

Main Idea: We learn from the early Christians in Acts 1:12-26 that waiting for the promise of God does not lead to inactivity, but involves three activities.

- I. Waiting involves praying (12-14).
 - A. We meet the people.
 1. The apostles were there.
 2. Other believers were there, too.
 - B. We discover their priorities (14).
 1. We need each other.
 2. We need the Lord.
- II. Waiting involves pondering Scripture (15-20).
 - A. They looked to God’s Word to interpret problems (15-19).
 1. Judas betrayed Jesus.
 2. Judas was one of us.
 3. Judas killed himself.
 4. Everybody has heard about it!
 - B. They looked to God’s Word to respond to problems (20).
 1. We must not live in the past.
 2. We must take steps to move ahead.
- III. Waiting involves preparing for the mission (21-26).
 - A. They identified a need (21-22).
 1. The decision wasn’t pragmatic.
 2. It had to do with their mission.
 - B. They took steps to meet the need (23-26).
 1. They proposed (23).
 2. They prayed (24-25).
 3. They picked (26).

Make It Personal: When waiting on God...

1. Am I believing that God will do what He said He would do?
2. Am I doing what God told me to do?

Scripture Reading: John 14:15-21

Waiting is hard. Most people don’t like to wait, especially in our fast paced Western world. We’re prone to get bent out of shape if we’re stuck behind a car turning left at an intersection and have to sit through an extra cycle in the traffic light rotation.

We like action. We like to feel like we’re accomplishing something. And that’s fine in its place, but the inescapable fact is that at times the Lord calls on us to *wait*.

On the day Jesus returned to heaven, He gave the apostles a very specific instruction. “Do not leave Jerusalem, but *wait* for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit (4-5).”

Why did Jesus make His followers wait? He had just given them a mission to accomplish, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (8).” But then He told them to *wait* before seeking to fulfill the mission.

Stay, wait, receive, then go—in that order. That’s what He told them to do. Before the “going” could occur, they needed to stay in Jerusalem, wait for the promise, and receive the Holy Spirit.

^{**}Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For an earlier development of this text, see the Acts series preached at WBC in 2001.

On the one hand, the reason for the waiting is obvious. There was no way they could fulfill this mission on their own. And they weren't to tackle it until the Holy Spirit had come. He is the source of power that makes the fulfillment of the mission possible.

But why didn't Jesus send the Holy Spirit immediately after He ascended to heaven? Why did He make His followers wait for the promise?

Take it a step further. What does it mean to *wait on the Lord*? What are we supposed to do while we're waiting on the Lord?

We can learn much from Acts 1:12-26. One thing is for sure. Waiting on the Lord isn't synonymous with inactivity. The disciples didn't take a ten day nap between Jesus' ascension and the Holy Spirit's arrival. The text makes it clear they devoted themselves to three very important activities while they were waiting.

There will be seasons when God invites us to wait on Him. Those can be hard times for us. We want to do something, or at least see *God* do something.

Yet those can be very meaningful times. How so? It can be if we view the time of waiting, not as a phase of inactivity, but one of preparation—as Jesus' followers did in Acts 1.

Indeed, in Acts 1:12-26 the early Christians prepared themselves for the fulfillment of the Savior's promise by engaging in very specific activities. I notice at least three in the narrative. We learn that waiting on the Lord is the perfect time for three activities.

I. Waiting involves praying (12-14).

Our text states, "Then they returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city. When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers."

The waiting period lasted ten days. We know that because the Holy Spirit came on the Jewish holiday called Pentecost, or the Feast of Weeks. Pentecost occurred fifty days after Passover. Since Jesus returned to heaven forty days after the resurrection, which occurred at Passover, there must have been a ten-day waiting period for them.

By the way, the timing of the Holy Spirit's coming was certainly not coincidental, as James Boice explains, "When we recognize that the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, that Pentecost was the Feast of Weeks, and that the Feast of Weeks was the time in the Jewish year when the first sheaves of the harvest were presented, we see that the timing is symbolic. The early Christians, who were Jews well-steeped in Old Testament traditions, also undoubtedly understood the symbolic timing—once it had happened. They understood that the blessing they experienced at Pentecost, when thousands of people believed and came into the church, was only the first-fruit of a much greater response that they were to see as that same gospel was preached in Jerusalem, then in Judea and Samaria, and eventually to the far reaches of the world."²

The harvest would come, but not yet. For now, they waited.

Where? According to Jesus' instructions, they returned to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives which was a "Sabbath days' walk" (about three-quarters of a mile). Luke clarifies this information for his friend and recipient of this book, Theophilus, since apparently Theophilus was unfamiliar with the geography of Jerusalem.

