

The Problems and Progress of Christ's Church

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[0 : 0 0] Well, we're going to turn now to our Bibles and to our reading for this morning, which you'll find in the New Testament in the Acts of the Apostles in chapter 1. We have one of the big blue church Bibles. I think that's page 909.

If not, it's near the beginning of the New Testament after the four Gospels, the book of Acts. And Paul began last week a series in these early chapters of Acts.

And we're going to pick up the story at chapter 1 and verse 12 after the ascension of the Lord Jesus. We read in verse 12, Then they, that is the disciples, returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day journey away.

When they'd 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 among the brothers.

[1 : 1 3] The company of persons was in all about 120. And he 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 bought 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 old language, Achel Dama, that is the field of blood.

For it's 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 us, one of these men, must become with us a witness to his resurrection.

[2 : 2 7] 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.

And may God bless to us his word. Amen. Good morning.

Please do turn to Acts and chapter one, which Willie read for us earlier. It's Acts chapter one and verses 12 to 26. 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 very major way.

[3 : 4 7] If you're a Christian here this morning, you will know well that feeling of being rocked by news of a scandal surrounding a minister, perhaps something he's done or something he's said.

You feel the shock, the disappointment. How could he do that? Perhaps you think of someone you look up to in the Christian faith and you wonder, what if, what if they messed up big time?

How would I feel? Maybe you're visiting here this morning. You wouldn't describe yourself as a Christian. You've read in the newspapers about the fall of some Christian leader.

I wonder what you make of it. It may be yet another piece of evidence that Christianity is nothing going for it after all. Perhaps that one action discredits Christianity beyond all credibility.

Well, these sorts of things can be very damaging indeed. They're often very public. People get to hear about it. But we need not be surprised, nor should we be disheartened, nor should we be discouraged, because such a thing shouldn't discredit the gospel.

[5 : 02] That is, I think, why Luke includes these verses here for us. What we read here, what was read earlier in these verses and acts, takes place amidst the swell of a scandal that blows any of the scandals you've just been thinking about clear out of the water.

This was front page news. This would have made the front page of the Jerusalem evening standard. Notice verse 19. News of Judas and what had happened to him, what he did, that was known throughout Jerusalem.

Everyone had heard about it. And the scandal that was going on there still reverberates today. We all know what we're talking about if we say someone is a Judas, if we call someone a Judas. And it's not an endearing term. You see, Judas had been one of Jesus' twelve apostles. One of the twelve men that Jesus had specifically chosen to be one of his apostles, to be one of his witnesses to his life, to be a witness to his words, his works, and the implications of all that Jesus said and did. But as we know, Judas, in the end, betrayed Jesus. He betrayed the Son of God. One of the key men in the Jesus movement, one of those closest to him, betrays him.

[6 : 33] How terribly embarrassing. How devastating. Surely the Christian movement was dead in its tracks before it even got going. So why does Luke include this section?

Why does he include verses 12 to 26? Why take up valuable space in his account? The two events either side of us are huge.

Last week we're looking at the Ascension, and next week we're at Pentecost. Why include this at all? Why not go straight from the Ascension to Pentecost? Why include this, to be frank, embarrassing event?

Why include this scandalous event? Well, Luke includes it here, I think, in order to give certainty, to give certainty about the fact of the solid foundation of the church.

Despite the obvious sin and the problems at the start, Luke writes to give us certainty that the church's foundation is sure and solid. Now, perhaps our confusion about why this is here at all stems from the fact that we miss the significance, the absolute foundational importance of the twelve apostles, and the huge implications of Judas' betrayal.

[7 : 50] These events surely, and did, send shockwaves around Jerusalem. For all the first Christians, for the readers of Luke's account, big questions would have been raised about the very foundations of the church.

Judas' betrayal would have been all over your Facebook feed. And Luke is resisting their temptation to bury this. He's refusing to add this as a footnote buried away at the back, or he's refusing to put it down as fake news.

No, he deals with this right up front and center. He's 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, unstoppable 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 morning. First, in verses 12 to 20, we see that disheartening problems in Christ's church do remain, because sin is real.

