

Acts 1:12-26

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Date: 19 January 2025

Preacher: Tim Suffield

[0 : 00] Amen. Wow. That we stand before our holy God such that we should be burned up and yet he extends his hands to us in love.

! Good morning friends, my name's Tim. We're going to be continuing your series in the book of Acts this morning. If you've got a Bible with you, you want to grab it and turn to Acts chapter 1, that will be helpful.

Before I read it, the question that I'd like you to hold in your mind, we're not going to turn back to it until towards the end of my message, but the question I'd like you to hold in your mind is, what do you do when it looks like God got it wrong?

What do you do when it looks like God got it wrong? So we will come back there, but kind of hold that in your mind as we read the passage and I sort of talk through the story and see what's going on.

We'll return to that, but what do you do when it looks like God got it wrong? I'm going to be reading from Acts chapter 1, I'm going to start in verse 12 and read down to the end of the chapter.

[1 : 17] This is just picking up in the story from where you got to last week. Then they, so this is like the disciples and Jesus' followers, then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day journey away.

And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room where they were staying. Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the zealot and Judas the son of James.

All 11 of them. All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus and his brothers. 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.

[2 : 38] 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 Akadama, 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 amongst us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us, one of those men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.

And they put forward two. Joseph, called Basabbas, who was also called Justice, and Matthias. And they prayed and said, You, Lord, who know the heart of all, show which one of these two you have chosen to take place in 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 on Matthias, and he was numbered with the eleven apostles. This is the word of the Lord. So, what's going on?

So, what's happening? Last week you heard, I believe, that they went up to the Mount of Olives and they saw Jesus ascend into the sky to the right hand of the Father to rule and reign over the cosmos forevermore.

[4 : 17] And then they're all standing there at the top of the mountain. He's kind of giving them some instructions, but sort of wondering what happens now. And so they walk down the mountain, about half a mile, it says, down to an upper room.

Almost certainly the same upper room that exactly six weeks ago they gathered with Jesus and had a meal that we call the Last Supper.

In fact, they've reversed that journey. They left that evening and they went up the Mount of Olives to pray with him before Judas arrived, betrayed him, and he was taken away to be killed. This must all be very potent in their minds because they're reversing it.

They're coming back down the mountain, back to the same room. It's even a Thursday. They've had 40 amazing days with Jesus where he's teaching them, helping them understand the Bible, setting them up for what's going to happen next.

They sort of know that in some way it's their turn. He's told them they're not ready. He said, wait. Wait for the Spirit to come. And in some ways what we've read is this in-between time because many of you will know that what happens next, that you'll explore next week, is what we call Pentecost, when the Spirit comes on them in power with fire and wind and then everything's turned on its head.

[5 : 44] The church is born and out they go to take the world by storm. But what they're doing right now is waiting. So they've gathered to pray. Much I understand like Harvest Church has gathered to pray this week and I think is tonight.

Though they stay there for 10 days praying. And everything that comes later births in its way from that time of prayer.

Everyone's here. We heard lots of their names in what I read out. But everyone's here. The three are here. Jesus' three best mates. Peter, James, John. They're here. The rest of the 12 are here.

There are 11 of them right now. But that's a problem they'll fix in a minute. But the 11 are here. Mary's here. Jesus' mother. Other prominent women are here. They're among the movement.

Jesus' brothers. James and Jude. And probably the others that we don't know the names of. Are here. Many of them. We're told 120 people.

[6 : 47] Probably many from among what earlier in the Gospels were called the 72. This sort of larger group of Jesus followers that he sent out to do things for him. Many of them probably are here.

And they're all devoted to prayer. And we know because we know what happens on the next page. That the outcome is amazing. Jesus sends the spirit and the world is turned upside down.

I suspect on day five of their 10-day prayer meeting. I don't know. Do you reckon it felt a bit dull? Well, I wonder.

Maybe that says more about me than anything else. But I wonder if, as it just sort of went on. And they haven't been told exactly how long they've got to wait. And several days in, you're starting to think, gosh.

Do we have to? What happens next? At some point, I've got to go back to my boat and get some fish. Or whatever it is that they might be thinking. There's a lesson in that, I think.

[7 : 50] For all of us. And I guess for Harvest Church right now. That we should persist in prayer. God answers our prayers sometimes after much persistence.

I mean, sometimes he answers our prayers honestly without us even asking them. And that can be confusing. Because we wonder why sometimes it takes so long. As an example of the very quick kind.

