

WORSHIP SERVICE - 9.28.2025

PART 34 - PROVIDENCE AND MISSION

I. INTRODUCTION

- Many of us know the pain of division in our families, workplaces, or even in the church.
- The scene Luke gives us at the end of ch15 is of Paul and Barnabas in conflict.
- But Luke also shows us something greater: even through disagreements and detours, God's providence keeps His mission advancing.
- The mission of God cannot fail, because God providentially directs it.

II. A PROVIDENTIAL PARTING

Acts 15:36-41

And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are." 37 Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. 38 But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. 39 And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, 40 but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. 41 And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

DETERMINATION TO VISIT THE CHURCHES

- We now transition to the beginning of what is referred to as Paul's Second Missionary Journey.
- "After some many days"... Paul suggests revisiting the churches from their first trip. He wanted to see how the brothers were doing.

DISAGREEMENT ON MINISTRY NEEDS

- Barnabas agreed and he wanted to bring John Mark.
- This is the same John Mark that had assisted them on their first missionary journey (13:5) and had left them and returned to Jerusalem (13:13).
- Barnabas wants to give him a second chance but Paul strongly objects.
- Their disagreement was sharp.
- What are we to make of this conflict?

- Barnabas, the son of encouragement, who could see the good in others. If there was anyone who could be trusted to assess the spiritual character of someone, it was Barnabas.
- Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, was more rational and pragmatic. If anyone could be trusted to properly assess missional fitness and readiness it was Paul.
- Who was right? Paul? Barnabas? Both of them?

DECISION TO PART WAYS

- Disagreements, even between godly men, are real.
- The outcome is that neither side prevailed in convincing the other.
- Paul and Barnabas could not reconcile at this moment and they decided to separate from each other.
- Barnabas takes Mark and they sail to Cyprus.
- Paul chose Silas and they headed up through Syria and Cilicia.
- Despite this separation, the gospel mission did not stall.
- The result of the split is that the mission is multiplied.
- God providentially uses the rift to double the missionary effort, working through their weaknesses.
- Paul and Barnabas both continue in fruitful ministry.
- Sometimes the godliest of leaders will see things differently.
- But here's what is important for us to see—God can even work through our divisions and disagreements to accomplish his plans.
- God is able to bring himself glory even in our failures and weaknesses.
- Even when God's servants bicker, His Spirit continues to work, the gospel marches on!
- We don't know God's sovereign purposes for such things as this disagreement.
- That is humbling and comforting.
- We can trust God to be working out his will even in what looks like failure, disagreement and disunity.
- And what of Mark? At the time Paul saw him as a liability and he wasn't willing to give him a second chance. But Barnabas did.
- Be like Barnabas! Be an encourager, lift people up when they fall and fail.
- Mark's failures weren't the end of his story.
- Years later, Paul would call Mark a fellow worker in his letter to Philemon. (Philemon 1:24)
- Though Paul once rejected Mark for ministry, when he was in prison, he wrote to Timothy, "Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is very useful to me for ministry." (2 Tim 4:11)
- And Mark has a gospel attributed to him.
- God restores fallen servants and multiplies His work in ways we cannot see in the moment.
- Maybe you feel like your failures have disqualified you for usefulness to God and ministry.
- God's providence governs even your failures, God is using them for his divine purposes.
- God uses broken people and broken plans to accomplish his sovereign will.
- Your story is not over—far from it!

III. A PROVIDENTIAL PREFERENCE

Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. 2 He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. 3 Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. 4 As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem. 5 So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.

A STRATEGIC CHOICE

- In Lystra, they encounter a young man named Timothy, a young disciple with a believing Jewish mother and a Greek father.
- What Luke immediately notes is his reputation, “He was well spoken of by the brothers...”
- Timothy is a prominent figure in Paul’s ministry.
- Two pastoral letters written to him from Paul
- He is mentioned in several of Paul’s letters and is the person most mentioned by Paul.
- Paul comes to call him his “true child in the faith.” (1 Tim 1:2)
- There is a warmth and affection in Paul and Timothy’s relationship.
- Paul determines they need to take Timothy along with them.

