

## Casting Lots

In the book of Joshua there came a time when the promised land had been subdued by Israel, and it was time for the tribes to settle down. Some of the tribes had already taken their portion of the land, but about half of the tribes had not yet received their land:

**Joshua 18:1-2:** “And the whole congregation of the children of Israel assembled together at Shiloh, and set up the tabernacle of the congregation there. And the land was subdued before them. And there remained among the children of Israel seven tribes, which had not yet received their inheritance.”

Joshua was not pleased at hearing this news. He commanded the Israelites to go out, look over the land, and bring a description of it to him. Once he had their information it would be time to allot it to the remaining tribes:

**Joshua 18:3-4:** “And Joshua said unto the children of Israel, How long are ye slack to go to possess the land, which the LORD God of your fathers hath given you? Give out from among you three men for each tribe: and I will send them, and they shall rise, and go through the land, and describe it according to the inheritance of them; and they shall come again to me.”

This was easy enough to do, but it raised a problem. Once Joshua had the information regarding the land they had just conquered, how would this land be divided up among the seven remaining tribes? This was *not* a trivial task! Once the land was given to the tribes it was to be theirs forever. The Mosaic Law did not allow tribes to swap land or sell it to others; once the land belonged to a tribe it would always belong to that tribe. When Joshua allocated the land he was setting its destiny in stone. That is where that tribe would be for the rest of the nation's existence.

As if that were not hard enough, there is the additional matter that land is not uniform. One piece of land is not the same as another piece of land. There are differences in terrain, in resources, in its relative location to important places, and so forth. Deciding who got what piece of land was a *really big decision*. How could anyone possibly make a decision like that?

If we were faced with this problem today there are several things we might do. We might form a committee and have them divide the land, but people would claim the results were unfair and that the best land was given to others. We might put it to a vote, but people would try to vote the best places for themselves at the expense of others. No matter what you did, someone would make the case that you messed up their future by giving the better land to someone else. Someone was going to be very unhappy.

The choice Joshua was going to have to make would impact millions of people for more than a thousand years. It was going to change the destiny of the nation and how history unfolded. So what did Joshua do? He *cast lots*:

**Joshua 18:8:** “And the men arose, and went away: and Joshua charged them that went to describe the land, saying, Go and walk through the land, and describe it, and come again to me, that I may here cast lots for you before the LORD in Shiloh.”

In modern terms, he flipped a coin. At the time it was actually possible to inquire of the Lord directly using something known as the Urim and the Thummim, but that is not what Joshua did. Instead he used the equivalent of random throws of a pair of dice to decide what tribe got what piece of land.

Why would Joshua use a coin toss to make such an important decision? The Bible gives us two reasons. The first is that casting lots keeps people from fighting over the result:

**Proverbs 18:18:** “The lot causeth contentions to cease, and parteth between the mighty.”

If you make a decision that favors one person over another then that could easily lead to a fight. However, if the decision is left up to a coin-toss then that changes everything. That is why issues like who goes first in a sporting competition are often decided by a coin toss – it is seen by everyone as a fair way to make that sort of decision. By “casting lots”, Joshua could divide up the land in a way that didn't show favoritism to anyone and that no one could really argue about.

There is another reason why lots were used. Did you notice that Joshua said he was going to cast lots before the Lord? That is because the Bible teaches that the outcome of casting lots is *not* random:

**Proverbs 16:33:** “The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord.”

The reason Joshua “cast lots” before the Lord was because he knew the Lord would use the outcome in order to make sure that each tribe got the land they were supposed to have. Joshua understood that the outcome was *not* random chance. God was in control of everything, including the casting of lots. There simply was no such thing as chance.

I realize this attitude seems a little strange, but that is because we don't usually think about it in that level of detail. We understand that God has an overall plan for history. God has given us prophecies about things that are going to happen in the future, and we know that God will bring those things to pass. We have seen God do that time and time again – the Bible is filled with fulfilled prophecy. We know that God is not *predicting* what is going to happen in the future; instead God is telling us that certain things are going to come to pass *because it is His will* for them to come to pass.

If God controls the future then God must also control the events that lead up to the future. If He didn't have that sort of power then the future He desires might never come to pass, because some event could come along that would push nations in a totally different direction. A small event in the past could cause a tremendous difference a few hundred years later. Sometimes world wars are started by small and seemingly insignificant events.

