

The Problems and Progress of Christ's Church

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Date: 26 April 2017

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good afternoon. Welcome to the Wednesday lunchtime Bible Talk. It's very good to see you, you're very welcome indeed. I can see there are still sandwiches and things left, so do please stay on afterwards and enjoy a bit of food and tea and coffee and time to chat together.

We continue our series in the book of Acts, so if you turn with me to Acts chapter 1, and we'll be beginning, or continuing on in Acts chapter 1, looking at verses 12 through to 26.

I think you'll find it on page 909. Is that right? 909? Church Bibles, 909 in the Vista Bible there. Acts chapter 1, and we'll pick it up at verse 12.

Then they, that is the disciples, returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's 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 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 amongst the brothers. The company of persons was in all about 120. And Peter 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, Akhutama, 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.

[2 : 4 6] And they put forward two. Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also called Justice, 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. And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias. And he was numbered with the eleven apostles. Amen. Well, may the Lord bless to us the reading of his words this afternoon.

Well, before we come and think about that together, let's pray, shall we? Let's gather our hearts and pray to our Heavenly Father. Our Father in Heaven, you are the great King over all.

You alone are the ruler of heaven and earth. The times are in your hands. You are the great sovereign Lord. And would you help us this afternoon to be reminded of who you are, that our eyes might be lifted from our immediate worldly concerns to your majesty and to your plans and your purposes.

that our focus as your church will be to take your saving news to all nations, that we are proclaiming Christ Jesus as Saviour, Lord, and King, so that all the world his worthy praise may sing.

So help us through the Scriptures and by your Spirit to hold fast to the hope of everlasting life, which you have given to us in our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

[4 : 39] So draw near to us this afternoon. Strengthen us. Equip us for that great task. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. The fall into disgrace of a Christian leader.

I'm sure that you can think of a Christian leader, perhaps a prominent pastor or a well-known Christian who has fallen from grace in a fairly major way.

If you're a Christian here this afternoon, you will know well that feeling of being rocked by the news of a scandal surrounding a minister or perhaps someone else.

And there's something he's done or something he says. You feel the shock, the disappointment. How could he do that?

Perhaps you think of something that you look up to in the Christian faith and you wonder, what if they messed up big time? How would I feel?

[5 : 47] Maybe you're visiting here this afternoon and you wouldn't describe yourself as a Christian. You've read the newspapers about the fall of a Christian leader. I wonder what you make of it. It may yet be another piece of evidence that Christianity's got nothing going for it at all after all.

Perhaps it discredits Christianity beyond credibility. Well, these sorts of things, they can be very damaging indeed, can't they?

They're often very public. They make the news. But we need not be surprised, nor should we be disheartened, nor should such a thing discredit the Christian gospel.

That is, I think, why Luke includes these verses here for us. What we read about here in these verses and acts takes place amidst the swirl of a scandal that blows any of the scandals you've just been thinking about clear out of the water.

This would have been front page news of the Jerusalem evening standard. Just notice verse 19 there. look at what it says there.

[6 : 55] This news about what Judas has done had become news all around Jerusalem. People have known about it. And the scandal that was going on here still reverberates today.

We all know what we're talking about when we call someone a Judas. And it's not an endearing term, is it? Judas had been one of Jesus' apostles, one of the twelve men that Jesus specifically chose to be one of his witnesses to his life, to his words, his works, and the implications of all that he said and did.

But as we know, Judas, in the end, he betrays Jesus, the Son of God. One of the key men in the Jesus movement, one of those closest to him, betrays him.

How terribly embarrassing. Surely the Christian movement was dead before it began. One of those closest betrays Jesus. So why does Luke include this section, these verses we just read together?

Why does he include it? It's embarrassing. It's not particularly impressive. Why does he include it? Well, Luke includes this section. In order to give certainty about the solid foundation of the church, despite the obvious sin and problems, even here at the very beginning.

[8 : 22] Luke is frank and open about the problems in Christ's church, even in the very earliest days. But he's also frank and open about the unhindered progress of Christ's church, despite those problems.

