

Waiting for Promises Made

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[0 : 00] Thanks so much for praying, Neil, for reading, Michelle. Let me add my welcome this morning. My name's Archie. I'm one of the ministry trainees here at Brunfield. Can I encourage you to have your Bibles open, if you don't already, at Acts chapter 1, maybe as you turn there or dust it off the shelf.

Let me ask a question. What's the biggest promise that anyone has ever made you? Katie, my wife and I, we were both at Glasgow University together.

And a couple of years ago, it was around Christmas time, we decided we'd go back, have a little look around, relive some of our memories. I don't know if you've ever been to Glasgow University, but it is an incredible place.

The main building there in particular is beautiful. And at that time of year, at Christmas, they light up the cloisters. So Katie and I, we arrive, would you believe it, there are even bagpipes playing in the background outside the chapel.

And I had the ring in my pocket, you see. I knew that that was the day that I was going to propose. I hadn't really thought through actually how or where or when, but right there in the cloisters, it was beautiful.

[1 : 09] It just seemed perfect. So there and then, I asked Katie to marry me. Obviously, she said yes. We're now married. And in a sense, in that moment, we promised ourselves to one another.

But then we had eight months of waiting. That's the thing with promises, isn't it? They very often come with this period of waiting.

And what we do as we wait can be really significant. I haven't actually counted them myself, but I'm told that there are over 9,000 promises in the Bible.

But do you know, the two promises that we find in Acts chapter 1, those two promises that we saw with Alistair last week, I think they are two of the most significant promises in the Bible for us today. So let's just quickly revisit those. One of the promises we saw last week was that Jesus' followers were to wait for the coming Holy Spirit. Have a look at verse 4 of chapter 1 with me.

[2 : 10] See what Jesus promised there. It says, So the Father has promised that though Jesus is going to ascend to heaven, he will send the Holy Spirit in his place.

What exactly does that mean? Well, have a look at verse 8. This is a key verse for the entire book, really, which is why we're revisiting it. Verse 8. So the promised Holy Spirit is coming, and he is coming to give Jesus' followers the power that they need to see the gospel heard across the world. And so in our passage today, Jesus has ascended, he's returned to heaven, and this is where we find Jesus' followers. They are waiting for the promised Holy Spirit.

But of course, we today, we're not waiting for the Holy Spirit anymore, are we? No, he's already come for us. But chapter 1 contains another incredible promise.

Have a look at verse 11. This same Jesus who has been taken from you into heaven will come back in the same way you have seen him go.

[3 : 38] So just as these believers in the first century were waiting for the Holy Spirit to come, so today we wait for Jesus to return. And our big question then this morning is, what does it mean to wait well?

First couple of verses in our passage, verses 12 to 14, give us two principles for waiting well. And then the rest of our passage, verses 15 to 26, give us a sort of worked out example of how to implement those two principles when difficult decisions of life need to be made.

So first of all, what does it look like to wait well? I was thinking a little bit as I was preparing this sermon about what I do generally when I'm waiting for things. I don't know if you've noticed this. It's something I'm definitely guilty of.

Whenever I'm standing in a queue, or to be honest, just whenever I'm on my own really, what's the temptation? We just get out our phone, don't we? That's what we do when we wait today, I think. It's just what people do these days when they wait. It's certainly what I do when I wait. But what do Jesus' followers do as they wait in our passage? Well, they are obedient to Jesus, and they are dependent on Jesus.

[4 : 50] They are obedient, and they are dependent. Have a look at verse 12 with me. What does it say? Then they returned to Jerusalem. Just notice, this is the first thing that these followers do.

See, Jerusalem wasn't home for them, at least for many of these believers. Jerusalem wasn't their home. Many of them were from Capernaum and Galilee, way up in the north.

And yet they go back to Jerusalem. Why? Why did they do that? Why don't they go home? Well, do you remember what Jesus said in verse 4? Do not leave Jerusalem.

That was his command to them. And so right off the bat, these followers are being obedient to Jesus' word in their waiting. Now, you see, it's a short walk from the Mount of Olives where Jesus has ascended to heaven.

It's a short walk from there back into the city. And when they get there, have a look at verse 13.

They went upstairs to the room where they were staying. So I think it's worth asking, who are we actually talking about here?

[5 : 55] Who is they? Who are these believers? Well, you see in the rest of verse 13, Luke names the remaining apostles. And I take it he does that to emphasize that actually there are only 11 left.

Because Judas Iscariot, who is the apostle who's not named here, he's betrayed Jesus. So he's no longer with them. We'll return to that later. It's important. We'll see why it's here later.

But then at the end of verse 14, do you notice who else is there? The woman and Mary, the mother of Jesus and with his brothers. So there are the women here, probably those who witnessed the empty tomb, as well as Jesus's closest family.

