



## Days of Preparation in Prayer (Acts 1:12-26)

*Commentary: Week Three*

*\*\*Scripture divisions used in our series and various commentaries differ from each other.  
This is the reason for the occasional discrepancy between  
the verse range listed in our series and the commentary notes provided in our Scripture Studies.*

### New American Commentary<sup>1</sup>

#### 5. Preparation in the Upper Room [1:12-14](#)

The apostles returned to Jerusalem in compliance with the Lord's command to wait there for the Spirit (cf. v. [4](#)). There they joined the other Christians in an upper room where they devoted themselves to fervent prayer (vv. [13-14](#)).

[1:12](#) In v. [12](#) we learn the setting of the ascension—the Mount of Olives. Olivet lies to the east of Jerusalem on the opposite side of the Kidron Valley. The distance of their walk was a “Sabbath day’s walk,” which was the longest distance one could walk without breaking the Sabbath. The rabbinic tradition set this at 2,000 cubits, i.e., about three-fourths of a mile, as the NIV note indicates. It is not necessary to conclude from this that the ascension took place on a Sabbath. More likely Luke placed the ascension in close proximity to Jerusalem, the holy city where Jesus died and rose, where the Spirit would be given, where the Christian witness would begin.

[1:13](#) Upon their arrival in Jerusalem, the apostles went “upstairs to the room where they were staying.” It is tempting to see this as the room where the last supper was held, but this is far from certain. Luke used different words for the two rooms (*katalyma*, [Luke 22:11](#); *hyperōon*, [Acts 1:13](#)). There is even less basis for connecting it with the house of John Mark’s mother, Mary ([Acts 12:12](#)). The upper room of [Acts 1:13](#) seems to refer to the top floor of a large Palestinian house. Such rooms were usually on the third floor and reached by outside steps. They were often used as dining rooms, as study places for students, or were sublet to poorer people. The list of disciples in v. [13](#) is identical with that of [Luke 6:13-16](#), although in differing order and with the omission of Judas Iscariot. The reordering of the first names is possibly deliberate. Andrew was moved from second place in the Gospel to fourth place in Acts, and John was moved to second place. This gives prominence to Peter, John, and James, the only apostles who have any individual role in the narrative of Acts.

[1:14](#) Verse [14](#) mentions others who were present in the upper room— “the women,” Mary, and Jesus’ brothers. The women may have included the wives of the apostles and certainly the women who accompanied Jesus from Galilee and witnessed his crucifixion ([Luke 8:2](#); [23:55](#); [24:10](#)). Mary may have accompanied the beloved disciple ([John 19:26](#)), but it is likely she was a member of the believing community in her own right. Like Jesus’ brothers, she was confused by Jesus’ ministry ([Mark 3:11](#); [John 7:5](#)). Like them she may have experienced an appearance from the risen Jesus. Paul mentioned such an appearance to James, the oldest of the brothers ([1 Cor 15:7](#)). According to [Mark 6:3](#), Jesus had four

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1. John B. Polhill, *New American Commentary – Volume 26: Acts*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 87-94.

brothers—James, Judas, Joseph, and Simon. There is no reason to take Mark’s words in any other sense than that they were Jesus’ half-brothers, the natural offspring of Mary and Joseph after the birth of Jesus. James assumed the leadership of the Jerusalem church in the latter portion of Acts ([12:17](#); [15:13](#); [21:18](#)), and according to tradition Judas later assumed the same position and authored the Epistle of Jude.

Verse [14](#) is often viewed as the first of the “summaries” in Acts, those passages where Luke gave a generalized review of the activity of the Christian community. The primary characteristic that marked their life together in this period was prayer, as they anticipated together the promised gift of the Spirit. Prayer was a hallmark of the church in its early days (cf. [1:24](#); [2:42](#); [3:1](#); [4:24](#); [6:6](#)). The time before Pentecost was a time for waiting, a time spent in prayer undoubtedly for the promised Spirit and for the power to witness. There is no effective witness without the Spirit, and the way to spiritual empowerment is to wait in prayer.

