They wait and they pray.

We don't often pray because our words seem inadequate. Praying gives us the realization that God is God and we aren't. We become afraid, conscious of our sins, aware of our unworthiness. Now we want to take God seriously so that we don't approach Him irreverently. Our prayers should be guided by the awe that despite our faults, sins, and excesses, God not only listens to us, He asks us to approach Him, and Scripture says we can do so with confidence.

Our first instinct is to shrink back, to not talk to God at all and think that maybe we can handle enough to get by. Or we think that the best course of action is to only approach God with the big things, the things that need a miracle – healings. House foreclosures. Job loss. We can ask about those things, but you can't ask constantly about them. That might take you a few minutes at best. The disciples were praying together for a whole week. What was that about?

The best way I can describe it is with my own kids. If they think that all I want to know about is when they're near dead from conking their head on the pavement or when they haven't eaten in two days, I'm not a good dad. If my kids think I'm so busy that I don't have time for anything but the huge stuff, then I've failed to let them know I make them a priority. And God has tried over and over again to tell us, "talk to me about anything." Jesus said, "Ask for whatever you want and the Father will give it to you." He has given us the right to approach Him whenever, about whatever.

Set aside time daily to come before God, enough to both talk and listen. Sometimes God gives us direction through the Holy Spirit; other times He speaks through His Word; other times He just lets us know He is there. Pray about anything and everything. Lift up people you know are hurting. Lift up concerns you have for your family. Ask for guidance on how to live righteously. Ask Him to change your heart towards others, to have love for them. Pray for our nation. Pray for CrossWay and the churches around here. Pray for more people to become believers through our work. Pray for courage to speak up for Jesus. Pretty soon, you can be in prayer for quite a while and not feel like it's repetitive or boring. There is a lot in this world that needs fixing, which means there's a lot to talk to God about!

I'm saying this not as an expert. To be honest, it is not easy to slow down for God. I've failed at it a lot. I'm not someone who's got this together. But I have had times in my life that it has happened, and I can tell you that I'm far more at peace, far less irritated and irritable, when it's happening. And here's the great news: current failure does not mean we can't have future success! All it takes is making the decision to wait on God in prayer and to do it, day after day. Each day is another opportunity to slow down and listen to God so we can follow Him.

The other lesson from this portion of Scripture is this: *when you're waiting on the Lord, when all the answers aren't clear, do what you know God is calling you to do.* Choosing Matthias wasn't earth-shattering. We don't know if it made much difference from an earthly perspective. But it made a difference from a Kingdom perspective because the disciples moved forward, following Scripture, doing the one thing God led them to accomplish as they waited.

Our human instinct after a time of waiting without an answer is just to give up, or to stop doing what we know is right for a quicker path. But don't do it. When there are a ton of unanswered questions, stay on the path you know God has shown to be right in His Word. Live out your faith so that even if you never get an answer that you can understand or discern, you have done what was right by God as far as you know it.

For over three and a half years, we lived without a worship space on Sunday mornings for CrossWay. We had a lot of doors shut. But we still felt like God had a plan for us. Had we stopped worshipping until that space came upon, likelihood is, none of us would be here today. What did we do? We kept worshipping, kept fellowshiping, kept reaching out with the gospel. We still have to wait to see if God might expand our community enough to have a full-time building someday – maybe, maybe not. But as we wait, we enjoy what we have and we do what is right.

A lot of things are often up in the air and we want God to weigh in. Our job isn't great and it would be nice if we had a better boss. Pray, but during the wait, do your very best. Use your good work to show your faith – as Paul says in Colossians 3, “whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to the Father through Him.” We really need God to come through with some financial help – but in the meantime, spend your money in a godly way, using it not only for yourself but for the Kingdom, helping others, sharing. Never let the waiting be an excuse to try to fix something God's hasn't yet fixed in a way that God wouldn't approve.

The good news is, the wait isn't forever. We'll see the Holy Spirit move in next week's lesson. God is not silent; He keeps His promises; He knows the good plans for us He will bring to light. But it is good to wait on Him all the time, as obedient and listening children waiting to hear from our Father who loves us dearly and our Savior who gave His life for us.