² James Boice, p. 30.

Once inside the city wall, the disciples made their way to an upper room. It must have been a large room, since according to verse 15 it accommodated 120 people. Some have identified it as a room in the house of John Mark's mother mentioned in Acts 12:12. It's quite possible that this room is where Jesus observed the Last Supper with the apostles and then appeared to them after His resurrection.

The Greek text says they went to "*the* upper room." It's not just any upper room. If, indeed, this was *the* upper room, it's fitting that the Holy Spirit was given in the very same room that Jesus promised Him.

And there they waited. Who specifically was there? In verses 13-14...

A. We meet the people. Luke mentions first of all that...

1. *The apostles were there.* The men Jesus chose to be His representatives and to whom He delegated His authority. Luke names the eleven men—Peter, John, James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. But they weren't alone...

2. *Other believers were there, too.* What other believers? In verse 14, Luke says some "women" were there, including Mary the mother of Jesus. It's likely the number also included Mary Magdalene, Mary the wife of Clopas, Mary and Martha, and Salome.

Luke also mentions Jesus' "brothers" were there, too. That's a reference to the Lord's biological siblings. Remember, Joseph and Mary had several other children whose names are listed in Mark 6:3—James, Joses, Judas, and Simon. Of course, though they didn't believe in Jesus during His earthly ministry, James and Judas (Jude) later did believe and became instrumental church leaders. The fact that Jesus' "brothers" were there in the upper room is a testimony of the power of Jesus to change skeptics into believers!

Altogether, the number of the disciples was about 120, as verse 15 plainly states. Who else was there? Perhaps Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, Lazarus, and the Emmaus disciples were there. And dozens of others who remain anonymous to us.

Now let's ponder that number for a moment. The church started with *only* 120 people. Barclay says there were about 4 million Jews living in Israel at the time, which means that fewer than 1 in 30,000 were Christians.³

Remember that when you feel outnumbered at school, young people. Keep that in mind when the critics at the office ridicule your "narrow-minded" Christianity. The first believers were but a handful, but they were zealous for the Master and the mission He'd given them.

And so must we be.

A lot of people would have a low view of 120 people. One such man came to Charles Spurgeon once, a pastor who was complaining about the small size of his congregation. Spurgeon's pointed reply was that perhaps the man had as many people as he cared to give account for in the day of judgment.⁴

Don't minimize small numbers. Little is much when God is in it. If you doubt that, remember the small company of believers that once occupied an upper room. They didn't stay small for long. Indeed, their number would explode to 3,000 the following week.

But not yet. This was a time of preparation, of *waiting*.

³ William Barclay, p. 15.

⁴ In John MacArthur, *Acts*, p. 30.

Do you think it was easy for them to wait? You say, “Well, what else could they do besides wait?” The fact is, they could have done the same things we’re prone to do. They could have gone to their own homes and returned to business as usual. Or they might have rushed ahead saying, “There’s a world to reach out there! We can’t afford to wait!”

But they did wait just like the Savior told them. If you’re going through a “waiting” period, know this. The sovereign Lord knows what He is doing. It’s not a waste of time. He’s preparing you.

“But what am I supposed to do in the mean time?” you ask.

What did the early believers do? How did they pass their time? Here’s the answer. *They prayed.*

Did you realize that the church was birthed in a prayer meeting? Verse 14 says, “They all joined together constantly in prayer.”

John Bunyan once wrote, “He who runs from God in the morning will scarcely find Him the rest of the day.”

It is said that Mary, queen of Scotland, once said, “I fear John Knox's prayers more than an army of ten thousand men.”

Sidlow Baxter said, "Men may spurn our appeals, reject our message, oppose our arguments, despise our persons -- but they are helpless against our prayers."

A time of waiting is an excellent time to discover a person’s priorities. So it was for the charter members of the soon-to-be established church.

B. We discover their priorities (14). The statement, “They all joined together constantly in prayer,” says much about the priorities that should govern the church. I see the believers modeling two essential priorities for us here.

1. *We need each other.* “They all joined *together* constantly in prayer.” Or as the KJV puts it, they continued “with one accord.”

Here we see the first indication of a trademark that characterized the church throughout Acts. They were devoted to each other. As followers of Christ they possessed a new loyalty, a loyalty greater than family loyalty. They saw themselves as a family, and indeed they were. They were the family of God, the *church*.