## **6. Restoration of the Apostolic Circle [1:15–26](#)**

This entire section, devoted to the replacement of Judas Iscariot, is carefully constructed in two main parts. After an introductory verse (v. [15](#)), the first part (vv. [16–19](#)) deals with the vacancy created by the demise of Judas. The second treats Judas’s replacement (vv. [21–26](#)). Joining the two sections is v. [20](#), which contains two scriptural proofs from the Psalms, the first relating to the prior section (Judas’s death); the second, to the following (his replacement).

### **(1) Judas’s Defection [1:15–20a](#)**

[1:15](#) “In those days” marks a transition to a new section. During this period of prayer and waiting, one essential item of business had to be considered by the young Christian community—the reconstitution of the apostolic circle of Twelve. Significantly, Luke made the parenthetical remark that the group numbered about 120 “believers.” “Believers” is a correct rendering of the Greek (“brothers”), since the term was not gender specific and would include female as well as male members of the community. The number is also significant. In rabbinic tradition 120 was the minimum requirement for constituting a local Sanhedrin. Peter assumed leadership among the apostles and convened the assembly. Throughout Acts, Peter played this role. He was the spokesman, the representative apostle. The other apostles were present and active, but Peter was their mouthpiece.

[1:16](#) Addressing the assembly, Peter referred to the Scripture that the Holy Spirit inspired through David. Peter said here that “the Scripture *had to be fulfilled*,” using the *past* tense of the verb for necessity (*edei*, “it was necessary”). The Scripture he was referring to is [Ps 69:25](#), which is quoted in v. [20a](#). Peter saw that psalm as pointing to the desertion of Judas’s place, which had already been fulfilled. In v. [20b](#), [Ps 109:8](#) is quoted, which points to another person assuming his place of leadership. This had not been fulfilled yet, so Peter used the present tense of the verb for necessity in v. [21](#), “it *is* necessary” (*dei*). The fulfillment of that Scripture constituted the main agenda item for the assembly. This use of the verb for necessity in connection with Scripture reflects a view that runs throughout Acts: Scripture that has a prophetic emphasis must come to fulfillment.

[1:17](#) In v. [17](#) Peter introduced the business at hand, the replacement of Judas. In language filled with Old Testament allusions (cf. [Ps 41:9](#)), he reminded the other apostles that Judas was a full member of their circle and shared their ministry. Verses [18–19](#) are not a part of Peter’s speech but constitute an “aside” that Luke provided for his readers, as indicated by the parentheses in the NIV. Peter’s train of thought was thus: Judas was a member of the Twelve (v. [17](#)); his place was now vacant (v. [20a](#)) and needed to be filled (v. [20b](#)).

[1:18–19](#) Luke provided us with the story of Judas’s demise in vv. [18–19](#). Judas purchased a field (literally, “an estate or farm”) with “the reward he got for his wickedness.” The reference is clearly to the money the temple officials agreed to pay Judas for leading them to Jesus ([Luke 22:5](#)). The language is more obscure in the remainder of v. [18](#): “And becoming prone, he burst in the middle, and all his entrails poured out” (literal translation). The NIV probably is right in interpreting the strange phrase “becoming prone” as “fell headlong.” The picture is that of a fall so severe as to open his body cavity and cause his inner organs (*splanchna*) to spill out. In consequence of this gory death the field became known by Jerusalem locals as Akeldama. For his non-Semitic readers, Luke translated the Aramaic word—“that is, Field of Blood.” Matthew gave a fuller account of Judas’s death. Despite significant differences in detail, the main emphases are the same in the two accounts—the purchase of a field with Judas’s blood money, the grisly death of the betrayer, the naming of the field “Field of Blood.” For Peter the recollection of Judas’s gruesome end must have been a grim reminder of his own denial of his Lord as he now sought to lead the assembly to fill the abandoned post.

