



# ACTS 1:12-26

## THE PRAYING CHURCH

**May 14, 2023**  
**Ethan Ezikian**

### **I. Introduction**

[Greeting, Welcome, Introduce myself, get your eyes on the text]

This is our second Sunday in the book of Acts, where we'll be all summer. Acts is written by a follower of Jesus and a companion of Paul named Luke. Luke composed the book of Acts as a theological history of the early church. It's an origin story meant to teach us about God and what it means to follow him. So our aim this summer is to walk through the planting of the early church and learn what it means to be the church today from the lived testimony of these brothers and sisters.

Last week we covered the first eleven verses in Acts 1, which contain the mission Jesus' gave his disciples in Acts 1:8, **"<sup>8</sup> But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."** Jesus took them up to the top of the mountain and said, "you're going to be witnesses of the good news of my victory over death, my salvation, my kingship, to the ends of the earth... but... wait for the promise of the Spirit." Last week we saw that Jesus plants his church by choosing a people who give witness to the gospel, commanding them to wait for the Holy Spirit.

And in our text today, we find the followers of Jesus are being obedient - they're waiting for the promised Holy Spirit to be poured out. And if you know your bible at all, you know they're in for a big, exciting surprise in chapter 2 when the Spirit comes... but that's for next week. Here in the second half of chapter one, they are waiting. If this were a book to movie adaptation of Acts, this might be one of the scenes that gets left on the cutting room floor because on first read there might not seem like a ton going on and there are details and characters introduced that never show up again and the big famous, exciting scene is coming up in the next chapter. But we're not making the book of Acts into movie! There is actually a lot going on in this text! Some things that are fascinating, some that might seem more confusing, some things that are describing events, and some principles that are being prescribed for all Christians. If we get past our first reading we will find a richness here. In this text we get a window into what faithfulness to the mission looks like in the waiting.

We're not very good at waiting, are we? So much of our world trains us to expect immediate gratification. And in the moments when we are forced to wait, we busy ourselves with the many distractions that our lives offer to us. How many of us can sit in a waiting room without checking our phones nowadays? But the way that we wait is like a trellis that shapes the growth of a vine. And how many of us, when we look at how our lives are growing, find the branches growing crooked?

Christians, in large and small ways, are a waiting people. We wait at a macro level because Christ is coming again and we wait for him to come. But we also wait at a micro level because we know that it is God who created all things, God who is sovereign over the orbits of planets and the budding of flowers. Jesus gave his followers a task - to witness to the gospel and make disciples, but even in the execution of our mission as God's people we are waiting. The bible says - speaking about spiritual growth - that people can plant and water, but it is God who brings the growth. Jesus said, "apart from me, you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5). So in our everyday lives we wait for God to act. In our obedience to his great commission we wait for God to act because if God does not act, there is no growth; we can do nothing. How do we wait in a way that leads to flourishing? How do we posture ourselves in the in between?

As we unpack Acts 1:12-26, we're going to see that faithfulness to our Christian mission looks like devotion to prayer and dependence on the Scriptures as we wait on God to act.

So let's look at the text.

## II. Walk Through the Text

One of the challenges of studying a narrative history like the book Acts is that it's telling us a story of how events unfolded and sometimes it's difficult to see what's there for us to imitate and follow suit in the church today vs what's merely there because we need to know that it happened. In other words, what is the bible describing and what is the bible prescribing? That's a question we're going to have to ask over and over again in the book of Acts. And in this account of the choosing of Matthias there is a lot that's being described and there are also some underlying principles that we can take with us and imitate. But if we just skip to the undergirding principles, we will miss some of the richness of the story. So let's just do some bible study through the text for a minute.

<sup>12</sup> Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. This is immediately after Jesus has given them their mission and ascended into heaven and the angels have said to them, "This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." (11)

<sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

We don't know what upper room this is, if it's the same upper room where they ate the last supper with Jesus or if it's different. Luke doesn't tell us. But we know that in the room all of the eleven apostles, plus the women, and Jesus' family devoted themselves to prayer together, with one accord. In other words they had close knit unity in prayer.

