

## Studies in the Book of Acts – Part 4

**“Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day’s journey. And when they had entered, they went up into the upper room where they were staying: Peter, James, John, and Andrew; Philip and Thomas; Bartholomew and Matthew; James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot; and Judas the son of James. These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers. And in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples (altogether the number of names was about a hundred and twenty), and said, ‘Men and brethren, this Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke before by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus; for he was numbered with us and obtained a part in this ministry.’ (Now this man purchased a field with the wages of iniquity; and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his entrails gushed out. And it became known to all those dwelling in Jerusalem; so that field is called in their own language, Akel Dama, that is, Field of Blood.) ‘For it is written in the Book of Psalms: ‘Let his dwelling place be desolate, and let no one live in it’; and, ‘Let another take his office.’ Therefore, of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John to that day when He was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection.’ And they proposed two: Joseph called Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias. And they prayed and said, ‘You, O Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which of these two You have chosen to take part in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place.’ And they cast their lots, and the lot fell on Matthias. And he was numbered with the eleven apostles.” – Acts 1.12-26.**

In our last study, Jesus ascended into heaven, and angels told the bewildered crowd, and principally among them, the apostles, that they should not stand gazing into heaven – there was work to do on earth, because **“this same Jesus... will come again”** as they saw Him go. The great singing evangelist, Knowles Shaw, penned those beautiful and powerful lyrics: “We walked not with the chosen few who saw thee from the earth ascend, and raised to heaven their wondering view, then low to earth all prostrate bend, but we believe that human eyes beheld that journey to the skies! Yes, we believe that human eyes beheld that journey to the skies!” We believe it with good reason! Because the most credible and trustworthy witnesses of the ancient world testify to it! Those “chosen few” were so changed and transformed by what they saw that their lives thenceforth became an unassailable witness to Christ. Luke 24.52 says that after Jesus disappeared from their sight, they worshiped Him, and then Luke summarizes the beginning of the apostolic age with some rather enigmatic words, **“and {they} returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple praising and blessing God.”** In Acts, Luke enlarges and expands those details considerably. Acts 1.12-13 says, **“Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day’s journey.”** “The Mount called Olivet,” or the Mount of Olives, was of course, a precious place to the disciples. The Garden of Gethsemane was there, and in that Garden, **“the place”** where Jesus most frequently retired to pray and spend quite time with His closest friends and His heavenly Father (John 18.1-2). It was on this mountain where Jesus had delivered the most startling revelation His disciples ever heard Him speak: that Jerusalem and the Temple would be destroyed – news that was so disturbing to them they imagined it would coincide with the end of the world (Matthew 24.1-2)! And now, from this same mountain, they have witnessed the departure of Jesus from earth and heard their marching orders for the upbuilding of His Kingdom as well as the blessed hope of His future return. So, full of anticipation, **“they returned to Jerusalem... a Sabbath day’s journey”** which most scholars put at around 3/5 of a mile, and the figure of speech simply meant that it was as far as a person was allowed to travel on the

Sabbath. **“And when they had entered, they went up into the upper room where they were staying...”** Many believe that this “upper room” was in the home of Mary, John Mark’s mother, and may likely have been the very room where the last supper was eaten on the night when Jesus was betrayed. Of course, Jesus told them to wait in Jerusalem for the baptism with the Holy Spirit and the promise of the Father and when those things were poured out from God, the Messianic Kingdom of Heaven would be officially inaugurated on earth. At this point there were only *11* apostles. The Bible lists them: **“Peter, James, John, and Andrew; Philip and Thomas; Bartholomew [also called Nathaniel] and Matthew; James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot; and Judas the son [or more accurately, the brother] of James.”** When Jesus chose His apostles, He selected 12 (Matthew 10.1-4; Luke 9.1; Mark 6.7), and the Bible tells us that there was a symbolic meaning in that number. **Matthew 19.28, “Jesus said to them [that is, the apostles], ‘Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration [that’s another way saying “the Kingdom” or the time when Messiah is ruling], when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.’”** We learned in a previous study that Jesus was coming as the “son of David” to “*restore Israel*” and that He would accomplish that by establishing a spiritual kingdom of “**true Jews**” and “**true children of Abraham**” – men and women whose connection to the ancient Patriarchs was “**by faith**” rather than ethnicity and bloodline (Galatians 3.26-29). And just as there were 12 tribes of physical Israel, there would be 12 apostles in the Messiah’s spiritual Israel! And, of course, this book was often called by the ancients “the Acts of the Apostles” because now that Jesus has returned to heaven, the work of God on earth was going to continue primarily through these men. In Matthew 16.19, Jesus said that they would be given, “**the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven**” – that is, the authority to open the Kingdom and allow entrance to it. Then He said, “**Whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will have been loosed in heaven.**” Yet most of these men, who Jesus said would be the mouthpiece of God, the ambassadors of heaven on earth, are not mentioned again by name anywhere else in the Bible after this verse. Only

