

Acts 1:14, 21-26

Introduction

Over our last couple of weeks in Acts, we've seen the disciples waiting in Jerusalem for the promise of the Father—the baptism of the Holy Spirit (1:4-5). While they wait, they've not been idle. “With one accord they were continually devoting themselves to prayer” (1:14). It was as a result of these prayers and his understanding of Scripture that Peter came to see the necessity of bringing the number of the apostles back to twelve after Judas' defection. But who was to be this twelfth Apostle? How was the will of God in this matter to be discerned? In verse 2, Jesus gave orders by the Holy Spirit “to the apostles whom *He* had chosen.” But Jesus is no longer physically present with the disciples, so they can't simply ask Him to choose as He chose before. How, then, is the choice to be made? In Luke's Gospel, he tells us how Jesus spent the whole night in prayer to God, and how when day came He called His disciples to Him and chose twelve of them, whom He also named as apostles (Lk. 6:12-13). And now we see the disciples following Jesus' example.

I. Acts 1:14 — These all with one accord were continually devoting themselves to prayer...

When it comes to the question of an apostolic replacement for Judas, we have to remember that the disciples are still “continually devoting themselves to prayer.” So we can assume that regarding the choice of a replacement for Judas they were praying that God would give them His wisdom and blessing, and cause His will to be done (cf. 1:24-25). All of life ought to be lived prayerfully in dependence upon God. Especially when there are significant and weighty decisions to be made, we can—and we should—ask God for wisdom. We can ask God for the wisdom of a sanctified “common sense” (that we would think rightly). We can ask God for the wisdom of godly counsel. We can ask God for the wisdom to recognize which biblical principles are especially relevant and also for the wisdom to know how these principles should be applied in the present situation. We can pray especially that in every decision that's made, God's name would be honored and glorified. James writes:

➤ James 1:5 — 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.

All of life ought to be lived in prayerful dependence upon God. But there are some things that warrant more focused prayer than other things. Jesus didn't spend the whole night in prayer to God before every choice that He made, but He did spend the whole night in prayer to God before His choice of those whom He would name as apostles. This was a choice, as we've seen in previous weeks, that was closely connected with the unfolding of salvation history (it was a redemptive-historical choice). And the same is true now as the disciples consider a replacement for Judas. This is a choice connected with the unfolding of salvation history and even rendered necessary by the prophetic Scriptures (1:15-16, 20-21). This is a choice, therefore, of a kind that you and I will never be confronted with. It's in a category all its own, and it will be important for us to remember this.

So how is Judas' replacement to be chosen? How is the will of God in this matter to be discerned? We answer first of all: With prayer and full dependence upon God. But now listen to what Peter says:

II. Acts 1:21–22 — “Therefore it is necessary that of the men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us—beginning with the baptism of John until the day that He was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection.”

How did Peter come to the conclusion that Judas' replacement must be someone who had accompanied the disciples beginning with the baptism of John?¹ There's no indication that Jesus had given him this direction. On the one hand, this is “common sense” given the fact that the original twelve had been with Jesus from the beginning (cf. Mk. 3:13-15; Jn. 1:35-51). But there's also the fact that the apostles are to witness to Jesus (“you shall be my witnesses”; cf. Acts 1:8) and common sense tells us that to witness the most fully to Jesus, one must have been with Him from the beginning. This criteria would eliminate Jesus' brothers (who were present there in the upper room; 1:14-15). Jesus' brothers had originally not believed in Him (Jn. 7:2-5), and so they had not followed Him from the beginning.

The one who would replace Judas must be able, Peter says, to give eyewitness testimony to Jesus' death and resurrection and ascension into heaven. Again, how did Peter come to this conclusion? In Luke 24 Jesus said to the disciples, “Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day... You are witnesses of these things” (Lk. 24:46, 48). Clearly, then, the one who would take Judas' place must also be a witness to these things; he must have seen the resurrected Jesus and have listened to Him speak about the things concerning the kingdom of God (1:3) until He ascended into heaven. This criteria would likely have eliminated others who were present that day in the upper room.