[9 : 07] And then secondly, verses 21 to 26, we see also the definite progress of Christ's church is assured, because our Savior reigns. So firstly then, the disheartening problems in Christ's church do remain, because sin is real.

And we see in these verses, the shocking reality of sin and opposition to Jesus, even amongst those who are closest to him, even amongst his chosen apostles, there was fierce opposition. Now, you'll perhaps hear folk in the church today saying that what the church today really needs is to go back to being the first century church.

Well, here's the first century church, and it's a church full of problems. Rose-tinted spectacles are being firmly dismantled by Dr. Luke. So what is the presenting problem here?

What's the issue? Well, look at verses 12 to 14, and notice that we have a list of names. A quick primary school question here for you.

[10 : 13] How many names are given there in verse 13? Quickly top them up. And you'll see that there are 11. Now, what's the problem with that?

What's the problem with there only being 11 names? Well, flick back with me, just for one minute, to Luke's first volume, to his gospel. And Luke chapter 6, you'll find that on page 862.

Luke chapter 6 and verse 12. Now, remember from last week, we saw that Luke wrote both of these accounts, both his gospel and the acts. And his gospel, his first volume, records all that Jesus began to do and to teach.

And his acts account, part two, records all that Jesus continues to do and to teach. You could say that Luke's gospel is about God's kingdom established and his acts about God's kingdom extended. So here, back in his first volume, Luke chapter 6, verse 12, we see another list of names. Look on there to verse 14 of chapter 6. We see a list of names.

[11:20] And there are 12 names in Luke's list here. So there's one missing from his acts list there in chapter 1. And the name missing is Judas Iscariot.

He's the name missing from the acts list. So flipping back to Acts, we all know why. We know why there are only 11 names in the list in Acts.

It's because Judas not only died, we read about that in verses 18 and 19, not only did he die, but fundamentally, he betrayed the Lord Jesus. He betrayed him to be arrested.

Now, this betrayal poses a big problem. You see, these weren't a random group of men chosen by Jesus who happened to number 12. No, that there were 12 is very significant indeed.

They were chosen by Jesus to be his apostles, and they would, as we read later in Luke, one day sit in judgment over the 12 tribes of Israel.

[12:21] You flick on to Revelation chapter 21, which speaks of a new city of Jerusalem with 12 foundations. And each of those foundations has a name written on it.

And the name written on those 12 foundations is one of the 12 apostles, written to the very foundations of the new Jerusalem. 12 apostles to replace the 12 tribes.

These 12 men represented the new, renewed people of God in their fullness. And it was these 12 who had in particular seen all that Jesus did and all that he said.

They were visual witnesses to all that he did, to his miracles, his teaching, his death, his resurrection, his ascension. They were visual witnesses, but they were also verbally instructed by Jesus.

There were 40 days between his resurrection and his ascension, and he taught his apostles during those 40 days. You read about that earlier in the chapter. And at the end of his gospel, we read also that he opened their minds to understand the scriptures during those 40 days.

[13:34] And here again, in Acts chapter 1, verse 3, you read that Jesus was speaking to his apostles about the kingdom of God. So these apostles, not only were they visually seeing all that Jesus did, they were verbally instructed.

And they were also chosen by Jesus. And they were charged by him to go to the nations to be his witnesses. Witnesses to the sufferings of Christ.

Witnesses to his resurrection. Witnesses who would proclaim the implications of those events. proclaiming the repentance and forgiveness of sins. So these 12 men, they had a monumentally huge, significant task.

They were, they remain 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.

And they were unique. And there had to be 12. And it's the very first issue that Peter tackles here in the book of Acts when he stands up, verse 15, in front of that company of men and women.

[14:44] Verse 15. It's the first thing he tackles. The first thing he takes head on. He knows that it's a big issue. Not only because a replacement for Judas had to be found, but also because of the huge pain involved in what had happened.

Notice what Peter says about Judas there in verse 16. He says, Judas became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. For he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.

Judas had been one of the closest. He was in the inner circle, one of the 12. He shared in the ministry and he became a guide to those who would arrest Jesus and ultimately crucify him.