And so all of these believers, they're all there in Jerusalem being obedient to Jesus's word. His command to stay in Jerusalem as they wait for the promised Holy Spirit.

But what does it mean for us to be obedient to Jesus as we wait for him to return today? Well, first and foremost, I think it is by seeking to follow God's word, to be obedient to the scriptures, to live as Christians in this world.

[7 : 07] I think that means to be distinctive in that way. And often, certainly in my experience, that means going against our natural instinct. It means going outside of our comfort zone.

See, everything inside the believers in our passage would have been screaming out for them to go home. But they stay in Jerusalem. Why? Because Jesus asked them to.

And sometimes going against our instinct can be deeply uncomfortable, can't it? It might mean standing up for someone who's being bullied in the office at work. Or stopping and having a chat with the homeless person on the street.

Or being prepared to stand up for Christian ethics in a tricky conversation with an old friend. Being obedient to Jesus can very often mean going against our natural instinct.

Refusing to stay in our comfort zone. Being obedient to God's word. Being obedient to God's word. But back in our passage, what are this group of believers actually doing as they wait in obedience?

[8 : 16] Well, they're depending on Jesus. Have a look at verse 14. They all joined together constantly in prayer. See, at the very heart of waiting well is prayer.

It is how they express their dependence on the risen and reigning Christ. And do you notice two things about the way that they pray? Firstly, they do so together.

And this togetherness is more than simply being in one place at one time. Doing the same sort of thing as each other. The word, it means something much closer to being united. This group of believers are absolutely united together in their prayer.

And really what they're united around is the core truth that Jesus died to rescue them. That he then rose again. That he has now ascended to reign from heaven.

In other words, it is their faith in Jesus that unites them together as one people. And so it is to him, the one who unites them, that they are praying.

[9 : 27] It's to him that they commune with their Lord and their Savior. If you're here and you're in the building or if you're watching this at home and you don't know Jesus, can I just speak to you in particular for a minute or two?

Because this is really what is at the heart of the Christian faith. There are lots of conversations out there at the moment going on about what Christianity might look like.

About what we might say about various moralities. Or about how faith and society ought to interact with each other. But can I plead with you?

Can I urge you to just set those things aside? And see something instead really very simple. And really quite wonderful about this man, Jesus.

See, the claim is that he is the God of this universe. And that he stooped down. That he became a man. And that the very reason that he did that was to invite you to commune with him.

[10:32] To have a relationship with him because he loves you. Knowing that, that very simple truth about Jesus, it might just change everything.

And maybe for us as a church. Looking around at the wider Christian culture around us, or even as we look around us here at Brunsfield, I think it's really worth us remembering this.

That we have been united in Christ Jesus. It's so easy, isn't it, to forget that we've been called to pray together out of that unity. And so praying to and communing with Jesus together as we do that. Because it is him, he is the Lord and Savior around whom we are united as his church. Have a look back at verse 14 with me and notice the second thing about how these believers pray.

They all join together constantly in prayer. So they pray together and they pray constantly as they wait for the coming Holy Spirit. They persevere in their prayer, in other words.

[11:38] They keep at it. Because they're clinging to Jesus in total dependence. So what does it mean for us to persevere in prayer?

To pray constantly as we await Jesus' return? I think if you're anything like me, then very often you will be tempted to give up on prayer.

When it doesn't feel as though God is listening. As though your prayers make no difference.

Remember who we pray to. This is the God of the universe.

He can literally move mountains. And so what do we do? Well for many of us here at Brunsfield, it helps doesn't it to come along to the prayer meeting on a Monday night or a Thursday night.

Maybe that time doesn't work for you. But maybe it just means praying together as we gather on a Sunday. Maybe especially at our monthly prayer gathering. Or praying in your small groups.

[12:34] Or with a Christian friend. Or with your family. Maybe for you it means praying out loud. Maybe it simply means praying in your head. Whatever works for you. Friends, please just keep at it.

Apparently Martin Luther said something along these lines. To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing.

Friends, don't ever give up on prayer. Because by our prayer we are clinging to Jesus and depending on him. So here are two principles that this group of believers held as they waited for the coming Holy Spirit.

They were obedient to him and they were dependent on him. And today we wait on the promised return of Jesus. And as we do so, we too can be obedient to him and dependent on him.

I think that is waiting well. But as we wait well, there will be times when real life requires us to make difficult decisions.

[13:44] I wonder if you've ever played the game Would You Rather. It's a silly game really. I think they're playing it actually up in embassy as we speak. But here's how it goes. Would you rather have toes on your hands or fingers on your feet?

Would you rather fight a thousand mouse-sized horses or one horse-sized mouse? Difficult decisions. Now these are obviously ridiculous.

