

Acts 1:15-26: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 21 October 2020

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[0 : 0 0] Acts chapter 1 verses 15 to 26. In those days Peter stood up among the brothers, the company of persons was in all about 120, and said, 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.

For he was numbered among us, and was allotted his share in this ministry. 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.

And it became known to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their own language, Akaldama, that is, field of blood. 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.

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

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

[1 : 2 3] And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was numbered with the eleven apostles. Luke's account of the replacement of Judas in the number of the apostles at the end of Acts chapter 1 is an interplay of light and shadow.

In the ten days between the Ascension and Pentecost, the upper room is a sight charged with expectancy, awaiting the promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit. However, Peter's recounting of the gruesome manner of Judas' death presents a grim image of the fate of those who oppose Christ's kingdom.

The upper room is a staging ground for the coming phase of Christ's mission through his church. In addition to intense communal devotion to prayer, the choice of Matthias to replace Judas within the twelve was a necessary part of the preparation that needed to occur.

The need for a replacement for Judas is one of several reasons to believe that the number of the twelve was not arbitrary. The twelve represented the twelve tribes of a renewed Israel.

Giving the numbering of the disciples at this point as 120, ten times twelve, is also likely significant. The twelve will represent the heads of the restored tribes at Pentecost, so it is important that a full complement be present.

[2 : 3 6] The gory manner of Judas' death, and Peter's application of imprecatory psalms to him, sits uneasily with many modern Christian sensibilities. Yet, unsettling as such themes may be to our ears, it is difficult adequately to understand Luke's vision of Christ's mission without an appreciation of the deathly shadow that Christ casts over his opponents.

Whether in Judas' prophetically foretold suicide, in the Holy Spirit slaying Ananias and Sapphira for their attempted deception, in Peter's cursing of Simon the sorcerer, or the angel striking Herod and condemning him to a gruesome demise, or even Paul's blinding of Elymas the sorcerer, Luke repeatedly presents the Spirit's mission as one that can have devastating and even fatal consequences for those who oppose it, for those who wrongly seek to claim God's power for themselves, like the seven sons of Sceva, or for those who attack his people.

Not only Christ's salvation, but also the actions and the fate of those who oppose him are foretold in prophecy.

The destruction that Christ's reign brings to his enemies is an important aspect of his kingdom. The Gospel writers' accounts of Christ's enemies are often designed to recall the great adversaries of God's people in history and their fates.

For instance, the Herods are depicted in a manner recalling the Pharaohs and Ahab, while Ananias and Sapphira are like Achan. The account of Judas' actions and his death also stirs various scriptural memories, especially those concerning the treacheries and attempted coups experienced by King David in the latter years of his reign.

[4 : 19] Peter's declaration that the Holy Spirit spoke about Judas through David treats David's words concerning his own life as typologically revelatory of what will befall his greater son.

In the Gospels, we also see narrative parallels being drawn between David and Jesus. Judas is the trusted familiar friend. He sits with Jesus at the table, yet he betrays him, as we see in Psalm 41 verse 9, which is quoted in John 13 verse 18.

David is betrayed by Ahithophel, his close friend and advisor, in 2 Samuel chapter 15. David leaves Jerusalem, he crosses the brook Kidron, and he weeps as he ascends the Mount of Olives, in 2 Samuel 15.

This is paralleled with the ministry of Christ, in John chapter 18 verse 1. David is ministered to by a messenger, as Christ is ministered to by an angel. David is assaulted by Shimei, with violence and cursing, as the mob come out to take Jesus.

His right-hand man, Abishai, like Peter, wants to strike the king's enemy down, but David prevents him, much as Jesus restores the ear of the high priest's servant, after Peter has struck him.

[5 : 27] In Matthew's gospel, we are told that, like Ahithophel, a regretful Judas parted ways with the conspiracy that he had initially assisted, and hanged himself, in Matthew chapter 27 verses 3 to 10.

In 2 Samuel, both the betrayer Ahithophel, and the unfaithful son of David, Absalom, end up hung from trees. In Matthew, both the betrayer Judas, and the faithful son of David, suffer a similar fate, although here it is the contrast, that the juxtaposition of the two invite, that attract our attention.

Many have struggled to reconcile Luke's account of Judas' suicide with Matthew's, and solutions with various degrees of plausibility have been proposed. It seems most likely to me that Luke is foregrounding another connection between Judas and David typology here.

Judas is playing the role of Joab. Joab was the treacherous and Machiavellian commander of David's army, who was a man who was twice involved in coups, the first a successful internal coup, wresting control of David's army back from Amasa, during the rebellion of Sheba in 2 Samuel chapter 20.

Joab had been deposed in chapter 19 verse 13, and the second his support of the pretender Adonijah in 1 Kings chapter 1. In 2 Samuel chapter 20 verse 8 to 12, we read the story of Joab's treachery towards Amasa.