Peter, Matthew, and John, three of the 11 Apostles named here, were called upon by the Holy Spirit to write books for the New Testament collection. So we might reasonably ask, why were there 12? What did these other men do? What purpose did they serve in the Kingdom of Christ? In addition to signifying that the Church of Christ is the spiritual Israel, as we've already mentioned these men became a "perfect" witness to the resurrection and ministry of Jesus Christ and a "perfect" voice of authority in the church throughout the whole of the Ancient World. It is true that the history of Acts focusses primarily on Peter and later the Apostle Paul and only mentions the others incidentally if at all. But the clear indication is that these men set out to fulfill Jesus' command to **"go into all the world and make disciples of every creature in all nations"** (Mark 16.15-16; Matthew 28.18). There are some very ancient traditions that suggest some of the territories where the other apostles labored. Some say that Andrew preached to the "barbarians" around the coast of the Black Sea and to Scythians, and even as far as Russia and Scotland! Nathaniel, or Bartholomew preached in Parthia, which is modern Iran, Lycaonia (which is part of modern Turkey), Armenia, and into Central Asia. Matthew preached in Ethiopia and Arabia; James, the son of Alpheus in Spain, Britain, and Ireland; John worked in Asia Minor, in what is now Turkey, and his brother James was martyred early while preaching in Judea. Matthias preached in Cappadocia, which is in the central part of modern Turkey. Phillip preached in Phrygia. Simon the Zealot began his work in Egypt, traveled throughout north Africa, and ended in the British Isles. Thaddaeus preached in Syria, and Thomas traveled throughout the Parthian Empire, bringing the gospel all the way the Hindus and Buddhists of western India. There may be some uncertainty about those traditions, but we do know that there were Christian communities in all of these places who knew these Apostles dating back to the first century. You can imagine the powerful witness that these ancient believers received when they were first visited by the miracle-working emissaries of God who amazed them with the story of Jesus and the message of God's loving salvation and coming judgement and then offered them the simple terms of admission in the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. And a few years later, visitors from the far-off centers

of the Roman Empire came with letters from other Apostles and books about the life of Jesus and the establishment of the Church, even this Book of Acts, and all that these writings taught, confirmed, and established what those first apostolic missionaries preached when the churches were originally organized. There is no wonder that the Christian faith not only spread but was almost immediately so deeply rooted in the hearts of its adherents that even death would not dissuade them from its practice! And when the complete message of Christ was fully circulated, there was no room for doubt: 12 witnesses, the perfect number, the ancient symbol of absolute completeness and authority had spread corroborated testimony to Jesus “to the ends of the earth.” But at the time of our text, in Acts 1, before all of those evangelistic adventures could take place, the Apostles are waiting for the power of heaven to come upon them, and right now there are not 12 anymore! There are only 11.

So, the Bible says that they gathered in their meeting place, and “**These all continued with one accord...**” That’s a beautiful phrase, frequently used to describe the ancient Christians, and it means that had “one mind” or “mutual consent” – the Living Oracles says they were “unanimous” as they steadfastly persevered, “**in prayer and supplication...**” Brother John F. Rowe pointed out that they weren’t praying for the baptism with the Holy Spirit – that is a modern practice among those who want some kind of extraordinary supernatural experience beyond simply being saved – but the baptism with the Spirit was a promise, and they believed God so they were waiting for it, not praying for it. But in this time of anxious anticipation, as the future loomed large before them, it was only natural for faithful men and women to pray and to ask God for the strength, the peace, and the courage that only He could give – and to THANK God for all He was doing in the fulfillment of His loving promises to mankind. Luke says they were, “**with the women** [These were those fiercely loyal and dedicated disciples who never abandoned Jesus at any moment, even all the others did. They were there by the cross through the gruesome hours of His execution. They ministered to his cold and lifeless body, while the *men* trembled behind locked doors. They were the first witnesses of His resurrection, and the first to spread the good news to

