

“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)

The classic movie “Forrest Gump,” as you may remember, 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, Forrest sits at the mailbox waiting for his son’s school bus. Panning down to the ground, the camera finds another white feather sitting near his foot, which alights on a gust of wind and is musically lifted back up into the clouds. The scenes frame the guiding philosophy of the film, which I would argue 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.”

That pair of philosophical possibilities is personified by two key characters in the story. Lieutenant Dan, Forrest’s commanding officer in Vietnam, is 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, recognizes life often unfolds in ways that are more “accidental-like.” As she lies dying of cancer, she famously tells her son that “Life is a box of chocolates. You never know what you’re gonna get.”²

It is an interesting question to ponder as we read this somewhat quizzical episode in the life of the early church. Does the church have a destiny, or is it floating on the breeze, subject to the whims of the world? At this early stage, the body of Christ is trying to move past a very painful part of its beginning: the betrayal of Jesus by Judas, one of the twelve disciples. Judas is dead and gone, which leaves his seat at the table noticeably empty. The church wants to fill that seat as quickly as possible, and they want to fill it with someone who has been around from the beginning. I don’t know about you, but given what is at stake, I find it a little strange that Peter and the early church leave this important personnel decision to a coin flip. Did they see it as an act of destiny... the providential next step in God’s plan for the church? Or does this strike you as more “accidental-like,” as if the church

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>.



was reaching into the metaphorical box of chocolates with absolutely no idea what they were about to get?

I can't answer that question because I obviously wasn't there, but it does not seem to me like they left the results completely up to chance. I see some thoughtful preparation and methodology at work. First, Peter specified some minimum pre-qualifications that the next apostle would need to meet. The new twelfth disciple needed to be someone who had not only known Jesus personally, but had been around from the beginning to the end -- from the baptism of Jesus until the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. We don't know how many people satisfied that criteria, but somehow the group narrowed the choice down to two men. There must have been some group deliberation, some way of comparing candidates and determining finalists. So, there was forethought, there was methodology; there was planning.

From there, the church was willing to let go. At that point, they cast lots. They essentially flipped a coin. But, even though chance was involved, it was neither arbitrary nor negligent. It was an act of faith. Before they cast the lots, the church joined their voices together and made a prayerful petition to God, saying "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen." Whatever came of it, they chose to believe that God was at work in the result. So, the coin flip was not an act of faithlessness, but an act of trust.

In the summer of 1859, a French acrobat named Jean François Gravelet, known in America as one Charles Blondin, stretched a tightrope across Niagara Falls. As amazed onlookers placed bets on whether he would make it, Charles Blondin slowly inched his way over to the Canadian side of the falls. After a twenty-minute rest, he threw a camera on his back and headed back over to the American side, pausing in the middle to snap some photographs.

As the summer continued, Blondin upped the ante. Sometimes he walked the tightrope blindfolded. Sometimes he rode a bicycle across. Once he pushed a wheelbarrow and walked the rope on stilts. His most famous exploit was probably when he carried a little stove and utensils on his back, walked to the center of the cable, started a fire and cooked an omelet. When it was ready, he lowered the breakfast down to passengers on the deck of the Maid of the Mist.³

One showday, after he had already crossed the chasm once, Blondin called out to the crowd: "Do you believe I can carry someone across these falls on my shoulders?" The people yelled back in one, enthusiastic voice, "Yes, you can do it!"

"OK," he said, "who's coming with me?"

The crowd was completely silent. Nobody was willing to go. Finally, Blondin's manager agreed to be carried across. Maybe he figured he had to do it if he wanted to keep his famous client. Whatever his motivation, the man climbed up on Blondin's shoulders, and the two of them inched their way across the falls. Hundreds had yelled, "Yes, we believe!" But when it came time to really trust, only one was truly willing to trust.