And then Luke tells us that there are more followers of Jesus than just the 11 and the women, there are about 120 people and at a certain point, Peter stands up and takes the lead and says in verse 16 and 17,

<sup>16</sup> "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. <sup>17</sup> For he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry."

Then in verse 18 & 19, Luke gives a short explanation of what happened to Judas. The book of Matthew also gives an explanation of what happened to Judas and if you look at the two accounts side by side you might be troubled because they seem to say different things. Matthew 27 says that Judas changes his mind because he's betrayed Christ and throws the money back at the chief priests, then he goes and hangs himself. And the chief priests buy a field that becomes known as "the field of blood." Luke, on the other hand says, "[Judas] acquired a field with the reward for his wickedness, and falling headlong, he burst open." So these accounts from Matthew and Luke are slightly different from each other. How exactly did Judas die? Did he hang himself or fall headlong? Who bought the field, the chief priests or Judas? Now, there is not a big theological truth to glean from discerning who did what, but I want to be an honest student of the bible with you and wrestle with what seems like a discrepancy because we believe that the bible is true and without error in everything it means to teach. So if one of these accounts is not communicating the truth, that's a problem, right? We don't want to sweep that kind of tension under the rug, we want to deal with it!

The good news is that many scholars do believe that these two accounts can be reconciled. One commentator wrote about the differences between Matthew and Acts here,

"Acts is interested only in Judas's eventual fate, not in any intervening activity... Judas's money led to the purchase of the field. Thus it may well be that, in a 'causative' sense, he purchased the field. [Like a] judge who sentences a criminal to death but does not personally execute him... Luke is interested in the event [of Judas's death] simply as a judgment..." (Block, 83-85)

In other words sometimes different New Testament authors, when retelling the same events have different priorities in what they are trying to communicate, which lead them to emphasize some details over others in ways that can look to us like they're telling two different stories, when really they are relating the exact same events from different angles with different priorities for teaching. And that's what seems to be happening here. Luke wants his readers to see vividly that Judas was being judged by God for his betrayal and he wants to get straight to that point. Matthew has a different aim and gives more detail to the story. So you can trust your New Testament, OK?

So Peter stands up and says we need to replace Judas! Why? Well to support his reason he quotes two passages of scripture: Psalm 69:25 and Psalm 109:8. Now these psalms are both about unrighteous enemies of God who receive judgment and Judas fits into that category, so Peter applies those scriptures to their situation.<sup>1</sup> Look at what Peter says about the bible in verse 16: "the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas" This is one of the clearest statements in the bible about what the Bible is - Peter says the Scriptures were given by the Holy Spirit, through David who wrote those psalms. This is what is called the inspiration of Scripture - that human writers were led by God in such a way that their words written down in the Bible are the Spirit's words. Peter believes - and we believe - that God The Holy Spirit speaks through the Bible and the Bible leads Peter to call for a replacement for the one who betrayed Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

So they put forward two candidates as replacements for Judas: Joseph called Barsabbas who is also called Justus (too many names) and Matthias.. And they pray for the Lord to reveal which man he has chosen and then they cast lots, which was a way of making a random selection. And Matthias is chosen.

Now, this is one of those descriptive vs prescriptive challenges in the book of Acts. Should we model our leadership selection process off of this chapter and cast lots for our leaders? Well I'm going to say

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<sup>1</sup> Block, 82

<sup>2</sup> Block, 82

“no” for a few reasons, principally because even though the early church continues to need leaders of various kinds and the New Testament goes on to teach about the selection of elders, a process like this of nominating two candidates and then casting lots is never mentioned again. In fact Paul simply says “appoint elders” (Titus 1:5...cf Acts 14:23)

So what are we to take from this scene in Acts 1? And not just in the sense of selecting leaders, but in an overarching sense. What principles should we take note of and imitate? How is the early church teaching us to be the church now?