Can you imagine the great pain involved? Seeing somebody you rub shoulders with for three years. You've done ministry with them. Suddenly they've turned their back and they've betrayed Jesus.

Even here, amongst Christ's closest, the reality of sin is so apparent, isn't it? And it's disheartening.

[15:59] It's damaging. It's discouraging. But we shouldn't be surprised. Just look how Peter begins his speech. There in verse 16.

Brothers, the scriptures had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas. The scriptures had to be fulfilled.

It was the pattern and the plan that God's anointed would be persecuted and betrayed. That's the point that Peter makes. He's quoting from two psalms there in verse 20.

Psalms 69 and Psalm 109. And he's saying that these psalms looked ahead to the betrayal of Jesus by Judas. Now both of those psalms are written by David, the anointed king of Israel.

And in both of them, the enemies of David are in view. The great pain of betrayal and opposition is clear as you read through those psalms. And Peter is telling us, having spent 40 days with Jesus, being taught and how to interpret the scriptures, that these psalms looked ahead to the very events they've just witnessed.

[17 : 15] They looked ahead to God's ultimate anointed king. And he tells us that Judas fulfills those two psalms as he betrays the Christ. That was always the plan.

That had to happen. God's chosen Messiah would have to suffer. And he would be betrayed by one of those closest to him. So it was David, so it was with Jesus.

That's always the way for God's servants. The disheartening problems of sin in Christ's church remain today. See, even though at the beginning, even with one of Jesus' closest, sin was there. It persisted. And it persists to this day. Sin was not a unique problem to the early church. Down through the ages, sin has reared its ugly head right at the very center of the church.

Amongst leaders, amongst elders in the church, sin lurks. And it causes great damage. And Luke is being absolutely realistic about that here, isn't he?

[18 : 25] Realistic about the fact of sin, even there amongst the twelve. He doesn't hide it away. He doesn't gloss over it. He states it up front, clearly. He's realistic.

But he's also realistic about the fact, as we'll see in a moment, that it isn't fatal. But before we move on to our second point, two key implications of what we see here about the disheartening problems in the church.

Firstly, remember the reality of sin, even amongst the leaders of Christ's church. Remember the reality of sin. Sin was a reality right there at the very beginning of the Christian church, even amongst those closest to Jesus.

And so you and I need to be as realistic as Luke is about that fact, about sin, about gross public sins like Jesus, like Judas, even in the church, even amongst those who profess allegiance to him, and those who have roles of leadership in the church.

church. So let's not be naive. Let's not think that sin stands patiently at the front door there on Bar Street waiting for us to leave this place.

[19 : 37] No. We need to be realistic about the presence of sin, even amongst those in the church, even amongst the leaders. Luke's realistic and so should we. And the second implication flows from that.

So we need to be careful about how we think about our Christian leaders. You need to be careful about how you think about your leaders. Don't put them on pedestals.

They're bound to fall. Perhaps not as catastrophically as Judas does, but they are not sinless. And you and I need to be realistic. Luke's realistic and we ought to be as well.

Think of your pastor. Think about your small group leader. They're only human. They're flawed. And they are only under-shepherds of the great shepherd.

There is only one perfect shepherd, only one great, sinless pastor of his people. It's the Lord Jesus. And it's in him that our confidence should rest.

[20 : 42] He will never fall. He will never let us down. Our confidence must rest in him. That brings us to our second point this morning. We see secondly in verses 21 to 26, the definite progress of Christ's church is assured because our Savior reigns.

The definite progress of Christ's church is assured because our Savior reigns. All the events surrounding Jesus' betrayal, all the actions of Judas, they're very sobering, aren't they?

But they had to happen. As we've seen, that was part of the plan. And Jesus is in control. And so nothing, not even a betrayal like Judas's, would hinder the advance of the gospel.

As we've seen, the events surrounding Jesus' death, his betrayal, by one in whom he had invested massively in, that was all part of the plan.

Peter says that the scriptures had to be fulfilled. This was part of the plan. Jesus would have to suffer. But Jesus would also be vindicated.

