

Appointed for Eternal Life
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
May 30, 2021-AM Service
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Acts 13:42-48

Before I read this morning's scripture, let me explain that our Acts series will not be chronological. Especially at the beginning, I will jump around a little bit. We will meditate on different parts of the book. We hope to give you a sense of the big picture. We want to give you a broad sense of the book so that as you read it (and I urge you to read it—maybe even more than once over the summer), you will see these themes and understand what the Holy Spirit, through Luke, is saying to us.

Paul finishes his sermon. He proclaims that Jesus has come to save Jews and Gentiles. Some people respond positively to his message. They become believers. Some do not respond to his message, they 'stir up persecution' against Paul, they end up pushing Paul out of town. You see this pattern throughout Acts in Paul's missionary journeys. Paul preaches. Some believe and some don't. What's interesting here is how Luke describes that division between those who believe and those who don't: "All those who were appointed for eternal life believed."

"All those who were appointed to eternal life believed." What does that sound like? What doctrine does that remind you of? It sounds like predestination. It sounds like the doctrine of election. You remember that doctrine, don't you? If you grew up in the CRC you do. The doctrine of election is one of central doctrines of Calvinism. It's a doctrine taught in our churches confessions. It's a doctrine that we believe is taught in the Bible, in passages like this one. The doctrine of election is the belief that God has chosen—or elected—those who will have faith in him. He has chosen them from before the dawn of time to be his children. They have been appointed for eternal life, and that appointment was set from eternity. Those appointed for salvation are chosen by sheer grace. It's not because they are better than others. It's not because God foresaw that they would be good and kind, while the unchosen would be mean and nasty, God just chooses to show them grace. That's what verse 48 sounds like. Those who were appointed for eternal life, those who were chosen beforehand, believed.

Of course the flip side of this is also true, the reason some people did not believe is because they were not appointed. That's the part of predestination that makes people uncomfortable. Saying that some people are chosen from eternity means that some people were *not* chosen from eternity. Some people were predestined and others were not predestined. They were no worse than those God chose to save, they were no more sinful, they just weren't eternally appointed. The idea that God would let people be born on this earth who have no chance at salvation makes people squirm. And no, in case you're wondering, there's no "Maybe the original Greek is different" here. Check every major translation—the NRSV, the KJV, the ASV the ESV-check whatever V you want and it will have some version of this translation.

Verse 48 isn't the only place in Acts that talks about something that sounds like predestination. Predestination is something like a theme in Acts. Let's look at a few verses together. Turn with me to Acts 2:23. In his Pentecost sermon, Peter says, "This man (Jesus) was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men put him to death by nailing him to the cross." Flip ahead to Acts 4:28. The believers are praising God in prayer. In that prayer they say that when Herod and Pilate put Jesus to death, "They did what your power and will decided beforehand should happen." Decided beforehand.

Acts 18:10. The Lord speaks to Paul in a vision and tells him to continue his ministry in Corinth because, "I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you because I have many people in this city." Almost like there are many people in the city who are already appointed to believe. Finally Acts 5:39. The Sanhedrin is thinking about executing Peter and John, but then Gamaliel stands up and he says, "if this Jesus thing is from human origin it will fail. But if this Jesus thing is of God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourself fighting against God." You can hear predestination in that too.

So is Luke trying to teach us the doctrine of predestination? Is Luke trying to teach us the doctrine of election as found in John Calvin's Institutes and the Canons of Dort? I think the answer to that is no. That's not me saying I disagree with the doctrine of election. It's in our confessions after all, and now that I've raised it, I owe you a sermon on it. But that sermon will be later and based on Romans 9-11, because that's where Paul really directly wrestles of when and how God chooses who will be saved and who won't. I don't think that's Luke's primary intention in this text. When Luke sat at his writing desk, picked up his quill, dipped it in the ink and wrote these words, he wasn't trying to teach us that there are certain people God passes over from eternity.

What was he trying to teach? Let's think about what life would have been like for these early followers of Jesus. It was a precarious existence. Acts 2 is Pentecost and on that day everything seems to be going pretty well, but things get ugly pretty quickly. In Acts 4 Peter and John are in jail, in Acts 7 Stephen is stoned to death, in Acts 8 Saul leads a widespread effort to arrest and sometimes execute Jesus followers. By chapter 12, James the brother of John and one of Jesus' inner circle, is imprisoned and executed by Herod. By chapter 12 believers are running for their lives. They are scattering all over the region. They are refugees.

Things weren't easy for Paul on his missionary journeys either. Paul gets grief from Jews and gentiles. In our passage, the leaders of the local synagogue first heap up abuse on Paul and then stir up persecution that gets them expelled from the region. In Ephesus, they riot and Paul almost gets torn apart. In Iconium, there's a plot to kill him and he has to flee. In Philippi, he's flogged and thrown into a dungeon and in Lystra, they stone him and leave him for dead.

If you think this was easy for Paul, think again. Read 2 Corinthians and Paul gives you a sense of how hard this was for him. In 2 Corinthians chapter 1, Paul reflects on the troubles he endured in the province of Asia (that's where Pisidian Antioch is located) and he says that he despaired. "It was more than I could take. I despaired of life itself." Paul was not immune to the pressures of life. I'm sure there were many nights when the apostle lay in his bed after yet another exhausting day that seemed to bring only rejection and said to God, "Lord this is too much for me. I'm not sure I can do this anymore. Please Jesus. Please. Please."