This is where we circle back to what I think this text is teaching us. Underneath the significance of specific events, there is an example of how to be faithful to the mission Jesus has given us in seasons when we are waiting for God to act.

### **III. Devotion to Prayer & Dependence on the Scriptures:**

Let’s zoom out from the specific actions taken by the apostles in this passage and remember the context in which they are led to take action. The whole selection of Matthias rises up out of verse 14: **“<sup>14</sup> All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer...”** Look at how this whole episode happens in the context of the disciples’ devotion to prayer! And then we see, as Peter stands up to take the lead, his whole justification for taking action is the Holy Spirit speaking through the Scriptures.

Prayer and the Word. These are like two pillars that hold up the ministry of the church. They’re like the two essential ingredients in the life of God’s people. Like in a blueberry pie you’ve got a whole lot of stuff going on, spices, butter, sugar, flour and those are important, but if you don’t have blueberries, you don’t have a blueberry pie. Without prayer and the Word, I don’t think we have ministry in the church. This is the consistent emphasis of the ministry in the church throughout the book of Acts, and really throughout the NT. In fact in just a few chapters, in Act 6, we see the apostles boil their whole responsibility down to prayer and the ministry of the Word. If we want to be faithful followers of Jesus we cannot settle for less than devotion to prayer and dependence on the bible. And that means that we need to talk about what these two essential ingredients are and how we should devote ourselves to them as followers of Jesus.

#### **On Prayer**

Most people in America say they pray. In 2014, 55% of Americans said they pray every day.<sup>3</sup> But across our culture there are a lot of definitions of prayer. For some people prayer is just a synonym for wishful thinking and positive vibes. And if that’s your definition of prayer I don’t blame internet for lashing out in rage at our “thoughts and prayers” whenever tragedy strikes. Because according to that understanding, prayer is useless. For more spiritual people prayer is a way to look inward and connect with the spiritual realm or an emergency flare - a way to cope with difficult times by asking for help. For religious people prayer is the right thing to do, the good thing to do, maybe even the admirable thing to do, but boring. And in competition with our social calendars, our favorite sports, our careers, our romantic relationships it loses every time.<sup>4</sup>

But none of those definitions are what these 120 disciples are devoting themselves to here, and that is not what God is calling you to devote yourself to! Think about what has happened immediately preceding this scene in Acts 1. The apostles were with the resurrected Jesus on the mountain! Jesus taught them and gave them commands, and then Jesus ascended into heaven and angels told them

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<sup>3</sup> [Pew Research](#)

<sup>4</sup> Staton, “Praying Like Monks, Living Like Fools,” 5.

that he would come again. God the Son has been revealed to them vividly. They have a knowledge about God and God's kingdom that they did not have before. And then... they return to the upper room and devote themselves to prayer. That is Christian prayer - you behold God and then you respond by talking with him.

Prayer is rooted in our knowledge of God. And think about this - isn't it curious that there seems to be a nearly universal impulse toward prayer? People across the world and across history, religious and even non-religious people seem to have an instinct toward prayer. That's where we get the old adage, "no atheists in fox holes" because in the moment of crisis how many unbelievers will still cry out, "Oh my God!?" Well prayer is rooted in the knowledge of God. And the Bible says in Romans 1 that all people have a knowledge of God. It says, <sup>20</sup> "For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made." But in our sin we suppress the truth. We all suppress knowledge of God. This is why prayer leaks out the way it does. Why there is a nearly universal instinct toward prayer.

And if prayer is rooted in knowledge of God, then the power of our prayers comes not from the strength our efforts or our techniques, but from the degree to which we have seen the Lord and known him!<sup>5</sup> And for us today, what we know about God comes through the Scriptures and through the main message of the scriptures, which is the gospel.<sup>6</sup> "In the Bible, God's living Word, we can hear God speaking to us and we respond in prayer... Through the Word and the Spirit, prayer becomes answering God—a full conversation."<sup>7</sup>

### **Christ the Word & Christ in the Word**

And this is why we need the ministry of the Word! Hebrews 1:1-2 says, <sup>1</sup> "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, <sup>2</sup> but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son..." If prayer is a response to God, and our knowledge of God affects our prayers to him, then we must desire to know him. And unlike people in the OT, we don't have God speaking to us audibly. We have something better.