For these followers of Christ, spending time together was a high priority. Fellowship was more important than work. It superseded family ties. Acts 2 states they devoted themselves to the *fellowship* (42). They had everything in common (44). They cared for the practical needs of others at personal expense (45). And they met together *daily* (46).

Is that how you view church? Church isn’t where we *go*. It’s who we *are*. That’s why we must pray for the church, give to the church, and make its attendance a priority.

We’re going to do something this spring to help us put this into action. We’re going to launch what we’re calling *community groups* which will meet weekly in homes during March, April, and May. And then we’ll evaluate them. You’ll be invited to sign up for a group and you’ll have the opportunity to get to know and grow in Christ with some brothers and sisters. Be watching for details.

Friends, the first reason we need the church is because we need each other. There’s a second reason, which drives the first, which the believers modeled for us in verse 14.

2. *We need the Lord.* “They all joined together constantly *in prayer*.” Please realize they were not praying for the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Jesus didn’t tell them to pray for that, but to wait for it. They didn’t need to ask the Holy Spirit to come any more than we do. His coming was a historical event that the Father promised and then fulfilled.

Why then did they pray? Because they knew what we're prone to forget. *We need the Lord. We desperately need the Lord!*

Scan the book of Acts and you'll quickly discover this. The early church was a *praying church*. What were they doing on the Day of Pentecost? Praying.⁵ What did the church do after Pentecost? Acts 2:42 says they devoted themselves to prayer.

Not long after, Peter and John were arrested. What did the church do after their release? Acts 4:24 says they *prayed*. In Acts 6:4 the apostles said, "We will give our attention to *prayer* and the ministry of the word." We see Stephen praying in Acts 7:59. When Peter was again thrown in prison, we see the church praying earnestly in Acts 12:5.

As the story goes, five young college students were spending a Sunday in London, so they went to hear the famed C.H. Spurgeon preach. While waiting for the doors to open, the students were greeted by a man who asked, "Gentlemen, let me show you around. Would you like to see the heating plant of this church?" They were not particularly interested, for it was a hot day in July. But they didn't want to offend the stranger, so they consented. The young men were taken down a stairway, a door was quietly opened, and their guide whispered, "This is our heating plant." Surprised, the students saw 700 people bowed in prayer, seeking a blessing on the service that was soon to begin in the auditorium above. Softly closing the door, the gentleman then introduced himself. It was none other than Charles Spurgeon.⁶

Beloved, is praying with other believers a priority to you? It's sad, but in many churches prayer meetings are the *least* attended services. Not so in the early church. They joined together *constantly in prayer*. And they did so because they knew they needed each other, but ultimately they needed the Lord.

When it comes to waiting on the Lord, here's the first critical activity. Waiting involved praying.

II. Waiting involves pondering Scripture (15-20).

Notice verse 15, "In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty) and said, "Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled."

Stop there. What did the believers do while waiting for Pentecost? They didn't just sit around. First, they prayed. Then secondly, they pondered the Scriptures.

They had to. Jesus was now gone. When He was with them, if they needed direction, what did they do? They asked Him! And He told them what to do.

But now He's gone. They can't hear Him speak any longer. So what do we see them doing when they want to know His will? The same thing we must do. Ponder the Scriptures.

In verses 15-20 we discover a problem that faced Jesus' followers and what they did about it. They looked to God's Word for two things...

A. They looked to God's Word to interpret problems (15-19). Here's what happened, verse 15, "In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty)."

Notice that Peter assumed the role of leader. But notice also how he addressed the believers in verse 16, "Brothers." There's a wonderful balance here. Is there leadership in the church? Yes. But hierarchy? No.

⁵ Acts 2:1 says they were meeting together (and we can assume praying together) on the Day of Pentecost.

⁶ *Our Daily Bread*, April 24.

In verse 16 Peter speaks, “Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus.”

Please notice the approach that Peter takes in dealing with the problem. He doesn’t give his own opinion. He refers to Scripture. Even Peter, contrary to the teaching of Rome, does not possess inherent authority. He, too, is subject to the Scriptures.

Peter is going to quote two Old Testament texts, both from Psalms. But don’t miss a couple of insights regarding the nature of Scripture mentioned by Peter. On the one hand he refers to Scripture as that “which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago.” On the other hand, he says the Scripture came “through the mouth of David.”

Both are true. The Scriptures came through human instruments like David, but ultimately, they came from the Holy Spirit. In fact, Peter attests that the same Spirit they’re waiting for is the One who spoke through David.

The problem that needed attention pertained to the subject of Judas. This was a major “publicity” problem for the early church. How could they make sense of what happened to Judas, let alone explain it to others? You can imagine the potential objections.