Just before Christmas one time, we were coming back from Alton back to Birmingham where we live at the moment. And we're driving along the dark country road. And I hit a pothole. And our tire goes flat.

And gosh, you get out of the car. And you start to think, what are we going to do now? And you're looking for your jacket, your space over anything. That's not going to last for 200 miles. And your mind's going like, hey, why? You start to find something to phone. And then an angel comes down the road.

I mean, the angel was disguised as a van with flashing orange lights. But, you know, an angel it was. And out the angel gets. His name's Luke. He's a tractor repairman. And he sort of says, oh, what's wrong?

[8 : 48] And I think I've got a flat tire. I'm just trying to figure out what to do. And he's like, let me have a look. He's like, oh, you have. But actually, you've bent your wheel. I can fix that, he says. Grabs his club hammer and beats it back into shape.

And then I have to talk him into taking money. Because he just wants to drive on his way to work. I hadn't even prayed. We realised as we were driving off, giving thanks to the Lord that this man has come and rescued us from our plight.

So I never even asked. I mean, I should have done. I probably should have been the first thing that I did, right? Rather than going into overdrive thinking about how to fix the problem.

But yet the Lord is kind and gracious to us. And he answered it without me even asking. And yet other times, it feels like we have to persist in prayer.

And we don't know why one is one and one is the other. And sometimes it feels like almost God's silence is to draw us into him. But at other times, we just find ourselves heartbroken by the fact that we've prayed and prayed and prayed.

[9 : 53] And the thing that we long for that's godly has not happened. And we don't. We can't really tell the difference. And yet we persist in prayer.

Because he's good. And he answers our prayers. Despite our tears. And yet here we find ourselves in this story.

In the middle of what I think is probably history's most powerful prayer meeting. We're told nothing about it. But the outcome is that the world is turned upside down. And what do they do right in the middle of history's most powerful prayer meeting?

They have what appears to be a church business meeting. Where they start thinking about who to elect. I mean, it's not what I do. It's not if someone asked me, right, we're going to have 10 days of prayer to him.

What do you think we should be doing in the middle when everyone's really flagging? And kind of needs a bit of a pick-me-up. I'd be like, let's turn the amps up. Or maybe send everyone home to bed and tell them they can come back in a couple of days.

[10 : 59] But that's not what they do. They say, let's have a business meeting. We need to have an election. We need to make sure that we get our 12th disciple.

Our 12th member of the 12. I mean, what's the problem that they're trying to fix? Well, they understand themselves. And Jesus has told them, that's numerous times in the Gospels.

They understand themselves as they're going to recapitulate Israel. That would be the theological term. What that means is they're going to sort of start it again.

Not new, but like begin again from within it. This is going to be Israel again. And so we need 12 tribes. So we need 12 leaders.

That's why there's a kind of poeticness to it. That's what they're concerned by. And it's like, we can't have 11. We need 12. So we need to replace Judas because of everything that he did.

[12 : 00] And so they decide to do that. And they start to talk about Judas. Just to clarify, when I read all the names out earlier, you might notice that one of them was called Judas.

There are two Judases among the 12, which can confuse us sometimes. But Judas Iscariot, who is not mentioned, was the one who betrayed Jesus, who led the troops to find him on that Thursday, six weeks before.

And then he was taken away for that sham trial and then nailed to a beam of wood to die. And so they think they have to do something about it.

They start by telling the story. They start by talking about Judas. They describe in some detail. In fact, quite a lot of this is a sort of comment that Luke has added into the middle of Peter's speech.

My translation has put brackets around some of it. But they describe the way that he died in quite colourful language. It appears he exploded. Or at least that's how Luke seems to describe it here, is that he bursts open and blood goes everywhere.

[13 : 04] I don't know if you're familiar, but if you read the account in Matthew, it's quite different. And it seems, if we try and put the two together, assume that they both knew what had happened, that Judas hung himself.

And then at some point, that's what Matthew says, and at some point later, either the rope broke or someone cut him down or an animal tore it down. Probably after he's dead, his body's been hanging there a while.

When it lands, it explodes, which is unpleasant, but what would happen? And in this field that the priests have used the money that they tried to pay Judas, but he eventually rejected, they've bought this field and he's then killed himself in it.

And obviously this is a problem. They look to the Bible, they pull some verses out of the Psalms and say, oh, we should replace him.

And then they start to talk about the criteria. Who should it be? Because it ends up being this guy, Matthias, that we don't really hear anything from again. And there's some other big figures in Acts that you might be like, surely it should be one of them.