The Gospel of John says that "Jesus Christ is *the* Word of God made flesh (1:1-14) because no more comprehensive, personal, and beautiful communication of God is possible. And when we look at Jesus as he is shown to us in the scriptures, we are looking at the glory of God... Through Christ, prayer becomes... a two-way communicative action. 'For through [Christ] we have access to the Father by one Spirit' (Eph 2:18)."<sup>8</sup>

Listen, I believe that the Holy Spirit is at work today and that in some ways we might receive impression from him and direct leadings from him, but if you want to be sure you are hearing from the Holy Spirit, then go to the Bible. It is through the Scriptures that we indisputably hear from the Holy Spirit about Christ, who reveals the Father to us and makes a way to his presence. We cannot know God apart from the Holy Spirit speaking to us in the scriptures.

### **The Apostle's Correct Us**

So as we examine this scene from the early church in Acts 1, we've said that our aim is to learn from the early church how to be the church today. And that means that we need to be willing to let the example of the early church correct us.

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<sup>5</sup> Keller, "Prayer", 49.

<sup>6</sup> Keller, 45

<sup>7</sup> Keller, 45-46

<sup>8</sup> Keller

One way that I think the apostle's devotion to prayer & dependence on the Scriptures corrects us is that it comes against the anti-authoritarian air we breathe. We love our autonomy in the West. And the way we think about prayer reflects that - You don't have to humble yourself before wishful thinking. It's really easy to say, "thy will be done" when prayer is looking inward. It's easy to ask God for help every once in a while. And when prayer is your religious duty, then it's really a way for us to rack up our points with God and therefore manipulate him. But Christian prayer requires that we submit ourselves to a revelation of God that comes from outside ourselves. It requires that we humble ourselves before a God who reveals himself according to his word. We have to place ourselves under an authority outside ourselves.

But we don't devote ourselves to that outside authority for nothing. The early church's devotion to prayer & dependence on the Scriptures also assume a power outside our ability. We have been conditioned by our productivity obsessed world to believe that talking to God is not productive or worthwhile, but if you are coming to Jesus Christ who holds the universe together, who has the power to act, to cause the stars to hang in the sky and hearts to wake up from death to life that means that your prayers are real work! And the early church is challenging us to surrender our prideful reliance on human strength and entrust ourselves and our work to God. Christian prayer is real work!

#### **IV. Conclusion**

So my final plea for us today, friends, is that we might become a people who wait on the Lord to act by devoting ourselves to prayer. At Union Church we have made clear that we love The Book. Let us also love prayer!

"American culture is probably the hardest place in the world to learn to pray. We are so busy that when we slow down to pray, we find it uncomfortable. We prize accomplishments, production. But prayer is nothing but talking to God. It feels useless, as if we are wasting time. Every bone on our bodies screams, "Get to work."<sup>9</sup> But if prayer is the real work, then let us work hard in prayer!

I was texting with a friend of mine this week, just checking in with him and he mentioned that the Lord has been teaching him to pray. And I asked him what tools he'd been using to learn to pray and his reply was so good. Let me just read it to you: "I read Keller's book on prayer... But really, I just blocked off time on my calendar at home alone, turned on work mode on my phone and just prayed through Ephesians 3... ...So I've strived to keep that practice in my week and then I'm praying each night with [my wife] and trying to pray weekly with a friend for an extended period of time. Those times of prayer are sitting in a given text [from the bible] for a bit and praying from it."<sup>10</sup>

And I love that because in my question I assumed he would point me to books, sermons, a podcast or two. And in his answer he did mention a good resource, but the bulk of his answer was putting it on his calendar, and praying with other people through the scriptures.