What we need to realize is that if God can control the future and the fate of nations, then He must also be able to control things on a much smaller scale as well – such as the outcome of casting lots. If God was unable to do a small thing as that then how could He possibly make promises about events far into the future? It is therefore not surprising that the Bible tells us the outcome of “casting lots” is of the Lord. It's not that there is something special about the lots themselves; they are not magical devices with supernatural powers. The reason “casting lots” works is because the lot is being cast in a universe that is under God's control, and since God has decided that history is going to turn out in a certain way He will make sure that nothing happens that could thwart His plan.

This is far from the only time that we see lots used in the Bible. In 1 Chronicles 24 and 25, King David set up a system of priests and other people to work in the temple. There were a great many people involved in those days, and they couldn't possibly all serve at once. A system had to be devised

in order to keep the temple running and make sure that everyone was in the right place and served at the right time.

There was a lot to think about here – this was a big decision that would impact the temple for hundreds of years. So how was this problem solved? By the casting of lots:

**1 Chronicles 25:8:** “And they cast lots, ward against ward, as well the small as the great, the teacher as the scholar.”

How was the land of Israel divided among the remaining tribes? By casting lots, and trusting that God would work through the lots in order to accomplish His will. How was the temple service divided among all the qualified families? By casting lots.

Those are not the only decisions that lots were used for in the Bible. There came a time much later in Israel's history when Nehemiah was working to rebuild Jerusalem and make it habitable again. At that time it was a dangerous thing to live in an unprotected and vulnerable city – especially in a land that was surrounded by hostile forces who might attack at any moment. Even so, *someone* had to live in the city or else the work would never be done and Jerusalem would never be livable again. But how could anyone make the decision about who should take that risk?

Nehemiah knew just what to do. He cast lots:

**Nehemiah 11:1:** “And the rulers of the people dwelt at Jerusalem: the rest of the people also cast lots, to bring one of ten to dwell in Jerusalem the holy city, and nine parts to dwell in other cities.”

The people did not form a committee to study the matter and decide who should move. Nor did Nehemiah make the determination himself, based on how well he knew people or who he thought made the most sense to move. No, instead they cast lots and left the decision up to the Lord.

We find this same approach to decision making in the New Testament as well. When Judas betrayed Jesus and then committed suicide, the ranks of the disciples dropped to 11 and a vacancy was opened. That vacancy needed to be filled, so the remaining disciples found two men who were both qualified candidates. However, who was the right person for the job? There was no obvious reason to choose one over the other. This was a momentous decision that would have a big impact on the church for the rest of its history – after all, God used the disciples to build the foundation of the church itself.

So what did the disciples do? They cast lots:

**Acts 1:24-26:** “And they prayed, and said, Thou, Lord, which knowest the hearts of all men, shew whether of these two thou hast chosen, That he may take part of this ministry and apostleship, from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place. And they gave forth their lots; and the lot fell upon Matthias; and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.”

Joshua cast lots before the Lord, and divided up the land of Canaan based on the outcome of those lots. The disciples prayed to the Lord and cast their lots, and upon that basis Matthias became numbered with the apostles. Notice that they did not treat the lots as if they were some kind of magical items; instead they prayed to the Lord, cast the lots, and accepted the decision that resulted.

It's true that there are many decisions in the Bible that were *not* made by lots. However, we can see why these particular decisions were good candidates for that model. When it came to dividing the

land, that was an enormous task that was a very poor fit for a decision by committee. Casting lots to divide the land was much more fair, was far less prone to corruption, and removed a burden that was otherwise unbearable. No one could possibly be “fair” in a decision like that, but by casting lots it could be handled quite nicely.

The same thing was true for the division of workers in the temple. Everyone was qualified, but who could possibly decide who should serve first in the year and who should serve last? If a committee tried to decide that it would just lead to hurt feelings and cries of favoritism. By casting lots the whole thing became much more fair and equitable.

When it came to deciding who had to take the risk of living in Jerusalem, that would also be a terrible decision for any leader to make. Which of your people do you put in danger? How could you fairly make a decision like that? But by casting lots, the decision was removed from the hands of men and there was no question of bribes or corruption. Everyone understood the basis for the decision and why people got what they did.

It may seem strange that an *apostle* was chosen by casting lots, but there were two excellent candidates and only one vacancy. By casting lots there were no hard feelings. No one had to worry about voting for the guy who lost, and there was no question about secret deals or favoritism. A lot of potential strife was removed – and there was no way to lose because both candidates were qualified.