The church, Christ's church, has a sure foundation. And Luke is writing to give us absolute certainty about that. So two points this afternoon as we look at these verses together.

First, in verses 12 to 20, we see that disheartening problems in Christ's church do remain because sin is real. And then second, in verses 22 to 26, we see that definite progress of Christ's church is assured because our Savior reigns.

So first then, we'll look at the disheartening problems in Christ's church that remain because sin is real. We see in these verses, don't we, that the shocking reality of sin and opposition, even with those closest to him, even amongst his chosen apostles, there is fierce opposition, there's betrayal.

Now you'll perhaps hear folk these days say that what the church of today really needs is to go back to being the first century church.

[9 : 43] Well, here's the first century church. And it's a church that's full of problems. Rose-tinted spectacles are quickly dismantled by Dr. Luke here. He's not shying away from the reality.

So what's the presenting problem here? What's the issue? Well, look at verses 12, 13, and 14. We have a list of names. Just cast your eye over those names.

And you'll see that there are 11 names mentioned there in verses 13 and 14. And Luke has a very similar list in his first part of his account, in his gospel.

Back in chapter 6, he has a name, a list of names. And it's very similar apart from one name. The list in Luke's gospel has 12 names.

And the 12th name is Judas Iscariot. His name's missing from this list. And we all know why, don't we? It's not only that he died.

[10 : 39] We read that there in verses 18 and 19. Judas died. But fundamentally, he betrayed Jesus. He's the one who handed him over. And his betrayal, well, it poses a big problem.

It was these 12 in particular who had seen Jesus and heard him. They were visual witnesses to all that Jesus said and did, to his miracles, his teaching, his death, his resurrection, his ascension.

They were witnesses to those events. But not only that, not only were they visual witnesses, they were verbally instructed by Jesus. Earlier in the chapter, we read about the 40 days between Jesus' resurrection and his ascension when he taught his apostles, his disciples.

At the end of his gospel account, we read that he opened their minds to understand the scriptures. And there again in verse 3 of chapter 1, we read that Jesus was teaching his apostles about the kingdom of God.

And these apostles were chosen by Jesus and charged by him to go to all nations as witnesses. Chapter 1, verse 8. Witnesses to the sufferings of Christ.

[11 : 54] Witnesses to his resurrection, his ascension. And they would be the ones who proclaim the implications of those events. Repentance and forgiveness of sins to the end of the world. They had, these 12 men had an absolutely monumental and significant task.

They were, they remained the bedrock, the foundation of the church. It was their faithful witnessing to all that Jesus taught and instructed them that formed the foundation of the church.

They were unique. And there had to be 12. 12 apostles. The 12 apostles of the renewed people of God.

The 12 tribes of Israel. The 12 apostles for God's true people. And there had to be 12. 12. And it's the very first issue that Peter tackles.

He stands up there in verse 15. It's his first major speech. And it's the one issue he tackles. He knows it's important. Not only because a replacement had to be found for Judas, but also because of the great pain that was involved.

[13 : 08] Notice what Peter says about Judas. Look at verse 16. Second half of verse 16. And verse 17. He's talking about Judas, that he was numbered among us.

And was allotted his share in this ministry. He was part and parcel of the band of 12 brothers that knew Jesus. Judas had been one of the closest.

He was in the inner circle. He shared in the ministry and he became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. Can you imagine? the great pain involved.

Seeing someone you rubbed shoulders with for three years. You've done ministry with them. Suddenly, he's turned his back. He betrays Jesus. Even here amongst Christ's closest, the reality of sin is so apparent, isn't it?

It's disheartening. It's damaging. It's discouraging. But we shouldn't be surprised. Just look how Peter begins his speech. He says, brothers, verse 15, 16, he says, brother, the scripture had to be fulfilled.

[14 : 20] The scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas. It was the pattern and plan that God's anointed would be persecuted and betrayed.

That's the point that Peter makes. he quotes from two psalms there in verse 20 saying that these psalms looked ahead to the betrayal of Jesus by Judas.