[14 : 08] Like, why is it that the 12th guy not end up being Paul, say, or even Jesus' brother James, who turned out to be this big leader in the Jerusalem church later on in the story. But neither of them would meet the criteria that they set.

They say it's got to be someone who's been with us right from the beginning. Someone who was there when John baptised Jesus. And someone who's been with us the whole way through to the end.

And so they look around the room, I imagine, and they're like, who meets this criteria? And they pick perhaps a few out. Maybe it was just the two of them. Maybe there were more. And among them they were like, these two guys, we think they're great.

And then once they've got their two candidates, they cast lots. In effect, they pull straws. That's not literally what they'd have done. But that's the effect of it. They're like, let's leave it, almost like, let's leave it to chance.

But that's not what they think's happening at all. They think this is allowing God to choose. And of course it is. They'll be thinking, perhaps, of Proverbs chapter 16, where it says, verse 33, the lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.

[15 : 20] Like even random things. Even what appears to be chance. They're like, this is God. And so they pick like that. Sometimes we can get stuck on that because we're like, why don't we do that?

Why don't we pull straws for who gets to lead the church? Well, lots of answers. But the short one would be, the short one would be, the spirit comes in the next chapter, which means they don't need to do the random chance.

They can just ask God and expect him to talk to them. But at this point, they've not received the spirit. So they quite know how God's going to answer them. So they use this method to get it. And then, after they've done all that, after they've had their long prayer meeting, after they've figured out the structures, then they're ready for power.

And then everything happens in the next chapter. And God comes and fills them and changes them and fills them with boldness and languages. And off they go to all the world.

But I wonder if that raises some questions for us. Every lot is from the Lord, it says in the book of Proverbs. They clearly trust that this is the way they can appoint leaders.

[16 : 39] That kind of implies God's in control, right? And he is. He is. He is actually in control. The Lord is sovereign over all things.

I think that's phenomenally good news. Because it means that the Father in heaven who loves you is actually able to affect the world for your good. Phenomenally good news to cling to.

And yet, I imagine for many in the room, it raises some questions about why things have gone the way they've gone in your life. Why this or that difficult, terrible thing has happened.

Thinking, I don't know if I'd have planned it this way if I was in control. And those, we can offer quite quick, trite almost, answers to those questions. That can be true.

But I think all I'd say on it today is if that's how you're feeling about something. When I say the Lord is in control, he's sovereign over everything. He loves you, he wants to do you good. And he can. And you're like, why hasn't he?

[17 : 41] What I'd say is, it's alright that you feel like that. Do you talk to someone? Do you actually talk to someone, not just expecting to say they're going to give you a nice theological answer about how the way you're feeling isn't necessarily quite right.

That might be helpful a little way down the line. But what you probably need right now is someone to listen to you, hear your pain, and say that they understand why you feel like that.

That's important. Do that. Talk to someone. Tell them how you feel. And what I'd like to tell you to you is that you can trust him. And he is good. Even on the days that it really feels like you're not quite so sure.

Because of the way that your life looks. So the question I raised at the start is, what do you do when it looks like God has got it wrong?

Well, I suspect many people in the room were asking that on that day because they're thinking about Judas Iscariot. And they're like, Jesus picked 12 guys to start this movement and one of them was a wrong one.

[18 : 51] Like in a really serious way, did he get it wrong? And then we might start to ask, because it kind of looks like it, right?

It kind of looks like he got it wrong with Judas. He needs replacing, certainly. We might start to ask other questions about ourselves that perhaps they did in the room. If he got it wrong with Judas, what does that mean for me when I mess up in a big way?

When I sin? Does that mean he got it wrong with me? Did he sort of choose me but got it wrong? And I wonder sometimes, I mean, you probably know what the answer to that question is because we've sung it lots of times this morning.

We're going to get there in a second. But kind of hold with me through the tension of it. I think it can look like it sometimes, right? It can look like God got it wrong when you look at your life and you look at your sin and you're like, Oh my word, what's wrong with me?

Why would he choose me? Am I sunk? Because of the way that I am, the things that I've done.

[20 : 01] Or even, and I'm sure some in the room were asking this thinking about Judas. Did he get it wrong with leaders who fail us? That's probably, Judas was their money guy. He was their treasurer.

He'd paid for their way. He's probably bought all of them dinner many, many times because he's the one who held the purse. They'll feel lots of things, I imagine, but they'll feel affection for him, probably.

Does he get it wrong, the Lord, when leaders fail us? I mean, it's true in one sense that all leaders fail, sure, because they're humans and they sin, but when they fail spectacularly in a way which blows things up, did he get it wrong?