So what does this have to do with us today? I find it fascinating that so much of what we find in the Bible is completely foreign to the way we run our churches. I have never seen a church make a decision by casting lots, even though that practice is quite common in the Bible. However, I have seen churches make many decisions by voting, even though voting is nowhere to be found in the pages of Scripture! Voting definitely existed in Bible times, because the chief priests voted to put Jesus to death; people knew about voting back then but yet no apostle ever suggested that it be used as a part of church government.

Getting rid of voting is pretty unthinkable today, but that is because we have gotten *very* far from the model of church that is found in the Bible. Today when we talk about “going to church” what we mean is going on a Sunday morning to a large, expensive building, where we will sit in a pew (or row of chairs) alongside a lot of other people that we may or may not know. Over the next 60 to 90 minutes we will sing a few songs together, collect an offering, and then listen to a sermon. After the pastor has finished delivering the sermon (which we listen to without saying anything) we go home. The church building has a paid staff which do most of the work, and a small group of deacons or elders who do the rest; the role of most members is to show up, give money, and then go home without having done much of anything or interacted with anyone. Nearly all of the money that is collected is spent on maintaining the church building and paying the full-time staff, because it takes hundreds of thousands of dollars to run a church building, even if only a hundred or so people attend. These “churches” are incorporated as nonprofit corporations (for tax exemption purposes), and have regular business meetings to review the church finances and vote on whatever needs to be decided.

Do we find this model anywhere in the New Testament? *No, we do not.* When the New Testament speaks of the Corinthian Church it refers to the group of Christians who live in Corinth. It was *not* speaking about a building, because no New Testament church had a dedicated building where they met to have worship services! In fact, there are *no verses* in the New Testament that command Christians to go around building dedicated church buildings. That simply wasn't how things were done in the days of the apostles. Instead of making the trip to an enormous and expensive church campus, Christians met in small groups in people's homes. While they were there they would sing songs and talk to one another and confess their sins to one another and pray for one another. Everyone who had something to say spoke up and said it. If a preacher had a message to give he gave it, and it was

discussed on the spot and people asked (and answered) questions. It wasn't a 60-minute service with a long monologue at the end; instead it was a highly interactive event that lasted until people were done. On top of that, these same people met regularly throughout the week to eat meals together. This was actually a vital part of the service, because when you eat a meal with other people regularly you can really get to know them. (Compare eating one or two meals a week with someone to sitting behind someone in church. After a year, which do you think will result in a stronger relationship?)

The “early church” model had a whole lot of things going for it. If you are meeting in small groups in people's homes then you don't have to worry about paying for an expensive building (or maintaining it, or paying taxes on it). If each of the small groups has qualified leaders then you don't have to force a single pastor to somehow try to meet the needs of hundreds or thousands of people. Each small group will get to know one another and will work together *as a body* (as opposed to the current model, where most of the body has nothing to do). It also means you don't need full-time staff, which *drastically* cuts down on overhead! That, in turn, means that you can dedicate a much larger portion of the offerings (which were *not* collected every week) to things like missions and helping the poor.

The modern church is designed to put all the work on the paid staff, and to minimize interaction by everyone else. You can faithfully attend a church all year and not learn anything substantial about the people who are sitting on the row behind you. However, if you attend a small house church faithfully for a year and have a meal every week with that small group, you would get to know them really well. Given a small and highly interactive setting, it suddenly becomes possible for you to help them and for them to help you.

The same goes for the sermon. When a pastor gets in front of 200 people, gives a monologue for an hour, and then sits down without taking any questions, he has no way of knowing how much of his message got across (if any of it did). No one can interrupt him and ask for clarification, and no one can correct him if he makes some terrible mistake. You can try to catch the pastor after the sermon to talk to him, but no pastor is very receptive to answering a whole bunch of questions, and if everyone did that he would have a real problem on his hands. However, in a small group setting people could easily ask questions, or bring up their own points, or discuss how to apply the message to their lives. The whole situation changes and discipleship actually becomes possible.

The problem is we are used to doing things in a certain way, and we think the way that things have always been done is the best way – even though, if we are honest, our way hasn't produced very good results. Church attendance numbers are dropping rapidly, people are not engaged, and very little spiritual growth is happening. If we take a look at what we are doing and try to find it in the Bible, we might be surprised to learn that there isn't much resemblance between our way of doing things and the pattern we see in the Word of God. It's possible that if we take a step back and try things a little bit differently, we might get different results.

In the Bible people cast lots to make some very important decisions. Once we reach a point where doing things in the way we see in the Bible is unthinkable, and instead we do things in ways that cannot be found anywhere in the Bible, then it becomes clear that we have lost our way and are mired in our traditions.