Finally, the one who would take the place of Judas must be a man (“of the men [*aner*] who have accompanied us”). How did Peter arrive at this conclusion? Common sense considers that Jesus originally chose twelve *men*, but more importantly, Peter will be mindful of the differing roles of men and women in the light of creation. There were devoted female disciples (cf. Acts 9:36) present among those gathered in the upper room (1:14). We can be sure that at least some of these had witnessed firsthand the crucifixion and burial of Jesus, and had been the very first witnesses to His resurrection (cf. Lk. 23:49, 55; Mat. 28:8-10). We can't be sure if these women were with Jesus from the beginning, but even if they were, they still could not have been a candidate for the twelfth apostle. The glory of a woman is different from the glory of a man (cf. 1 Cor. 11:7); therefore, for a woman to be chosen as an apostle would not only be contrary to the will of God, it would bring shame to the woman—undermining the true glory of her womanhood.

We see then how the field of potential candidates has been considerably narrowed by the application of common sense, by the application of Jesus' word, and by the application of biblical principle. How was the will of God in this matter to be discerned? We answer first,

¹ Not before Jesus was baptized, but at least before John was arrested (beginning from the time that John was still baptizing).

prayerfully with dependence upon God, and second, by the diligent and careful application of biblical precept and principle. Knowing the will of God is not a matter of “divining” something shrouded in mystery, but rather of diligently applying the revealed principles and precepts of His Word. Today, we can confess with our Baptist forefathers that “the whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down or necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture” (LCF 1.6). We’re reminded here not only of the sufficiency of Scripture, but also of the necessity of Scripture, and the authority of Scripture, and the clarity (perspicuity) of Scripture with respect to living in faith and obedience to God’s will for us.

But what about those cases where after much prayer and the application of all relevant biblical precepts and principles, the choice that must be made is still not clear? Here in Acts chapter one, the field has been narrowed, but there are still two qualified candidates left. We read in verse 23:

III. Acts 1:23 — And they put forward two men, Joseph called Barsabbas (who was also called Justus), and Matthias.

It’s possible that there were more than just two men who met all the objective criteria for replacing Judas (Lk. 6:12-13; 10:1; 1 Cor. 15:6; Acts 1:15). Maybe for other reasons (age, family circumstances, personality/temperament, etc.), it was deemed that it would not be wise for some who were otherwise “qualified” to be “put forward” for this office. But still there were two candidates who to all outward appearances were equally suited to take the place of Judas. We read in verses 24-26:

IV. Acts 1:24–26 — And they prayed and said, “You, Lord, who know the hearts of all men, show which one of these two You have chosen to take the place of this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell to Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

Would it be nice if everything was always this “easy”? No, it wouldn’t! If all we had to do to “discover” the will of God in any given situation was cast lots this would inevitably result in a mechanical “religion” where we’re never truly seeking after God, where “obedience” is external and perfunctory, and where we’re robbed of the joy of knowing God personally. But still, does this passage set any precedent for us? At certain times, is this a legitimate way for us to determine what God’s will is?²

When the disciples cast lots in Acts 1, it was because after prayerfully exercising common sense and applying biblical precept and principle, there were still two candidates for only one spot (if they were choosing elders, they could have chosen both men). To choose between Joseph and Matthias by a vote or show of hands could only be a popularity contest. Casting lots was

² There are some who point out that after Pentecost there was (*apparently*) no casting of lots when the “deacons” were chosen in chapter six (6:3-6). But that was a fundamentally different situation. Just as they did not need to cast lots to determine if it was God’s will to appoint men full of the Spirit and of wisdom to oversee the care of widows in the church, so they did not need to cast lots to determine if the number should be seven or to determine which men should be chosen.

necessary for the sake of impartiality. That's the "negative" reason. But there was more to it than this.