[21 : 53] He would be raised from the dead. And we saw last time that not only was he raised from the dead, but he has ascended to heaven. He now reigns. He is the reigning Messiah there on this throne.

He is the one in whom all the promises and longings of the Old Testament have been fulfilled. He's reigning now from heaven, which is why despite the reality of sin in the church, you and I can take great confidence that the progress of Christ's church is definite.

Nothing can stop it because Christ reigns now. So not only was the betrayal of Jesus part of the plan, it was also unable to hinder the progress of the gospel.

And that's particularly what we see here in these verses. A replacement for Judas had to be found. someone who, verse 22, must become, along with the original 11, a witness to the resurrection. And Peter was confident that things would progress because what they were seeing, all they had witnessed was simply a fulfillment of what the Old Testament said would happen. What they were witnessing is the fulfillment of those psalms in verse 20.

[23 : 09] And so the task that Jesus has commanded them to, the task set out in chapter 1, verse 8, that task of witnessing to the ends of the earth by the gospel of Jesus Christ, that must go on.

Nothing's going to stand in the way of that. A new 12th man must be appointed. And that's exactly what happens. A replacement is found. 12 apostles to replace the 12 tribes representing the renewed people of God in its fullness.

And so out of a group of 120 disciples, Peter and the apostles 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, who had witnessed his life, his death, his resurrection, his ascension.

One who had been privy to his teaching, had to be a visual witness and one who had been verbally instructed and one who was chosen by Jesus. But why such criteria?

Why not just pick anyone? Well, the apostles' task was to be witnesses to the resurrection. That was their task.

[24 : 30] The apostles' role was unique, foundational to the church. And it needed to be someone who had seen with their own eyes and heard with their own ears all that Jesus had said and done. And it's clear through all of this that it's the Lord Jesus himself who directs the ongoing progress of his church.

In the face of sin amongst key leaders in the face of betrayal, in the face of disappointment, Jesus continues to lead the progress of his church.

He continues to reign over his people. Just notice the prayer there in verse 24. The apostles have narrowed it down to two men, to Justice and Matthias.

And they pray this, you, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show us which of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry.

The apostles know that the Lord Jesus is now reigning. He's in heaven. He's continuing to direct all that's happening. He is sovereign. And because he's sovereign, they pray, they ask him to show you which of these two men, both of whom are adequately qualified, which of these two is to be the 12th man, the 12th apostle.

[25 : 51] And so far from being disengaged and distant, Jesus is continuing to lead, to guide his church, choosing which disciple was to be one of the apostles who would join in the ranks of the other 11.

And it's Christ's continuing reign that guarantees the progress of the gospel without hindrance. it is his reign which ensures that his church will achieve his purposes.

But even though we know that Christ is reigning, he was then and is now, even though we know that, even though that gives us great assurance about the progress of the gospel, we also need to remember what we've seen in the first half of our passage this morning and also what we saw last week in terms of Jesus' timescales.

we need to be realistic. Back in chapter 1 verse 7, Jesus gives us the right perspective on his kingdom about when we can really expect it to come.

And are we to expect God's restored kingdom now? Well, Jesus says no. Last week, we saw that the task of the church is not to build the kingdom now, to build the restored kingdom now, but the task of the church is to proclaim the kingdom now.

[27 : 11] And so, we need to be realistic about how things will look now. And Luke is realistic. So, even though the progress of Christ's church is assured, it will take place amid suffering from without, as we see again and again as Acts goes on, but also from sin from within, as we've seen with Judas.

The progress of Christ's church is assured, but it takes place in the midst of reality. Sin exists, even in the very center of things. So, Christ's church, you and I will only be free from suffering and sin when Christ returns.

Only when the events of chapter 1, verse 11, come to be, will we be free of that. And that hasn't happened yet. We're still waiting for chapter 1, verse 11, to happen. And so Luke is writing 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 when they fall, the progress of Christ's church doesn't miss a stride.

He is in control. He was then and he remains so now. Now, these sort of problems, the problems we read about here, have always been in Christ's church and they will continue to be until the end, until he returns.