Both of those psalms are written by King David, the anointed king of Israel. And in both of those psalms, the enemies of David are in view. The great pain of betrayal and opposition is clear.

Peter is telling us here, having spent 40 days with Jesus being taught from the scriptures that these psalms looked ahead to God's ultimate anointed king.

And he tells us that these psalms are fulfilled by Judas. This was always the plan. This had to happen.

[15 : 25] God's chosen Messiah would have to suffer and he would be betrayed even by one of those closest to him. it was with David and so it was with Jesus.

That is always the way for God's servants. The disheartening problems in Christ's church remain because sin is real. It's always going to be the way.

Even there at the beginning, even one of those closest to Jesus, sin was present. It persisted. And it still persists to this day. Luke is absolutely realistic, isn't he?

He doesn't hide this away. He doesn't put this down to fake news. He says, no, this happened. Judas betrayed Jesus. He's realistic about it.

But he also knows, as we see in a moment, that it isn't fatal. before we move on, two key implications for us. Two implications.

[16 : 23] Firstly, remember the reality of sin, even amongst the leaders of the church. Sin was a reality right there at the beginning, even amongst those closest to Jesus.

And you and I need to be as realistic as Luke is about sin, about gross public sins like Judas's, even in the church, even amongst those who profess allegiance to Jesus, even those who lead the church.

Let's not be naive. Let's not think that sin stands patiently outside the front door waiting for us to leave here. Sin is a reality, even amongst those who lead the church.

So implication two, be careful about how you think about your leaders. Be careful how you think of your leaders. Don't put them on pedestals, because they're bound to fall off.

Perhaps not as catastrophically as Judas does, but maybe. Church leaders are not sinless. You and I need to be realistic.

[17 : 31] Luke is realistic, and so we ought to be too. Just think of your pastor, your small group leader. They are, in the end, only human under shepherds to the great shepherd.

They are flawed. But there is a greater pastor. There is one who is without sin, and it's in him that our confidence must rest.

And that brings us to our second point this afternoon. We see in verses 21 to 26, the definite progress of Christ's church is assured, because our Saviour reigns.

Jesus' death, all the events surrounding Jesus' betrayal, the actions of Judas, they're all very sobering, aren't they?

But they had to happen. This was part of the plan. Jesus is in control, and so nothing, not even the betrayal of Judas, would hinder the advance of the gospel.

[18 : 32] as we've seen, the events surrounding Jesus' death, his betrayal by one in whom he had invested hugely in, was all part of the plan. Peter says that the scriptures had to be fulfilled.

But not only was the betrayal of Jesus part of the plan, it was also unable to hinder the progress of the gospel. That's what we see here, particularly in these verses. A replacement for Judas needed to be put in place.

Someone who, verse 22, must become, along with the original 11, a witness to the resurrection. Peter was confident that these things would progress because what they were seeing was simply what the Old Testament had foreshadowed.

What they were witnessing was the fulfillment of those psalms that he quotes in verse 20. So the task that Jesus has commanded them to, the task set out in verse 8, that witnessing to Jesus to the end of the earth, that must go on.

A 12th man must be appointed. And that is exactly what happens. A replacement is found. 12 apostles representing the renewed people of God in its fullness.

[19 : 52] apostles. And so out of a group of 120 disciples, Peter and the apostles narrow it down to two. That's what we read there, isn't it?

120 are involved, verse 15. And so they make a choice. Out of all those folk, they narrow it down to two. And the criteria for consideration, Peter mentions there in verse 21.

It needed to be someone who had been with Jesus throughout his public ministry. It had to be someone who had witnessed his life, his death, his resurrection, his ascension.

It had to be one who had been privy to his teaching. It had to be a visual witness, one who had been verbally instructed by Jesus, and chosen by Jesus.

But why such criteria? Why not just pick anyone who was a good bloke? Why not just pick someone they liked? Why these criteria? Well, these apostles, their task, look back at chapter 1, verse 8, their task was to be witnesses, to be witnesses to his resurrection, verse 21, 22.