Notice what the disciples pray: "You, Lord, *who know the hearts of all men*, show which one of these two You have chosen..." The disciples assume that there is one particular candidate who by God's special grace and appointment is suited to take the place of Judas' apostleship. I don't believe the point is that one man was more righteous and faithful than the other. The point is rather that only God knows which one of these men He has suited and prepared for this specific role. When it comes to this choice that's so full of salvation-historical significance and that's even been necessitated by the prophetic Scriptures, and when after earnest prayer and the diligent and wise application of common sense and biblical precept and principle there still remain two apparently equal candidates, then clearly God must reveal His choice. But how can it be assumed that the casting of lots will reveal God's choice? The answer is both wonderful and mysterious.

V. Casting lots in the Old Testament

- Proverbs 16:33 — The lot is cast into the lap, but its every judgment is from Yahweh. [The New Living Translation paraphrases like this: "We may throw the dice, but (Yahweh) determines how they fall."]

In our modern context, we think of throwing dice and casting lots in connection with what we call "chance." But with God there's ultimately no such thing as "chance." With God, not even the rolling of the dice during the family game night is "chance." How could there be such a thing as chance with the God who is "infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth" (BC Q. 7)? How could there be such a thing as "chance" with the God who knows all things not as bits and pieces of knowledge based on things external to Himself but who knows all things that there are to know in one eternal and unchangeable act of knowing that is entirely "internal" and intrinsic to His own being? God's knowing is not the same as our knowing—which should warn us about how we think of God's *foreknowing*. God's knowing is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable because *He* is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable. Therefore, before the world was created, God foreknew all things that would ever be insofar as all things that will ever be are the transcript of His infinite, eternal, and unchangeable decree. "The decrees of God are His eternal purpose, according to the counsel of His will, whereby for His own glory He has foreordained all things, whatsoever comes to pass" (BC Q.10). There are many who think of God's decree as the *result* of His foreknowing as though God "learns" and reacts to things that are independent of Himself. But this is to think of God in purely human categories. Instead, God's foreknowing is His knowledge of all things (including the sparrow that falls to the ground and the number of hairs on your head; Mat. 10:29-30) as the expression (the working out) of His own all-encompassing decree. Unlike us, God's knowledge originates with Himself and is therefore infinite, eternal, and unchangeable. This is why there is ultimately no such thing as chance—ever, anywhere. Chance is the doctrine of paganism. It's a denial of the God of the Bible. With God, not even the rolling of the dice during the family game night can be called—in any ultimate sense of the word—"chance." At the same time, "fate" and "fatalism" is also the doctrine of paganism and a denial of the God of the Bible. God is a personal God who does not normally suspend the "natural laws" that He has ordained, who never violates the free moral agency of man, and who never mechanically manipulates the dice (or the lot)! We confess

this wonderful mystery, that: “Although in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly; so that there is not anything [that] befalls any by chance, or without His providence; yet by the same providence He orders them to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily [laws of nature], freely [human free agency], or *contingently* [in ways that are apparently random, haphazard, and arbitrary; i.e., by “chance”] (LCF 5.2). It’s this reality that helps us to understand the proverb: “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every judgment is from Yahweh”; “We may throw the dice, but [Yahweh] determines how they fall” (cf. Lk. 1:8-9). But still, is discovering the will of God really just a matter of rolling the dice? In order to answer this question we need some more biblical context.

God commanded that the land of Canaan should be divided among the twelve tribes by lot (Num. 26:55–56; Josh. 18:6; 1 Chron. 24:5-19; 25:8-31; 26:13-15; Neh. 10:34-36; cf. Ezek. 47:21-22; 48:29). God was not subject to the “chance” casting of lots. He decreed the lots that would be cast without taking away the “contingency” of this second cause. Notice, now, that this is an event with salvation-historical significance for the entire covenant community. God is giving the land to His covenant people in fulfillment of His covenant promises and as a type of that heavenly country that we inherit in Christ (Heb. 11:13-16). God could have revealed the tribal boundaries directly to Moses or to Joshua, but the lot proved their impartiality. With the lot, no one could “blame” Moses or Joshua; instead, they could only affirm that their inheritance had fallen to them according to God’s will (no one would have thought of complaining that they had received their inheritance by “chance”).