So, the church prepared, and then it trusted. The people did their due diligence -- they clearly had some kind of process that led them to the two finalists, but in the end they let fate and chance decide. But there is one more really interesting thing about this story of

³ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-daredevil-of-niagara-falls-110492884/>

the early church that we have to bring into the analysis, and it is this: we are never told how it turned out. *Neither one of the two finalists is ever mentioned in scripture again.* Right after we read in verse 26 that “they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles,” Matthias disappears from the story. We are left to guess about what became of him. Did he drop out of the story because his ministry was a complete failure? Or could it have been that he joined the mission so seamlessly, so effortlessly, that there was no need to mention him because the body of Christ never missed a beat? Or, much more likely, was it a little bit of both?

And what about the other guy, “Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus”? Are we to assume that he 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 do great things? Could he have served Jesus faithfully for the rest of his life in a ministry that was amazing and fruitful, but just never made it into letters that survived the ages? We just don’t know.

The fact is, even after two millennia, the church is still debating about whether Lt. Dan or Forrest’s mom has it right. We dress it up to make it more dignified, but the basic question is the same. Reformed theologians like John Calvin have always leaned heavily toward the lieutenant’s view of destiny. Calvin wrote 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.⁴ On the other hand, Thomas Aquinas, in his brilliant theological summary, argued that everything that happens is *not* caused by God, at least not directly. If everything was foreseen by God, Aquinas said, that would mean that nothing would happen by chance, or luck, or just bad timing. And that didn’t make sense to him, because as he looked over the 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 (which we would never say), or we must confess that God is not pulling all the strings at every moment in every situation.⁵

That, however, does not mean that God is absent or uninvolved. God does not give people cancer, or start forest fires, or generate hurricanes to punish cities for their sins. But we do dare to believe that God is somehow present in all of it, operating within all people and all things in ways we cannot fathom. Bad things happen, but our God is ready to redeem it all, to repair the rifts, reconcile the breaks, restore the good, no matter what may come. Bad things happen, but, as theologian Shirley Guthrie says, “they hurt less when we know that God does not will and cause them to happen... [that our God] is God with [us] and [God] 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

So, I don’t know if God caused the coin toss to go Matthias’ way, or if it was, as Forrest would say, more “accidental-like.” In the larger view, however, it seems that God

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion, Vol 1*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, [2006]), 1.16.3, p. 200.

⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1022.htm#article2>

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

really did have a plan. We confuse ourselves if we try to trace the course of that plan through every day, or every moment, but, in the long view, God always seems to be working a divine purpose out. Maybe that's why we aren't told what happened to Matthias, or to "*Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus.*" But we do know what happened to the church – that it grew, that it spread, that it strengthened and preached the gospel and healed the sick and fed the hungry and welcomed strangers. And we do know that both of those men were part of God's plan for the church. Even if we don't know every twist and turn that the path took in their individual lives, taking the grander, higher, and longer view, we know that through it all God somehow worked divine purposes out.

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. So I will give Forrest the last word here, because I think he might really be on to something in all of this.

In that closing scene at the end of *Forrest Gump*, as Forrest stands over Jenny's grave, he presents this existential debate about whether life is predestined or random. And then he answers his own question. "I don't know if Mama was right or if it's Lieutenant Dan," he says. "I don't know if we each have a destiny, 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."⁷

I agree. I don't think God pulls every string in every moment, and if we try to make divine sense out of every microcosmic moment -- every stumble, every ache, every challenge – we will drive ourselves crazy. But I also think that God is somehow present in every little moment. Wherever we might be – whatever we might be feeling, or wanting, or needing, or hoping, I believe that God is right there with us, and that – whatever may happen in any given moment -- God does have a plan – and that plan is strong enough, and good enough, and faithful enough to redeem anything and reclaim anyone.

So, like the early church, we can do both. Like Peter, like James, like John and Matthias and "*Joseph called Barsabbas also known as Justus*"... we can, as people of **destiny**, plan and prepare. We can set a faithful course according to what we see, think, and feel. And then, as people of **trust**, we can give it to God. As we reach into life's box of chocolates, we will never know exactly what we are going to get. But, surrounded by the breath of God, we can offer the prayer that is strong in every age: "*Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us the way you have chosen.*"

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YpDgIL8gY8o>