

"Is Faith Like a Box of Chocolates?"

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¹⁵In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons) and said, ¹⁶"Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus—¹⁷for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry."

²¹"So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, ²²beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection." ²³So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. ²⁴Then they prayed and said, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen ²⁵to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place." ²⁶And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles. (Acts 1:15-17, 21-26)

If you've ever seen the classic movie "Forrest Gump," you may remember that the film begins and ends with a floating feather. In the beginning, it gently falls from the sky and drifts down to the ground, riding the air displaced by passing people and cars, until it comes to rest on the muddy sneaker of Forrest Gump as he sits on a park bench. At the end of the movie, as Forrest sits at the mailbox waiting for his son's school bus, the camera pans away from Forrest to follow yet another feather that is picked up from the ground near his foot and then musically lifted back up into the clouds by the wind. The scenes frame the guiding philosophy of the film, which is encapsulated in a statement Forrest makes at Jenny's grave. "I don't know if we each have a destiny," he wonders, "or if we're all just floating around accidental-like on a breeze."

Looking back, the viewer realizes that two of the most important voices in Forrest's life have answered that question very differently. Lieutenant Dan, Forrest's commanding officer in Vietnam, was always the voice of providence. "We all have a destiny," he says. "Nothing just happens. It's all part of a plan!"¹ Forrest's mother, on the other hand, sees reality in much more random terms. As she lies dying of cancer, she famously observes that "Life is a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get."²

This tension is similar to what we might feel about this strange little anecdote from the very earliest days of the church. Judas, one of the original twelve apostles, has betrayed Jesus and is now dead. The powerful symbolism of having twelve apostles, lining up as it had with the twelve tribes of Israel, needed to be restored. They didn't feel like they could be "The Eleven," so they set about picking a replacement. It all came down to two finalists: Joseph, a/k/a Barsabbas, a/k/a Justus, and another man with a much simpler name, Matthias. In the end, they essentially flip a coin to decide who gets to be the next apostle of Jesus Christ. And it begs the question: was the church acting out its destiny here, or was

¹ "Forrest Gump (1994) - My Destiny Movie Clip," <https://www.youtube.com>, accessed May 10, 2018.

² "Life is a Box of Chocolates - Forrest Gump (7/9) Movie CLIP (1994) HD" <https://www.youtube.com>.



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this just a cosmic “whatever” – a concession that, even in the life of faith, things are going to blow where they blow and we never really know what we’re going to get?

It all seems so un-Presbyterian, doesn’t it? After all, even “American Idol” makes the finalists do a sing-off at the end. Viewers get to cast their votes for their favorite. The judges take the microphone to explain their decisions. This just does not feel the church acting “decently and in order.” Seems way too arbitrary. Where was the nominating committee? Where were the rating sheets so the people could rank the candidates on important metrics of mission and personality? Could we at least hear the candidates give a sermon before we choose? Should the early church have at least tried to discern what their destiny was and tried to act in accordance with that vision?

In another way, this process may seem like the most Presbyterian thing they could have done. If there is one thing we are known for, it’s predestination. Perhaps this was a big nod to the fact that God already had this all scripted out the way it needed to go – that the early church just needed to get out of the way and let God be God and let the chips fall where God had already preordained that they fall.

Notably, scripture gives us no clues whatsoever on whether this process was, in the end, good or bad, because *neither one of the finalists is ever mentioned again*. Matthias, the new apostle, disappears from the story completely. Was this because the ministry of Matthias was a complete failure? Or could it have been that he joined the others so seamlessly, so effortlessly, that there was no need to mention him because Christ’s team never missed a beat? Are we to assume that “Joseph/Barsabbas/Justus” just went back to fishing, or farming, or whatever he did before he started following Jesus? Was he bitter and jaded at not being chosen, or perhaps did he go off and serve Jesus faithfully for the rest of his life in a ministry that was amazing and fruitful, but was just never spoken about in a letter that survived? We just don’t know.

It is easy to see why this question – whether we are playing out a preset destiny or just being tossed randomly around on the wind – has always been with the church. Reformed theologians like John Calvin have tended to lean heavily toward God’s control of the world, saying that literally “nothing takes place without [God’s] deliberation,” that God “is the beginning and cause of all motion” and that every movement in the world is under his hand.³ The idea is consistent with our high view of God’s sovereignty and power, but it can also lead us to difficult and painful conclusions. For example, if God controls everything, and my father has cancer, then God must have given my father cancer. Or if a hurricane destroyed New Orleans, and God controls the winds and the waves, then God must have wanted to destroy New Orleans. This linear understanding of causation has caused a great deal of heartache in the Christian soul. When painful situations arise, we either chalk it up fatalistically to getting a bad chocolate from the box, or we are left to struggle with why God would predestine such a painful thing for us.