Those are impossible decisions. But very often in life we are faced with difficult decisions where the way forward doesn't seem immediately obvious. That might be a small thing like whether to work late or even just what to have for dinner.

It might be a bigger decision like a career change or a house move. Sometimes our decisions even have massive impacts on other people. Whether to get married.

Who or where to give your money. And the remaining verses of our passage then offer a very real and difficult decision that these believers had to make.

[14:47] And they also offer us a lived out example of how to be obedient to and dependent on Jesus as we make those decisions. And we see in verse 15 that what's going on here is happening in those days.

Which I take it just means in this period of waiting between Jesus' ascending to heaven and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. And it also tells us there in verse 15 that there are about 120 believers in Jerusalem at that time.

So you've got this relatively big group of believers and they've been gathering together in obedience and dependence. And as they've done so, one of the apostles, Peter, seems to have noticed something in Scripture.

And it is something that requires them to make a difficult decision. Do you see that? Do you see what he says? Have a look at verse 16. Brothers and sisters, the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas, who served as a guide for those who arrested Jesus.

So what's Peter saying? Well, he's saying that David, the Old Testament king, at some point in Scripture has said something about what would happen to Judas.

[16:05] But what Scripture is Peter actually talking about? Well, luckily, he tells us. Have a look at verse 20. It is written in the book of Psalms, May his place be deserted.

Let there be no one to dwell in it. And may another take his place of leadership. Now, the Psalms were sort of like the prayer book of the early church.

And so as they gathered together in prayer, they're rooted in the Psalms. And in them, Peter sees Judas's betrayal.

He sees that the betrayal was foretold, that his place would be deserted. And he also sees that it was foretold that he would have to be replaced, that another would have to take his place.

And I think it might seem a little bit random to us, the way that Peter uses the Psalms here. But I really do think we can make sense of it. So bear with me. See, these Psalms that Peter quotes from, Psalm 69 and Psalm 109, Jesus uses those Psalms in the Gospel to explain what is going to happen to him.

[17:09] In fact, they're some of the most quoted Psalms in the New Testament. And if you think about how Jesus uses the Old Testament, in Luke's Gospel, for example, on the road to Emmaus, the risen Jesus, he explains to two of his followers how the Old Testament foreshadowed him and what he'd come to do.

And so in those 40 days between Jesus's resurrection and his ascension back to heaven, I suspect that he would have been teaching the apostles and the early believers in a similar sort of way, showing them how to handle the Old Testament, how to see its fulfillment in him.

And so because of that, I think it's no surprise that Peter has noticed here the need for this scripture to be fulfilled concerning Judas. Maybe Jesus even showed him it himself.

And in seeing that, he notices that they have a difficult decision to make. And in addressing that difficult decision, what is he being if not obedient to Christ and his word?

We will return to that difficult decision in a moment. But our passage, it gives us the fulfillment of both of those in it. And one of the fulfillments is a little bit of a tangent, I think, from the thread of the passage.

[18:27] But it's worth going there with Luke, the author of this book, because Luke, the diligent historian, he gives us the result of Judas's betrayal, the desertion, as it is, of his place as an apostle.

And it's pretty graphic in verses 18 and 19. With the reward he got for his wickedness, Judas bought a field. There he fell headlong.

His body burst open and all his intestines spilled out. Everyone in Jerusalem heard about this. So they called that field in their language, akaldama, that is, field of blood.

Now that might be in brackets in your Bible. And that's because it's not part of Peter's speech. It's, like we said, a sort of editorial insert from Luke. And he does that sometimes. We'll come across it through this book.

But what he's doing is simply showing here how the scripture that Peter is referring to has been fulfilled. And I think it's worth us going there too and just thinking for a moment in this tangent about Judas's death.

[19:33] I'm beginning by saying that, quite importantly, I think, I'm not sure this is how it had to end for Judas. See, in some ways there's very little difference between Judas's betrayal of Jesus and Peter, his denial of him.

And the biggest and most important difference there is repentance. Peter denied Jesus, but his genuine heartfelt repentance led him back to his savior. Judas, on the other hand, may have deeply regretted his choice to betray Jesus. But instead of that leading him to return, it drove him away. And ultimately, here we see it drove him to death, tragically, to suicide. Just a note here to say that we really recognize the pain of that here, of suicide. The feeling that you've had enough of this world. That you no longer want to be here. Or that you're no longer wanted here. Maybe you or someone you know has or is battling with that. [20 : 43] And if that's you, please speak to us. We'd love as a church to do what we can to help you. And do as well, please stay plugged in, tuned in here at Brunsfield.