“If Jesus was truly the Messiah, why didn’t Judas—a man who saw Him firsthand for three years—believe in Him? If Jesus couldn’t convince one of His own followers He was the Messiah, why should I trust Him?”

And then there’s the problem of evil. “Why did God let Judas betray His own Son? Why didn’t God do something about it? Why do bad things happen in this world anyway? How can I believe in God if He can’t prevent evil?”

Yes, when it came to the Judas subject, the church had a potential problem on its hands. What could they do about it? Here’s what they did. They looked to God’s Word to interpret their problem. Through the grid of the Scriptures, Peter clarified four things about Judas.

1. *Judas betrayed Jesus.* Peter says he “served as guide for those who arrested Jesus (16).” Tragic, yet true, Judas instigated the unthinkable plot.

2. *Judas was one of us.* “He was one of our number and shared in this ministry (17).” Judas preached, healed, did miracles, and helped people. For three years, he looked like a true apostle. He sounded genuine and looked genuine. He fooled the crowds and even the other apostles. Apparently, he even fooled himself.

Peter knew Judas firsthand and said of him, “He was *one of our number.*”

Realize this. Associating with Christians doesn’t make someone a Christian. Even doing “Christian” things doesn’t make someone a Christian. Judas did both. To be a Christian, a person must receive Christ for the reason He came, to save us from our sins.

Judas did not. He hung around Jesus hoping to get something else out of Jesus, which Jesus did not give him. So in the end...

3. *Judas killed himself.* Verse 18, “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.”

Judas himself, of course, didn’t buy the field. He took the money and threw it into the Temple prior to hanging himself. The chief priests picked it up, and since it was blood money decided to use it to buy a field as a burial place for foreigners (Matt 27:5-7).

Apparently, after hanging himself, either the rope broke or the knot came untied, and Judas’s body fell to the ground, his intestines spilling out. A tragic ending to a tragic life.

4. *Everybody has heard about it!* “Everyone in Jerusalem heard about this, so they called that field in their language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.”

Peter says that *everybody in Jerusalem* knew about this problem. So he dealt with it head-on. That's what we need to do with problems that might hinder our message. *Deal with them.*

How? Like Peter did. By searching the Scriptures. The text indicates that while waiting, Peter investigated God's Word to interpret the problem of Judas. In verse 20 we hear him sharing what he discovered, which highlights a second thing the early church did with God's Word. First, they looked to it to interpret their problems. Then...

B. They looked to God's Word to respond to problems (20). "For," said Peter, "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.'"

The first quotation comes from Psalm 69:25 and the second from Psalm 109:8. In Psalm 69 David cries out to God and asked Him to deal with an enemy who hated, betrayed, and inflicted pain on him. "Pour out your wrath on them," he says in the verse prior to the one Peter quotes. And, "May they be blotted out of the book of life," he says three verses after the one Peter quotes.

In Psalm 109 David again asks for help in dealing with an enemy, this time someone who betrayed him. "In return for my friendship they accuse me... They repay me evil for good, and hatred for friendship," says David just a few verses before the one Peter quotes (4-5). Then he says, "May his days be few; may another take his place of leadership," in the verse Peter quotes.

So as Peter studies his Bible, he comes to the conclusion that those two texts address the Judas dilemma. This is what the Bible says we need to do, he tells the believers in the upper room.

1. *We must not live in the past.* That's the first quotation, "May his place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in it." What Judas did is done, and it happened just as God predicted ten centuries ahead of time.

2. *We must take steps to move ahead.* That's the essence of the second quotation, "May another take his place of leadership." Judas is gone, and David said someone will take his place.

Which is exactly what Peter will propose in the next scene.

Now let me ask you something. Where do you turn when you are facing problems in life? Peter and the others searched the Scriptures. They didn't want human opinion. They wanted to know what God had said.

So for you and me, it's not what to do with the Judas situation. But we do have our own situations. Perplexing bumps in the road. So here's the challenge.

We need to search our Bibles and find God's answers to those situations. Maybe you and your spouse are at odds. Or you don't know how to handle a friend who has betrayed you. Or you're trying to make sense of some other loss. Go to the Book. And do it with others who love Jesus too, like Peter did.

Romans 15:4 says, "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope (ESV)."

We've seen two activities so far. One, waiting involves *praying*. We talk to the Lord. Two, waiting involves pondering the Scriptures. *Bible study*. He talks to us. We need both. Churches need both. Now we come to a third activity.

III. Waiting involves preparing for the mission (21-26).

This happened in two ways for the believers.