others. And here they are still. Just as dedicated – waiting and praying for the next chapter in their service to Christ to begin] **and** [with them is] **Mary the mother of Jesus...**” This is the last time we see her in the Bible. Notice that the other disciples were not praying *to* Mary, or *through* Mary, or even asking *her* to pray for *them*! They were praying *with* her. Unlike the apostles, there is no indication in the Bible that she would have any special role in the church apart from faithfully following Christ and leading others to do the same by her wonderful example – Luke says that she was “**the mother of Jesus**” – but she is not *our* mother, she is our sister. Just a Christian like us – rejoicing with us in God our Savior. And finally, he says that “**His brothers**” or literally “**His brethren**” are also present. While Jesus was alive on earth, before His resurrection, His siblings to not believe in Him like His mother did – in fact they often cursed Him as an embarrassment to the family and accused Him of being crazy (Mark 3.21)! On one occasion it appears that they try to convince Him to go into a terribly dangerous situation hoping that He would be killed and no longer be a trouble to their lives (John 7.1-9)! But the Apostle Paul says that after the resurrection, Jesus appeared to His brother James and converted him, and know here they are in the spiritual family of the Lord – no longer merely His brothers, but as James and Jude would say, His “bondservants” (James 1.1; Jude 1).

Verse 15 says, “**And in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples (altogether the number of names was about a hundred and twenty** [Apparently, this doesn’t mean that there were only 120 faithful disciples left in the world. Paul mentions that there were more than 500 at this time (1 Corinthians 15.6). But in this gathering, there were about 120 of them, and that gives a little perspective of how large some of these “house meetings” of the early Christians might have been]),” The verse continues, “**and** [Peter] said, ‘**Men and brethren, this Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke before by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus; for he was numbered with us and obtained a part in this ministry.’ (Now this man purchased a field with the wages of iniquity; and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his entrails**

**gushed out. And it became known to all those dwelling in Jerusalem; so that field is called in their own language, Akel Dama, that is, Field of Blood.)”** So Peter reminds us why there are only 11 apostles now. One of their own, Judas Iscariot, had betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver, what Peter here calls “**the wages of iniquity**” and when he realized the full weight of what he had done, rather than turn to Jesus in repentance he committed suicide. The Gospel of Matthew says that he hanged himself (Matthew 27.5), but there is no need to think of what Peter says here as a contradiction. Peter is simply describing the ultimate fate of Judas’ body, whether the rope broke, or some passerby cut the body down, or it pulled apart through the process of decomposition – it eventually fell and burst open on the ground below and “**his entrails gushed out.**” That might seem like an unnecessary and uncharacteristic detail of graphic violence, but it was probably added by Peter to emphasize the terrible end of this sad case in the mind of all his listeners and those of us who read it today. Peter seems to connect the field and the suicide, so it is likely that this was where Judas died. Matthew says that before taking his own life, Judas returned the money to the Chief Priests, but because it was defiled, they couldn’t use it in the temple, so they went and bought the field with Judas’ blood money – after such a grotesque thing happening there the field likely lost its value and so it is called a “**potter’s field**” which described a field where the soil was eroded away and only clay remained, and it became a burial place for the poor and homeless (Matthew 27.7) including Judas himself – the poorest man who ever lived, because although he was once offered the richest treasures of heaven, he traded them for those riches which James said become “corroded, corrupted, and moth eaten” and pass away (James 5.1-3).