[6 : 48] When they were at the great stone that is in Gibeon, Amasa came to meet them. Now Joab was wearing a soldier's garment, and over it was a belt with a sword in its sheath fastened on his thigh, and as he went forward it fell out.

And Joab said to Amasa, Is it well with you, my brother? And Joab took Amasa by the beard with his right hand to kiss him. But Amasa did not observe the sword that was in Joab's hand, so Joab struck him with it in the stomach, and spilled his entrails to the ground without striking a second blow, and he died.

Then Joab and Abishai his brother pursued Sheba the son of Bichri, and one of Joab's young men took his stand by Amasa and said, Whoever favours Joab, and whoever is for David, let him follow Joab.

And Amasa lay wallowing in his blood in the highway, and anyone who came by seeing him stopped. And when the man saw that all the people stopped, he carried Amasa out of the highway into the field, and threw a garment over him.

Joab, then, is the one who betrays with a kiss. He cuts Amasa's stomach open with his sword so that his entrails pour out. Amasa's bloody body is placed in a field, and everyone who passes it by is arrested by the sight of it.

[8 : 00] First Kings begins in the final days of David's reign, as he instructs his son Solomon concerning the kingdom, and establishes him on the throne. The opening chapter of the book of Acts is comparably resumptive in its narrative character.

It begins at a similar point. Jesus is about to ascend into heaven, and he instructs the disciples in preparation for the new administration. At the start of his reign, shortly before his Pentecostal receipt of the gift of the spirit of wisdom from the Lord, in chapter 3, Solomon has to lay the foundations of his reign by exiling or executing unfaithful members of his father's administration, and other rebels, Adonijah, Abiathar, Joab, and Shimei, and replacing them in their offices.

In 1 Kings, chapter 2, verses 28-35, Joab is killed by his replacement, Benaniah, the son of Jehoiada. He is buried in his house in the wilderness. We should carefully observe the close applicability of the imprecatory psalm cited by Peter in Acts chapter 1 to Joab's situation.

May his camp become desolate, and let there be no one to dwell in it, and let another take his office. These verses are from Psalms 69 verse 25 and 109 verse 8, respectively.

Judas here suffers a death strikingly similar to that of the man Joab betrayed with a kiss, an instance of the law of retribution. Like Joab, he has a desolate habitation.

[9 : 27] In the dawning stages of the glorious new administration of David's glorious son, soon to be heralded by the gift of the spirit of wisdom, his office is given to another. Judas is a tragic figure, and one who understandably leaves many modern people feeling uneasy.

In characters such as Judas, we see the glorious light of the kingdom of Christ can cast some very dark shadows, playing the part of Ahithophel and Joab, to David's greater son.

Luke presents Judas as one of several cautionary examples of the fate of those who oppose the kingdom of Christ. We are squeamish about death, destruction, and judgment being brought upon or foretold for the enemies of Christ.

This can be an obstacle for our understanding and acceptance of his kingdom. We want a Christ who is safe, not the King of kings and Lord of lords, who comes on a white horse against tyrants and rebels, striking the nations and ruling them with a rod of iron.

We want the Christ of the nativity narratives, some imagined wrathless lamb, rather than reckoning with the prominent presence of themes of vengeance and judgment in the full New Testament portrait of Christ.

[10:32] The replacement for Judas has to fit a number of qualifications. He has to be someone who has witnessed the entirety of Christ's ministry, beginning at the ministry of John the Baptist and going all the way to the resurrection.

It is especially important that an apostle have witnessed the resurrected Christ. The candidates have to be among those who travelled with Christ. It is important that the candidates have had extensive experience of interaction with Christ, hearing him teach, being alongside him and seeing the way that he lives, having been formed under his instruction.

They are also more particularly choosing one of the men. Although there were many women who had accompanied Christ for the entirety of his mission, the office of the twelve was restricted to men. Even though figures like Mary Magdalene or Mary and Martha or Bethany would have been closer to Christ than certain of the apostles, for the ministry appointed to the apostles, it was important that they were males.

They were supposed to be the guardians and the founders of the new church. They were supposed to symbolise the twelve tribes of Israel in a restored nation. The fact that they had witnessed the ministry of John the Baptist was also a matter of great importance.

John the Baptist was the last great prophet before the advent of the sun, and so it was important that the apostolic witness would take the baton from John the Baptist and bring it forward and pass it on to the rest of the church.

[11:50] The ministry of the apostles would include elements of proclamation. They would be the chief witnesses of the resurrection, and also elements of pastoral oversight. They would have a special responsibility for overseeing the life of the church, acting as pastors and as guardians.

Of the two suitable candidates put forward by the apostles, we don't know a great deal. Joseph called Barsabbas, also called Justus, and Matthias. Of these two men, Matthias is the one who's chosen.

After a prayer that the Lord who knows the hearts of all would judge in the matter, Matthias is chosen by lot. The twelve now being complete, the ground is prepared for the day of Pentecost.

A question to consider. What are some of the other places in the New Testament where we see a special emphasis upon the ministry and the witness borne by John the Baptist?

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