I mean, I've seen that happen. I'm sure many in this room will have done in lots of different ways. I was reflecting this week on my two spiritual fathers, a guy called Bob, who got hold of me when I was a teenager and kind of taught me to be a Christian.

He died, gosh, 10 years ago, quite young, but finished the race really well. And I was reflecting also on the other spiritual father of mine, a guy called Nick, who got hold of me in my 20s and kind of taught me to be a pastor, really, who blew up his ministry in an enormous way that I kind of had to deal with.

[21 : 21] I was one of his elders by then. But lots of you would have seen this in lots of different ways, big and small. What do we do with it when it looks like God gets it wrong?

I mean, it's probably worth saying it's not most leaders that that happens to. I don't think the odds work, but for Jesus it was 1 in 12, and it's probably less if you look around the Christian world.

But did he get it wrong? Here's the thing, and this is how we should think about it. Does he get it wrong with Judas? Does he get it wrong with my sin? Does he get it wrong with others that we might look at?

No more than he got it wrong when he died on the cross. It says in Isaiah 53 that it was God's will to crush Jesus so that he could save the world, and that any who would come to him would find that their sin is forgiven if they but repent.

The worst sin ever committed was to kill God. The worst sin humanity has ever committed was to take the Lord Jesus and stick him on a piece of wood and hang him there until he died.

[22 : 39] And that's the greatest hope of the whole world, that he would actually have done so willingly, his arms outstretched, as it were, to embrace us, as St. Athanasius so poetically said.

That he would willingly use our sin in order to do us good. So when it looks like it's almost gone wrong, when it looks like the Lord has made a number of terrible decisions, that his rescue mission to the earth has ended in his own death, we can look at that and go, oh, but that's kind of what he intended, such that he would rise again into glorious life.

That's how salvation comes. Which doesn't actually answer any of the other questions that I raised. But what it does do is it allows us to go, maybe he knows what he's doing, even if I haven't got the foggiest.

What do you actually do when it looks like God's got it wrong? You weep. I'm sure they did much of that. You're not told, but I'm sure they did much of that in those days.

And you talk to those that you love and those around you about how it feels. And then you cast your cares upon Jesus, because he is the only one who seems to have never failed.

[24 : 05] And then you do what they did, which is they continued to trust God, and they kept going. Carrying their wounds with them, but they kept going.

Does Jesus reject you if you sin? No. No. No. He does not.

Has he rejected you when those that you trust die or leave you? No. And he hasn't.

And has he rejected you if others you trust betray and fail you? It's exactly what they did to him. No, he hasn't. Why do we know that's true?

Because he's never failed. He's the only perfect man who's ever lived, and he chose to put himself in your place. If you don't know him, you can know him right now and find that that's true of you.

[25 : 09] If you do know him, then we still need to be told that every week, that he would stand in your place willingly and take everything for you. And that he did it as joy, not as duty, because he loves you and he always has.

And that doesn't answer all the questions, and that's okay. We can probably figure some of them out, maybe, but honestly, we don't need that. What we need is Jesus to embrace us and tell us that he loves us, and he's here to do that.

And in just a moment, Rob is going to come and lead us in the kind of tangible proof of that, because we're going to eat bread and drink the cup, such that we can not just hear, oh, God loves me, but you can taste it.

Taste and see that the Lord is good, as we told him in the Psalms, which is what David was thinking about, though he didn't quite know it, was the Lord's Supper. Taste and see that the Lord, you can taste it. He's like, I'm for you, and I've given myself for you, and you need to know it's so in your bones that being told isn't enough.

Eat it. Drink it. I love you. That's what we're going to do. If the band could come, and if we could all stand together, Rob will come in a moment and lead us.

[26 : 28] I'm just going to briefly pray. So, yeah, stand with me if you're able. Lord Jesus, we love you.

Thank you that you first loved us, came to get us, that our failures, whether small or big, as long as we keep turning back to you, are enough, sorry, are not enough to take us away from your hands, that you've got us gripped firmly.

Thank you that you're for us. Thank you that you love us. Thank you that it was your joy to come and get us. Lord, would you come by your spirit and settle this again into our hearts.

Help us believe. We do believe, Lord. Help us in our unbelief. That is sometimes hard. Help us believe. You love us. You're for us. You came to get us. You died for our sin and then were raised again to glorious life and then ascended to the right hand of the Father on high such that you rule and reign the cosmos forevermore.

Speak it into our hearts, O God. Amen. Amen.