Union Church, we have to pray! We cannot just get around to it or let it slip our minds. So I want to point you to some ways we're trying to put prayer in our calendar:

- Sunday Mornings Before Church
  - 8:45 - 9:20AM
- This Summer: Prayer Walk at Three Fires on Wednesdays
  - Wednesdays at 4:00-4:30PM

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<sup>9</sup> Paul Miller, "A Praying Life," 3.

<sup>10</sup> Robby Moore, Text Message

- Praying for Three Fires staff & students, praying for our church, and praying for a harvest in Livingston County
- With online prayer guide
- Worship & Prayer
  - Sunday night, June 4 & August 6

## Testimony

I want to encourage you to those things, but I want to leave you not with calendar items, but with a testimony.

When I was thirteen years old, I wasn't sure I was buying all the Jesus stuff. I was a curious kid, but I wasn't an easy sell. *Look, if this story is real, I want in. But if it's a fairy tale, I'd prefer to find out sooner than later so I don't waste so much time singing mediocre songs and sitting through all these meetings.* That was my logic.

Naturally, when a mentor approached me with an experiment of sorts, it caught my attention. "What do you think God would do in the lives of your unbelieving friends if you spent every day this summer walking a circle around your school in prayer for them?"

"I have no idea."

"Why don't you find out?"

I liked that idea.

...[That summer] I wore a dirt path into the thick summer grass walking the school grounds with a folded-up student directory in my right hand. ...Never once did I use the school directory until that summer, when it became my personal "book of common prayer," guiding the whispered words of my uncertain, pubescent voice while I paced around the outside of that familiar building, holding every last name in my soon-to-be eighth grade class before the God I only half believed in.

Something happened to me that summer. I fell in love with the God I wasn't sure was listening. I discovered that I didn't just "need" God in some ultimate sense; I liked God. I enjoyed his presence. I looked forward to his company. That's all I knew for sure.

On the first day back to school, I asked to speak to the principal....I just asked him, "Can I start a new extracurricular school program—one about Jesus?"...

...That's how I ended up leading a Christian outreach meeting in a fluorescent-lit, white-tiled math classroom at Brentwood Middle School...

..My entire strategy for hosting these meetings was simple. I'd sit in my bedroom on Tuesday evenings, open the Bible at random to a page somewhere in the middle, pick a paragraph on that page, read it with absolutely no other context or hint of biblical literacy, jot a few thoughts of my own interpretation on a sheet of loose-leaf paper, and then read and explain that passage to whomever showed up the following Wednesday morning. It was a recipe for disaster, not revival.

But I had one thing going for me. I prayed.

I went to school an hour early on Wednesdays to lead that group, so I went to school an hour early on Tuesdays and Thursdays to keep thumbing through that now pocket-creased, heavily frayed, and worn-out school directory, praying name by name for my classmates. My mom, the believer who led me to faith, actually sat me down and asked me to chill out with all the prayer because she was losing too much sleep taking me to school so early—true story.

A couple months into these meetings, so many students were coming that we had to move from a math classroom into the school's theater. By the end of that school year, approximately one-third of my eighth-grade class had come into relationship with Jesus in the darkness of the early morning,

with all the atmosphere of hospital lighting, through the potentially heretical sermons of a thirteen-year-old skeptic.

It's either completely ludicrous or utterly breathtaking to think that in the midst of all the insecurity of a thirteen-year-old boy...there was also the Spirit of the living God bending history in loving response to the prayed mumblings of a kid. And not because he finds that kid particularly brilliant or his suggestions on how to run the world innovative, but simply because he finds this kid in all of his insecurity, awkwardness, and adolescent nervousness to be irresistibly lovable. That's ludicrous, or it's breathtaking.<sup>11</sup>

It might happen for us or it might not. Jesus doesn't call us to create outcomes. He calls us to be faithful to the mission by devoting ourselves to prayer and depending on the voice of the Spirit in the Scriptures as we wait on him to act.

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<sup>11</sup> Staton, 8-10