God commanded that each year on the day of atonement, Aaron should choose two goats and then cast lots for them, “one lot for Yahweh and the other lot for the scapegoat” (Lev. 16:8-10). Here’s another event with salvation-historical significance for the entire covenant community (cf. Lev. 16:15-22). The point here is not that God was leaving the matter to chance! Through the casting of lots, the choice would not be Aaron’s but would be according to God’s sovereign determination (not based on any quality in the goat).

During the conquest of the promised land, when Achan sinned by taking some of the spoil of Jericho that was devoted to destruction, Joshua said to all the people of Israel:

- Joshua 7:14–15 — “In the morning then you shall come near by your tribes. And it will be that the tribe which Yahweh takes by lot shall come near by families, and the family which Yahweh takes shall come near by households, and the household which Yahweh takes shall come near man by man. And it will be that the one who is taken with the things devoted to destruction shall be burned with fire...”

God didn’t look ahead and see that the lot would happen to fall on Achan. That the lot would fall on Achan was part of God’s infinite, and eternal, and unchangeable decree. And here again is another event full of salvation-historical significance for the entire covenant community (cf. Josh. 7:1-13; also see Acts 5:1-11). God could have pointed Achan out directly to Joshua, but as each tribe, family, household, and man “came near” for the casting of the lot they would be reminded of their solidarity as a covenant people and therefore of the need to remove the evil person from among them (cf. Woudstra; 1 Cor. 5:13).

After God had already revealed to Samuel that Saul was to be the first king of Israel, we read:

- 1 Samuel 10:20–21 — Samuel brought all the tribes of Israel near, and the tribe of Benjamin was taken by lot. Then he brought the tribe of Benjamin near by its families, and the Matrite family was taken. And Saul the son of Kish was taken.³

Here again is an event with salvation-historical significance for the entire covenant community (cf. 1 Sam. 8-10, 12). The casting of lots ensures that Samuel can't be accused of favoritism or partiality to the tribe of Benjamin or the family of Saul. As the book of Proverbs says:

- Proverbs 18:18 — The cast lot puts an end to contentions and decides between the mighty ones.

Furthermore, as Matthew Henry says, “By this method it would [be clear] to the people... that Saul was appointed [by] God to be king...” (Matthew Henry; quoted by Davis). In each of these examples where there is a salvation-historical significance impacting the entire covenant community, the emphasis is not just “negatively” on avoiding charges of partiality, etc., but “positively” on discerning the truth or “discovering” the will of God. And in each of these cases, it would appear that God Himself commanded the use of the lot.

In Nehemiah 1, “the people cast lots to bring one out of ten to live in Jerusalem, the holy city, while nine-tenths remained in the other cities” (Neh. 11:1).⁴ There was a practical as well as a theological necessity for “the holy city” to be populated after the return from exile (salvation-historical). However, for the people to leave their homes (which might sit on ancestral land) and move to Jerusalem would be difficult and challenging. How could it be decided who was to move and who was to stay? As one commentator says, “The people regarded their selection by... lot as the will of God, and were thus satisfied and [at least some were] glad to do his bidding” (cf. Neh. 11:2; Fensham). In this case, God had not commanded the use of the lot, and neither was the lot primarily intended to “discover” the will of God. The lot would have been unnecessary if there had been plenty of people already wanting to move! Instead, it enabled a difficult decision affecting the entire covenant community to be made without partiality. But in the process, the people could trust and rest in the sovereign will of God. They could trust God with the results because they all believed the truth of Proverbs 16:33— “The lot is cast into the lap [by man], but its every judgment is from Yahweh.”

There are other examples of lots being used where there's no salvation-historical significance and where the covenant community is not involved. We think especially of casting lots to divide the spoil.

- Psalm 22:18 (cf. Job 6:27; Joel 3:3; Obad. 11; Nah. 3:10) — They divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.