## **(2) Matthias’s Installation [1:20b–26](#)**

[1:20b–22](#) In vv. [21–22](#) Peter laid down the qualifications for Judas’s replacement. He had to be one who had witnessed the entire ministry of Jesus from the time of his baptism by John to the ascension. Above all he had to have witnessed the resurrection appearances. Here we have the basic understanding of the apostles’ role in Acts. They were primarily “witnesses” to Jesus, eyewitnesses who could share his teaching and confirm his resurrection and ascension. As such, the role of apostle was limited to the Twelve. It was a unique, irreplaceable office ([Eph 2:20](#); [Rev 21:14](#)). There could be no apostolic succession, since there were no further eyewitnesses to succeed them. Note that James was not replaced after his martyrdom ([12:2](#)). It was necessary to replace Judas because he had abandoned his position. His betrayal, not his death, forfeited his place in the circle of Twelve. Even after death James continued to be considered an apostle.

[Luke 22:28–30](#) speaks of the apostles’ unique role of sitting in the kingdom and judging the twelve tribes of Israel. Their number corresponds to the tribes of Israel, for in a real sense they represent the restored Israel, the people of God. The continuity with Israel necessitates the restoration of the full number of twelve. Because the church is built on the foundation of these Twelve as representatives of the true Israel, the people of God of the messianic times, their number had to be completed before the coming of the Spirit and the “birth of the church.” Throughout Acts this unique circle of the Twelve eyewitnesses is characteristically designated as “the apostles.”

[1:23](#) The assembly put forward two candidates who met the qualifications, Joseph and Matthias (v. [23](#)). Joseph is described as also having been called Barsabbas, “son of the Sabbath.” Jews and proselytes often bore Gentile nicknames, among which “Justus” was common (cf. [Acts 18:7](#); [Col 4:11](#)). Nothing more is known of Joseph except for a later tradition cited by Eusebius that as a result of his missionary work he was forced to drink poison and suffered no ill effects. Matthias, whose name means *gift of God*, is merely mentioned with no further fanfare. Later tradition speculated that he became a missionary to the Ethiopians or that his bones were buried in Germany at Treves. In the Acts text Joseph is given such prominence that one would expect *him* to have been chosen, perhaps a reminder that God’s ways are not always man’s ways. The assembly did turn the matter over to God by praying for divine direction (v. [24](#)).

[1:24–25](#) Perhaps a further requirement of a strong inner faith on the part of the one to be chosen is implicit in the address to God as the one who “know[s] everyone’s heart.” The prayer concludes with the specific need to replace Judas’s ministry, which he had abandoned “to go where he belongs” (v. [25](#)). The Greek phrase is a little softer, literally “to his own place,” and could also be taken as “place of his own choosing.” Despite the reticence of the phraseology, most would already have in mind where that place would be. As the assembly prayed for God’s direction in the selection of the twelfth apostle, it was

following a precedent already set by Jesus, who also prayed before he chose the original Twelve ([Luke 6:12f.](#)).

[1:26](#) The prayer concluded, they then “cast lots” (v. [26](#)). The Greek text reads literally “they gave lots to them.” The meaning seems to be that they *assigned* lots for them. The method was likely the one depicted in the Old Testament. Marked stones were placed in a jar and shaken out. The one whose stone fell out first was chosen (cf. [1 Chr 26:13f.](#)). Some have wanted to see Matthias selected by vote of the church, but the text points more to the ancient procedure of lot-casting. One should not be put off by the “chance” element. In the Old Testament the outcome was always seen to be determined by God. That was probably the consideration in this case. Before Pentecost, before the presence of the Spirit to lead it, the church sought the direction of God and used the Old Testament procedure of securing divine decision. After Pentecost the church in Acts made its own decisions under the direction of the Spirit. In this particular instance it was all the more important that the decision be the Lord’s, not theirs. Like his first selection of the Twelve, its constituency was his to determine.