A. They identified a need (21-22). “Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have 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.”

Perhaps Peter had in mind Jesus’ prophecy in Matthew 19:28, “I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”

Some, such as G. Campbell Morgan, say that Peter acted without divine guidance, and that Paul should have been the twelfth apostle. I don’t agree. In my estimation...

1. *The decision wasn’t pragmatic.* The fact is, they didn’t replace Judas because he died, but because he defected. A few years later, when James the son of Zebedee was killed by Herod (Acts 12:2), the church didn’t find an apostolic successor for him. For that matter, all of the apostles except John died as martyrs, but none were replaced. Why not? Because unlike Judas, they were faithful unto death.

No, the decision to replace Judas wasn’t made on a pragmatic basis. Rather...

2. *It had to do with their mission.* Peter’s choice of words in verse 22 are key, “For one of these *must become a witness* with us.”

Does the word “witness” sound familiar? It should. It’s the term Jesus used when He gave His followers their mission in 1:8, “You will be my *witnesses*.” That’s why the replacement was chosen. In order to fulfill the mission.

Then after identifying the need...

B. They took steps to meet the need (23-26). Here’s how: “So they proposed two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias. Then they prayed, ‘Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs.’ Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles.”

The solution involved three steps...

1. *They proposed (23).* Why did they propose two men? Was it arbitrary? William LaSor offers an interesting and very plausible explanation. They proposed these *two* men because these were the only two men to qualify.

How many men were there who could claim to have followed Jesus from the very beginning at John’s baptism? Not very many! In His first year of public ministry, Jesus’ followers were relatively few. The crowds came later as His popularity increased—at about the middle of His ministry when He performed the miracle to feed the 5,000.

LaSor concludes, “If there had been three or thirty who could have qualified, and only two were put forward by the fellowship, then I might be inclined to agree with Campbell Morgan that the method was open to question. On the other hand, if only two could qualify, then there is no objection.”⁷

In fact, since only qualified men were considered, no matter how the lot fell, a qualified man would be chosen. Indeed, the fact that Joseph Barsabbas wasn’t chosen doesn’t mean he didn’t serve in the church. It just means he didn’t serve as an *apostle*.

So first, they proposed...

2. *They prayed (24-25).* “Show us the one You have chosen,” they prayed. Prayer is vital in seeking God’s will. We need to ask God to show us what pleases Him. But prayer isn’t all we must do. They proposed, then prayed, and finally...

3. *They picked (26).* How? By casting lots.

⁷ William LaSor, *Church Alive*, pp. 39-40.

William Barclay explains, “Amongst the Jews it was the most natural thing to do because all the offices and duties in the Temple were settled that way. The names of the candidates were written on stones; the stones were put into a vessel and the vessel was shaken until one stone fell out; and he whose name was on that stone was elected to office.”⁸

Should we cast lots today? No. Acts is narrative literature. It’s telling us what happened, not necessarily what *should* happen.

In fact, this is the last time in Scripture you’ll find this practice mentioned. There’s no need to cast lots any longer. Why not? Because of Acts 2—the Holy Spirit has come.

The final words of verse 25 are sobering, “Judas left to go where he belongs.” As MacArthur assesses, “Judas, and all others who go to hell, belong there; it is the place of their own choosing. It belongs to them, and they to it.”⁹

We’ve learned something important today. When God calls on us to wait, what should we do? When waiting we must devote ourselves to praying, pondering Scripture, and preparing for our mission.

Make It Personal: When waiting on God...

I need to ask myself two questions...

1. *Am I believing that God will do what He said He would do?* The truth is, God will do what He said He would do. He cannot lie. Do I believe Him?

Start here. He said, “If you put your total trust in My Son, I will give you eternal life.” Do you believe Him? Are you giving evidence that you believe Him?

He said, “I will build My church.” Do you believe Him?

He said, “Trust in Me with all your heart. In all your ways acknowledge Me, and I will direct your paths.” Am I believing Him? Or am I trying to do His job for Him?

God will do what He said He would do. Waiting is a perfect time to say, “Have Thine own way, Lord, have Thine own way.”

2. *Am I doing what God told me to do?* Waiting is the perfect time to keep doing what He told us to do. In Acts 1, Jesus said to wait, so the believers waited, not by being inactive, but by doing what He had previously told them to do.

Am I obeying His commands? Am I joyfully doing what He told me to do while I am waiting on Him to do what He said He would do? Trust and obey for there is no other way to be happy in Jesus.

⁸ Barclay, p. 17.

⁹ John MacArthur, p. 35.