[21 : 10] The apostles' role was unique and foundational to the church. It needed to be someone who had seen with their own eyes, heard of their own ears, all that Jesus said and did.

And it's clear that through all of this, it is the Lord Jesus who directs the ongoing progress of his church. In the face of sin amongst key leaders, in the face of betrayal and disappointment, Jesus continues to lead and reign over his people.

Just notice the prayer in verse 24. Look down with me there, verse 24. This is what they pray. You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry.

The apostles know as they pray that the Lord Jesus is now reigning in heaven. He is continuing to direct all that is happening. He is in control.

He is the reigning sovereign. And because of his sovereignty, they pray and ask him to show which of these two men, both of whom were adequately qualified, which one is to be the twelfth apostle.

[22 : 25] So, far from being disengaged and disinterested, Jesus is continuing to lead and to guide his church, choosing which disciple will join the other eleven and be one of his apostles.

That is what guarantees the progress of the gospel, unhindered. That is what will ensure that his church will achieve his purposes.

He is in control. But we do need to be realistic about how things will look. Now, Luke is realistic. So even though the progress of Christ's church is assured, it will take place amidst suffering from without and sin from within.

We have seen that with Judas and we'll see suffering from without as we go through the book of Acts. So even though the progress is assured, it takes place in the midst of difficulty.

Christ's church, you and I, will only be free from that suffering and sin when Christ returns. And that hasn't happened yet. And so Luke writes these verses to give his readers, to give you and I, certainty that even when leaders, Christian leaders, even leaders as close to Jesus as Judas was, even when they fail and fall, the progress of Christ's church doesn't miss a stride.

[23 : 54] He is in control. He was then and he remains so now. These sorts of problems have been perennial and they will continue to be a problem until Christ returns.

We must be realistic about that. As we close, two final implications for us. Two things to take away. First, Christ is in control now, no matter how things might look on the ground.

So don't panic when Christian leaders fail and fall. And that can be so hard, can't it? I don't have to mention particular examples, but I'm sure you can think of some, maybe recent or from many years ago of a Christian minister, Christian leader who's let you down, perhaps very badly.

And of course it's right that we feel that, but not to the point where it shipwrecks our faith, not to the point where it gives us reason to doubt or discredit the Christian faith wholesale.

Christ is in control now. He will bring, he is bringing chapter 1 verse 8 to fulfilment. The gospel is going to the end of the earth.

[25 : 13] I was reading just the other day that globally about 50,000 people are being added to the church every day. 19 million a year. The gospel is going to the end of the earth.

So there's our first implication. Christ is in control now, no matter how things might look on the ground. So don't panic when Christian leaders fail and when they fall.

But secondly and finally, Christ was in control then. So you can be sure about the foundations of the church. It was Jesus who chose the twelve apostles.

Even when one betrayed him, it was Jesus who chose the replacement. So we can have absolute confidence and certainty about the gospel itself. We can have confidence and certainty because the church was built on a foundation of twelve men who lived with Jesus, who walked with him, who talked with him, who ate with him, who watched him suffer and die, who spent forty days with him being taught about the scriptures, who saw his ascension.

They were solid and reliable witnesses to all that Jesus said, all that he claimed to be. Jesus has given his church a solid foundation and the evidence of that is what we hold in our hands today.

[26 : 37] We have his word. And so our passage teaches us this afternoon that Christ was in control then so we can be absolutely sure about the foundation of the Christian church as we live today.

Luke has written his account so that you and I can have certainty about Jesus, about his gospel, and about the witness of his church, which will go to the end of the earth, unhindered, no matter the failings of the church's leaders.

Amen. Let me pray and we'll sing to close. Our heavenly father we thank you for your word which brings us certainty and surety, which speaks of the absolutely solid witness to the Lord Jesus.

So would you help us in our weakness and failings as no doubt we've thought of leaders who have fallen, who have failed.

But Lord, the gospel doesn't fail with it. Your gospel does progress. It goes on unhindered. So grant us confidence in your gospel and help us to trust you that your word will prove true.

[28 : 04] We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.