This summer we're going to be working through the book of Job. And hopefully that will equip us as we think about this issue together. Judas's story, though, it didn't need to end this way. See, he could have repented. But what did have to happen was that he had to be removed from the office of apostle. He had to vacate his possession. He had to make way for another to be chosen in his place. And that's what we see here. But come back to the thread of the passage with me for the second fulfillment of those scriptures, which is choosing a 12th apostle to replace Judas.

This is the difficult decision we've been talking about. See in verse 21. It is necessary to choose. See, the way that the scripture is fulfilled here is through the obedience of God's people. [21 : 50] And what are the criteria here for this replacement apostle? Well, have a look at the rest of verse 21 and 22 with me. He has got to be one of the men who has been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us.

For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection. In other words, the mark of an apostle, the qualification required, is that they must be someone who has been with Jesus from the beginning of his ministry and witnessed his resurrection. Now, the word apostle simply means messenger of good news. But for the early church, the office or the role or the charge of the apostle, it was unique to that time. A capital A apostle, if you like. And so just a brief aside to say that we might see those in churches today who would claim to call themselves apostles. And being charitable, I think it's very likely that they're simply trying to describe themselves as messengers of good news. But in my view, I think it would be wise to be wary of the use of apostle in that way today, certainly where it's used as a title.

[23 : 07] Because it seems clear to me that the title apostle was unique, unique to those who were qualified in their witnesses of Jesus's life and his resurrection, and also unique in that they were chosen to be the foundation of Christ's church.

Back in our passage, in order to make an obedient choice, then, they needed to choose one who fit the bill. This very specific criteria.

But there are 120 believers there. I suppose there must have been at least a handful of those who met that criteria. Indeed, in verse 23, two are proposed, aren't they? Who fit this criteria. And so one of them has to be chosen. This office of apostle. So it's unique, not only to those who are qualified, but also unique to those who are chosen. But how did they choose? Faced with this decision where there seemed to be more than one good possible option, what did they do? Well, have a look at verse 24. Then they prayed.

[24 : 10] And notice their prayer. It isn't long. It isn't flowery. It isn't mystical. Continuing in verse 24, their prayer. Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry.

They simply ask Jesus to help. They depend on him. And what happens? Does Jesus then speak to them out of the sky, out of the clouds, or appear to them in some way like a ghost to answer their question?

No. What happens? Does he help? Does he answer them? Well, he sort of does. See what happens in verse 26. They cast lots to make the final decision.

Casting lots. It's like drawing straws or rolling a dice or simply tossing a coin. And so there's no doubt here that God is in that decision. Throughout the Old Testament, people cast lots as a means of making God-informed decisions.

But there are a couple of important caveats to make here before we all start tossing coins over every decision we have to make in life. Firstly, the believers here, before they do anything, they consult scripture and they pray.

[25 : 22] In other words, they are obedient and dependent. And it's only once they've done that that they then cast lots. But secondly, this is actually the last and only time a decision is made in this way in the New Testament.

Many would say that the coming of the Holy Spirit essentially removed the need to make coin toss decisions, because spirit-filled believers will be guided in their decisions by him.

And I'm sure that there is some truth to that. Maybe some of us have even experienced the truth of that. But it's certainly my experience, maybe it is yours too, that making decisions in life, whether they're big or small, having searched scripture in obedience to him, having prayed about it in dependence on him, I'm very often, nevertheless, left with more than one possible path.

And in my view, if we are depending on him, if we are obedient to him, sometimes we will still just have to make a decision to pick a path.

This doesn't mean that we should be making every decision at the flip of a coin and then claiming that that is God's will for our life. Of course it doesn't mean that. But if we have searched scripture, and if we have prayed, and only if we've done those things first, at some point we might just have to make a decision and trust that whatever happens, Jesus is right there with us.

[26 : 51] That's what this group of believers seem to do. And I think that the way that they make that difficult decision is a wonderful example of waiting well, by being obedient to Jesus and his word, and by depending on him.

When I proposed, when Katie said yes that day in Glasgow, I was at that time living down south, somewhere near Oxford. But Katie was still up here.

She still lived actually quite close to Glasgow. And do you know, it was a pretty tough eight months, not being able to see each other very often. That wasn't always easy. But imagine how it must have been for this group of believers, desperately trying to cling to Jesus as they wait for the Holy Spirit to arrive.

And how do they do that? Well, they are obedient to Jesus' word, and they are dependent to him in prayer. And as we wait for Jesus to return, in every decision of life, will we do the same?

Let me pray. Heavenly Father, thank you so much for your word. Thank you that through it we see you make wonderful promises, and that in it we see some of those promises wonderfully fulfilled.

[28 : 18] Lord, I pray that as we wait for that final promise of your return, that we might be a group of believers who are marked by our obedience to you, and who are known for our dependence on you.

We pray in your son's precious name. Amen. Thank you. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.

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