Peter said that, “**the Holy Spirit spoke before by the mouth of David concerning Judas**” and that it was written in the Scripture. He might have had in mind the words of Psalm 41.9, “**Even my own familiar friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted up his heel against me.**” We know that this was a prophecy of Judas, because the Jesus tells us so in John 13.18, but it appears that **Peter** has some other passages in mind from Psalms 69.25 and 109.8. Acts 1.20 says, “**For it is written in the**

**Book of Psalms: ‘Let his dwelling place be desolate, and let no one live in it’; and, ‘Let another take his office.’**” Both of these Psalms describe the just punishment of God against the wicked, and especially the one who oppresses the righteous and the Lord’s Anointed – the idea is that any such person has forfeited his right to an inheritance or to hold any position of value and prominence. Peter **continues** in verse 21, **“Therefore, of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John to that day when He was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection.”** Peter here lists the qualifications of an apostle: 1) to be an apostle one must have trained with Jesus from the beginning of His ministry and throughout the 3 ½ years; 2) one must have been among the eyewitnesses of the resurrection of Jesus, because part of the work of the Apostles was to give convincing testimony to that event. Obviously, these qualifications exclude any living person from being an apostle today! There is no living human being who spent time learning from Jesus in His earthly ministry, nor is there any human being alive today who has seen the risen Lord Jesus with his own eyes – therefore there can be no living apostles on the earth today. That is simple reasoning, but very important. Whatever authority Jesus gave to the 12 Apostles, it has not been given or passed on to any person on the earth since their time, and the only access we have to their authority is through their writings in the New Testament scripture! **Verses 22-26** say, **“And they proposed two: Joseph called Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias. And they prayed and said, ‘You, O Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which of these two You have chosen to take part in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place.’ And they cast their lots, and the lot fell on Matthias. And he was numbered with the eleven apostles.”**

I want to consider four points from these verses: 1) The Apostle Peter says that Judas **“fell.”** That means that Judas had once been saved, but through unrepentant transgression, or sin, he fell away and became lost! 2) Judas not only lost his salvation, but he lost his apostleship, and it was not by

death but **“by transgression.”** In other words, it was Judas’ decision to turn away from Christ forever that caused him to vacate the office of apostle and need a replacement. Throughout the rest of the Bible, we read about other apostles dying, such as James (Acts 12.2), but there is no indication a replacement was chosen for him. You see it is not death that terminates the office of an apostle, it is apostasy. The other apostles died in loyalty to Jesus and they have never lost their apostleship – they are still the apostles of Jesus Christ, still sitting on twelve thrones, still exercising authority in the church through their writings. The Apostle Paul said that the Church is built “upon the foundation of the Apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone...” (Ephesians 2.20), and when John saw the foundations of the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven he said, “Now the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb” (Revelation 21.14). 3) While the other apostles made the proposal of Joseph and Matthias based on their meeting the necessary qualifications, the Lord himself was invited to make the selection! **Luke** says, **“they prayed and said, ‘You, O Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which of these two You have chosen... And they cast their lots, and the lot fell on Matthias.’** In the ancient times, the casting of lots was not an appeal to luck, it wasn’t a coin toss – it was an invitation for God to oversee a selection process by His providence. Proverbs 16.33 says, **“The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.”** And the Bible says that from that time **“he was numbered with the eleven apostles.”** 4) Peter says that Judas went **“to his own place.”** This is an ominous and dreadful expression, it was used in the ancient Jewish commentaries to refer to eternal destiny of a wicked person, the place Jesus taught us to call Hell. It is called “his own place” because it is not the place God chose for him, but rather he mapped his own course here. I want to read a quote from **Edsil** Dale’s notes on the Book of Acts that I think captures the grim and somber meaning of Peter’s words:

“Judas’ sin of greed was a cancer of progressive degeneration, from avarice, thievery, deceit, betrayal, remorse, to suicide and to his own place.... He was sorry, but instead of proper repentance he committed

suicide. What a contrast between Judas and Peter! Both had been rebuked as agents of Satan by Jesus. Both turned against the Lord at the end of His ministry. Both had deep sorrow – Judas with his bitter remorse and Peter with his dark night of weeping. But only Peter had that godly sorrow which leads to repentance, Judas had the sorrow of the world. If he had chosen a different course, he could have returned to the Lord as Peter did. It is a fearful thing to be a free moral agent, free to choose one's way.”

Those last words, I think, are especially meaningful. Our culture loves its freedoms, and we have them from God and from our national government as well. We are free to choose our own course, to make our own life, to go our own way, and to end in our own place. But while we have the opportunity we should seriously consider whether our own place is better or worse than the place God has planned for us.