That's how we all feel in the middle of our troubles. It feels overwhelming. There's no sense to it. It's like we're being blown around by random forces. Your daughter is struggling with anxiety and mental health issues. You've tried counseling, you do what you can to reassure her, you've been up in the middle of the night rubbing her back to keep her calm, but it just seems to get worse. Like you're blown around by random forces. You went to the hospital because your heart condition is making you weaker and weaker. They took an MRI and in addition to your heart problems they find a spot on your lung. It's cancer. It feels like you are getting blown around. The business you're involved in is struggling. The market has suddenly changed, new technologies have emerged, the pandemic completely changed cost structures, and you've tried to adjust. You work 80 hours a week to try to keep things going but the numbers

keep going in the wrong direction. Blown around by random forces. When you're in the middle of things, it can feel like chaos.

We don't know exactly when Luke wrote Acts, but we do know that when he sat down at his desk and dipped his quill in the ink, he wasn't in the middle of it anymore. He wrote Acts long after the events were over. And after the drama, he is able to see things that he couldn't in the midst of them. In the middle of the drama, what was happening in Pisidian, Antich, Iconium and Philippi must have seemed like chaos. But looking back he can see that it wasn't chaos. The hand of God was there, steering things, appointing things. In the middle of the long journeys with the shipwrecks and the riots and the persecution, it felt like they were being blown around by random forces. But looking back Luke could see that in the middle of all those storms there was a prevailing wind, that was blowing and moving everything towards its appointed end.

That's why he drops all those phrases like "those appointed for eternal life" into his manuscript. That's why these allusions to predestination show up throughout the book. He's trying to reassure the people of the early church and he's trying to assure us that we are not being blown about by random events. He wants us all to know that in the middle of every day and moment of your life, the prevailing wind of the Spirit is blowing things to the Father's appointed end. In Acts 11 there is a little story—almost an aside—where you hear Luke trying to help you feel that prevailing wind. He mentions that in the persecution that broke out after Stephen was killed, Christian refugees scattered as far as Cyprus and Phoenicia and Antioch. But when they arrived in their new place and set up camp, they brought the gospel with them. They told the people in the new towns about Jesus. They told the Jews in those towns about Jesus and they started telling the Greeks, and in Antioch a large new multi-ethnic church was formed. It was the first time people from different cultures were worshipping together like this. Jews and Greeks, slave and free, rich and poor, all one in Christ Jesus. You see what happened there? In the middle of the persecution it felt like evil powers were bringing destruction and chaos, but the breath of Spirit comes along and starts blowing and soon it all ends up moving towards God's appointed purpose.

In the infusion room where they are about to put the chemo treatment into your pcc line—the wind of the Spirit is blowing you toward life in Jesus. As you sit there at 3 in the morning rubbing your anxious daughter's back, the prevailing wind of the Spirit is there blowing you both to your appointed end with Jesus. As you sit at your desk at your business looking at the alarming numbers and wonder how it's going to work, the prevailing wind of the Spirit is there, blowing you towards your appointed end with Jesus. Luke wants harried people, discouraged people, tired people to see that the Holy Spirit is in the middle of all of your days, and he is blowing in all your stuff, and he is blowing you towards God's appointed end.

As I thought about the prevailing wind of the Spirit, I found myself thinking of a passage from the Narnia books. You know the Narnia Chronicles. It's a work of fantasy literature designed to illustrate Christian faith and the Christ figure in the book is the lion, Aslan. It's from the book *The Silver Chair*. In *The Silver Chair* two British children—Jill and Eustace—are suddenly carried off to Narnia. When they arrive in Narnia they find themselves in a beautiful, still wood. They walk through the wood and wonder about where they are, when suddenly the wood comes to an end, and they find themselves at the edge of a cliff. Eustace is afraid of heights so he takes a step back from the edge, and tells Jill to watch out. Jill is not afraid of heights and to show off, she takes a step forward right to the edge of the cliff and looks down. When she looks down she suddenly realizes that the cliff is thousands and thousands of feet high, many times higher than the tallest cliff in our world. And as she looks down her head starts to

spin and staggers a little bit. Eustace reaches out to grab her and she grabs him and somehow, in the grabbing, she pulls Eustace over the edge. He falls with a terrible scream. In her pride and selfishness, she does this terrible thing.

But at the moment Eustace falls over, the lion Aslan appears at her side. Aslan starts blowing. A powerful wind comes from his mouth. The wind lifts the boy and carries him down safely to the place where Aslan wants him to be. Because, as you find out in the story, it is Aslan who has summoned the two children to Narnia. He has a purpose for them, they are appointed for his work, and he wasn't going to let something like Jill's foolish pride keep him from accomplishing his purposes.

I know that many of you feel like you are living in the middle of chaos right now. Life is beating you down and blowing you around. You don't know what to expect from day to day. I don't know why these terrible things are happening to you. I don't know why it has to be so hard. But I proclaim to you what I do know: The prevailing wind of the Spirit is blowing in your life and that wind will not stop blowing until it carries you, till it carries this world, to your appointed end in Christ Jesus.

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