³ 1 Samuel 14:40-42 appears to be an example of the use of Urim and Thummim (see the commentators; cf. ESV).

⁴ On Judges 20:9 see the commentaries.

In this case, there's no emphasis on "discovering" the will of God, and yet we still confess the mystery that the lot's every judgment (decision) is "*from Yahweh.*"⁵

In the book of Jonah, when the pagan soldiers cast lots in order to find out on whose account the storm had come upon them, the lot fell on Jonah (Jonah. 1:6-7). These were superstitious sailors concerned not with "salvation history" or with God's covenant people, but only with preserving their own lives. They cast lots in order to find out who made which god angry. This is a perfect example of how lots should not be used! In this case, God had decreed from all eternity that the lot should reveal the truth, but God doesn't always decree that the lot reveal the truth. Neither does He always decree that the lot "reveal" His will. God hasn't bound Himself to the lot in this way. So under what circumstances is it acceptable and "safe" to use the lot?

Conclusion

It's acceptable to cast the lot when we're not attempting to discover the truth of a matter and when we're not attempting to "discover" the will of God (as that which we're morally obligated to obey). If we're presented with a choice between two jobs and after prayerfully weighing all the evidence and applying every relevant biblical precept and principle, we still find it impossible to make a decision (highly unlikely), flipping a coin by faith would be perfectly legitimate. ("By faith" means trusting God with the results—come what may.) But even then, we're not morally bound to obey the result of the coin toss—especially if other relevant information comes to light. While we can't rest in the result of the coin toss as "revealing" to us the will of God or as guaranteeing that this is the job where I'll be happiest long-term (that would be pagan superstition), we can rest in the fact that the choice we've made is encompassed within the sovereign decree of our most wise and powerful and holy and just and good and true and faithful God (this is Christian faith). And we can always know that "as the providence of God does in general reach to all creatures, so after a most special manner it takes care of His church [and of each one of His children], and disposes of all things to the good thereof" (LCF 5.7; Rom. 8:28).

Why can we no longer cast lots to discover the truth of a matter or to "discover" the will of God? Because salvation history has already come to its fulfillment in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus and His pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Therefore, we'll never be faced with a situation that has salvation-historical significance or that impacts the whole of God's covenant people. It was only in this context (with other qualifications) that people could be assured that the lot would "reveal" to them God's will. Individual Israelites did not cast lots to discover the will of God in private matters unrelated to the unfolding of salvation history (that would be pagan superstition).

Here in Acts chapter one, insofar as the disciples were casting lots to choose between two equally legitimate candidates and therefore avoid partiality and favoritism, and insofar as the disciples could rest in the result as being encompassed within the sovereign will of God, we can follow their example. But insofar as the disciples were casting lots with the prayer that the God

⁵ When Haman cast lots to determine the month for the Jews' destruction, the lot fell on the twelfth month which gave time for the whole sequence of events to unfold by which God would accomplish the Jews' deliverance (Esther 3:7, 12-13; 9:1; cf. Ezek. 21:18-23).

who knows the hearts of all men would “reveal” to them that “will” which they would be morally bound to obey—we know we’ll never be confronted with a situation where following this example is appropriate.

Knowing the will of God is not a matter of “divining” something shrouded in mystery, but rather of prayerfully applying the revealed principles and precepts of God’s Word. We rejoice today in the sufficiency of Scripture—that “the whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down or necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture” (LCF 1.6). And so we pray for the ability to live wisely in accordance with the precepts and principles of God’s word so that we might always know the blessing of God’s peace and joy *come what may*—remembering that even the “chance” role of the dice is “from [God].” We’re called to live each day prayerfully seeking God’s revealed will while at the same time humbly and gladly submitting ourselves to all that He has ordained—to the infinite, eternal, and unchangeable decree of our Father, who is Himself “infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.”

- Deuteronomy 29:29 — The secret things belong to Yahweh our God [we rest in this with peace and full assurance], but the things revealed belong to us... that we may do all the words of this law [that by grace through faith we may do God’s will].