Sin remains a problem. We also need to remember that Christ's church will progress. It will go on unhindered. Nothing was going to stop that.

[28 : 53] Christ was in charge. He found a replacement for one of his twelve apostles and the church was given a firm foundation. So, two key implications as we close.

Two key implications. Firstly, Christ is in control now, no matter how things 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 by name particular examples, but I'm sure you can think of some. When a Christian leader, maybe recently or in the past, a Christian minister has let you down badly.

You feel it. And of course, it's right that we feel it. It's right that we feel grieved. But not to the point where it shipwrecks our faith.

Not to the point where it gives us reason to discredit the Christian faith wholesale. Christ is in control now. He will bring, he is bringing, chapter 1 verse 8 to fulfillment.

[30 : 04] He is bringing his gospel to the end of the earth. That is going on now. And nothing is going to stop that. I was reading just the other day that globally, 50,000 people are added to Christ's church every day.

90 million a year. the gospel is going to the ends of the earth. So the first implication is this. Christ is in control now.

He reigns now. So no matter how things look on the ground, we don't panic, even when Christian leaders fail and fall. The second implication, Christ was in control then.

So you can be sure about the foundation of the church. He's in control now, but he's also in control then. So you can be sure about the foundation of the church. It was Jesus who chose the twelve apostles.

It was he who chose the replacement for Judas. Even when one betrayed him, even when Judas handed him over, it was Jesus who found the replacement. And so we can have absolute confidence and certainty about the gospel itself.

[31 : 19] We can have confidence and certainty because the church was built on a foundation of twelve men who lived with Jesus. They talked with him.

They ate with him. They watched him suffer and die. They also spent forty days with him after his resurrection. Forty days of instruction in the scriptures from the Lord himself.

He has given his church an absolutely solid foundation. salvation. Remember who these twelve apostles were. They're solid, reliable witnesses to all that Jesus did and claimed to be.

Witnesses to his resurrection. An historical event so well attested to that the only credible explanation for it is that it is what the Bible states. Jesus did actually rise from the dead.

It's the only credible explanation. resurrection. One well-known Japanese writer said this, if we don't believe in the resurrection, we will be forced to believe that what did hit the apostles was some other amazing event different in kind yet of equal force in its electrifying intensity.

[32 : 33] If we try to explain the changed lives of the early Christians, we may find ourselves making even greater leaps of faith than if we believed in the resurrection itself. And so I'll ask you, if you haven't yet considered the evidence, if you haven't yet read the Bible as an adult, will you?

Will you consider the evidence? It has a solid foundation. Will you invest in time to meet a friend, maybe over a coffee, and together read one of the accounts of Jesus' life?
Will you come to the Mark drama in a few weeks and see one of those accounts of Jesus' life being acted in front of you? Perhaps you've written off Christianity.
What have you got to lose? If you're right, if Christianity's got nothing to it, you've got nothing to lose. You might even get one or two nice coffees out of it.
but if you're wrong, if the apostles, if their witness is right, if it's true, if Jesus is really who he claimed to be, if he really was God's son, if he really did die on that cross, if he really did rise again, if he really is reigning in heaven right now, if he really is coming back as judge one day, which chapter 1 verse 11 tells us he is, if you're wrong about that, then what have you got to lose?
[34 : 17] Well, you've got everything to lose. Our passage teaches us that Christ was in control then, so we can be sure about the foundations of the church now.
It is worth serious consideration. Luke wrote his account, he wrote these words so that you and I can have certainty about Jesus, about his gospel, about the witness of his church.
And these events, they call us to repentance and to the obedience of faith. So will you consider the evidence seriously? And will you have this as your solid foundation?
No matter what's going on, no matter if a Christian leader falls, your foundation is on this. Amen. Let me pray.
Our heavenly father, how we thank you that you have given us a rock solid basis. You've given us the witness of the apostles.
[35 : 45] we can have absolute certainty about the life of Jesus, his death, his resurrection, and the explanation of those events.
And so help us father, to ground ourselves in these facts, in the solid, reliable evidence of your word. Help us not to be moved by that.
And help us to consider and to respond in faith. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.