Other Christians have understood it a little differently. Thomas Aquinas, for example, in his brilliant work that summarized his theological views, argued that everything that happens is not caused by God, at least not directly. If everything was foreseen by God, he argued, that would mean that nothing would happen by chance, or luck, or just bad timing. That didn’t make sense to him, because as he looked over the

³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion, Vol 1*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, [2006]), 1.16.3, p. 200.

world, he saw all kinds of occurrences – both good and bad -- that were undeniably the result of chance, luck, or bad timing. That, he thought, leaves us with two choices. Either we say that God does not have the power to stop those things (something Aquinas would never say), or we confess that God must not be pulling all the strings.⁴

At the end of *Forrest Gump*, as Forrest stands over Jenny's grave, he puts his own spin on this ancient Christian question. "I don't know if we each have a destiny," he says, "or if we're all just floating around accidental-like on a breeze, but I, I think maybe it's both. Maybe both is happening at the same time." If we take a closer look at this passage from Acts, this is exactly what seems to be going on. Peter and the early church left this important decision to a coin flip. But it was more than that. Peter had specified certain qualifications for the next apostle. That person needed to be someone who had not only known Jesus personally, but had been with the group from the beginning to the end, from the baptism of Jesus until the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Presumably there had been other potential candidates, but somehow the people of the early church had narrowed it down to two. So, there was structure. There was planning. But more importantly, there was prayer. Before they ever cast the lots, they joined their voices together and made a petition to God, saying "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen." The flip of the coin, they believed, would be completely in God's hands. The destiny was not known in advance, and they let chance decide it, but it was not just an exercise in arbitrary chance. The hand of God was clearly at work, even in the uncertainty. Somehow, somehow, it was both. It was both a moment born upon an unpredictable, uncertain wind... and it was also a sure and certain destiny playing itself out.

If we are honest with ourselves, we all experience the providence of God in this way. When John Wesley was just a boy, he lived with his family in the rectory of the church served by his father, the Rev. Samuel Wesley. The home in Epworth, England was at least 100 years old when the family moved in at the very beginning of the 18th century. The wood beams were old. It was dusty and dry, capped off with a thatched roof. It was a fire waiting to happen, and on February 9, 1709, that's exactly what happened.

No one really knows how it started, but it was suspicious. Samuel Wesley's ministry at Epworth had been controversial, and not everyone liked him. There had already been one fire in the home that some thought had been set by an arsonist. In the past, certain townspeople had threatened the pastor and his family. His cows had been stabbed, his dog mysteriously lost a leg.

The family was sound asleep when they heard someone outside yell "Fire!" By that time, the thatch roof was completely engulfed. The pastor and his children barely made it downstairs before the flames swept through the hallways. Seven of the children who were in the house that night made it out, all but little John, who was only five. Samuel tried to get back in a number of times, but walls of fire made that impossible. All he knew was to kneel down and pray that God would receive his little soul. At that moment, little John appeared in the upstairs window. Neighbors frantically searched for a ladder, but there was none to be found. So one neighbor climbed up on another man's shoulders and pulled the little boy through the window just as the roof of his room collapsed in flames. As the fire continued to burn, an exultant Samuel Wesley shouted out with joy, "Come, Neighbours! Let us kneel

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1022.htm#article2>

down! Let us give thanks to God! He has given me all my eight Children: let the house go: I am rich enough!"⁵

Samuel Wesley labored in the Epworth parish for forty years. As best as anyone can tell, not much came of it. He was not especially loved. Outwardly, not much changed. But like Matthias, he had been chosen to serve, even if that service was not noticed by many. God did not cause the fire. God did not cause any of the difficulties Rev. Wesley encountered along the way. Even so, it was clear that God was at work through it all, in times when they felt blown to and fro by the wind, but also in the ways that destiny took a firm hold, as it did on that night when little John Wesley felt the providential hand of God in a way that changed his life, and the life of the church, forever.

I don't know how you may be feeling this morning. Maybe you are feeling the benevolent hands of God upon you, guiding you toward a destiny that you can see and feel. Or perhaps you feel more like you are kind of floating on the wind, being tossed about in ways that do not make any sense to you. Most likely, it is both... both are happening to you and for you at the very same time. This seems to have been the experience of Matthias -- one who knew the joy of being chosen and singled out for something new and wonderful... but who also must have felt at times like he was just drifting from day to day, doing the best he could, day to day, wondering if anyone was noticing, wondering if it was all worthwhile. But the truth is, even when we cannot see it, God is alive in all of it, operating within all people and all things in ways we cannot fathom. God does not give people cancer, or start fires, or generate hurricanes to punish cities for their sins. Bad things may still happen, but, as theologian Shirley Guthrie says, "they hurt less when we know that God does not will and cause them to happen, but is God with and for us in hard times as well as in good times, in failure and sorrow as well as in success and happiness, in sickness and suffering as well as in health and prosperity, when death comes as well as when life is spared."⁶

This is the ultimate good news for any potential disciple... good news both for Matthias, who was chosen, and Barsabbas, who was not... good news when we feel blessed and when we feel cursed. Either way, in every way, God is with us and for us. And so, as people of destiny, and as people who are afloat on the winds of life, we can always pray the powerful prayer of the early church: "*Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us the way that you have chosen.*" **Amen.**

⁵ <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/shaped-by-tragedy-and-grace-wesleys-rescue-from-fire;>
<https://justcallmepastor.wordpress.com/2011/06/20/the-fire-in-the-parsonage/>

⁶ Guthrie, Shirley C. Jr. *Christian Doctrine*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press (1994), p. 171.