A CULTURAL ACCOMMODATION

- Timothy’s background is crucial to understanding why Paul has him circumcised before taking him along.
- v3 Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.
- The Jerusalem Council had ruled that circumcision was not required for salvation.
- But because Timothy was both Jewish and Gentile, his uncircumcision would have closed doors among the Jews they hoped to reach.
- So what Paul did was strategic so that there would be no impediment to proclaiming the gospel to the Jews first, as was his custom.
- Paul circumcised Timothy—not to add to the gospel, but to remove barriers to it.
- He would not allow circumcision as a requirement for salvation, but he embraced it here so that nothing would hinder Jews from hearing Christ.
- Sometimes gospel liberty means laying down our rights for the sake of mission. That is gospel wisdom.
- Paul is demonstrating cultural accommodation by removing barriers to the gospel among the Jews.
- Paul later wrote, “I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.
- Timothy was now equipped for cross-cultural missions work (1 Cor 9:22-23).
- We too must ask, what obstacles might we be putting in the way of others hearing the gospel?
- Missionaries do this all the time, they accommodate and adapt to the cultures they are trying to reach.
- We can remove obstacles to the gospel by making sure our life matches our confession and showing hospitality to those outside of our comfort zones.
- We need to always evaluate our ministry methods, practices, and programs and be willing to alter them if they hinder gospel outreach.

- Are you willing to lay down your preferences, comforts, and even freedoms so that Christ may be known?
- Through Paul's own preferences and choices, the unseen hand of providence was guiding Paul to meet Timothy and make the decision to take him on his travels.
- As they traveled, they delivered the letter with the decisions reached by the apostles and elders of the Jerusalem Church.
- The result was unity and the strengthening and increase of the church.

IV. A PROVIDENTIAL PREVENTION

Acts 16:6-10

And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. 7 And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. 8 So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. 9 And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." 10 And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

FORBIDDEN PASSAGE

- The ministry team heads north traversing Phrygia and Galatia.
- They wanted to go into the Roman province of Asia, but the Holy Spirit forbade them from preaching the word in Asia.
- They tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.
- We don't know exactly how they were hindered, but they were prevented providentially.
- It seems strange to us that the Spirit of the Lord would prevent them from preaching the gospel in those areas.
- What is evident in the narrative is the Spirit's active direction in missionary strategy.
- The Spirit of the Lord is not a passive presence in missional endeavors.
- God providentially hindered them from those areas because in God's plan the missional priority shifts so that the gospel can cross over into Europe.

THE SPIRIT'S DIRECTION

- They travel east through northern Asia and through Mysia, down to the coastal city of Troas.
- It is there Paul received the vision of an open door for ministry; a man of Macedonia standing in front of him urging him to come over to Macedonia and help them.
- God revealed his plan through a vision.
- Paul relayed the vision and together they concluded, this is the Lord! They determine together to cross the Aegean to bring the good news to the Macedonians.
- The whole thrust of this passage is that it is the triune God guiding the worldwide mission of the spread of the gospel.
- Paul wasn't failing—he was being redirected!
- God works through these means. Closed doors can feel frustrating.
- God's providence sometimes says "no" so He can lead us to His better "yes."
- Closed doors are not failures, they are redirections.

- When God closes doors in your life, ministry plans, job opportunities, or personal desires, don't mistake it for abandonment or failure.
- It may be his hand of providence guiding you into something greater than you could have planned.
- What we need to learn is to use godly wisdom and discernment to understand what the Lord desires for us.
- The ministry team had to "conclude that God was leading them elsewhere..." that implies that they had to evaluate and put all the puzzle pieces together.
- There is a mystery to God's providence. His ways are inscrutable. (Rom 11:33)
- Notice there is no formula here, they didn't understand God's will from day one.
- They had to discern his plan each step of the way.
- We think it would be easier if God always led us to his will by giving us visions and direct instructions.
- This is where trust and obedience are essential to the Christian life. Trusting that God is at work for our good in every circumstance of our life.
- Our only responsibility is to remain faithful to the Lord wherever and however he leads us along the pilgrim journey.
- Remain sensitive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, following his revealed will in Scripture, and seek godly counsel along the way.
- Sometimes the doors open; other times they shut. There is purpose in both of those.

CONCLUSION

- The mission of God cannot fail—not because Paul and Barnabas always agreed, not because Timothy was the perfect partner, not because Paul's plans always worked, but because the sovereign Lord directs His gospel to the ends of the earth.
- He is actively at work, providentially guiding the whole missionary and evangelistic endeavor.
- Trust Him with your life. Trust Him with your failures.
- He's using all things, both good and bad to bring about his good plans and purposes concerning you.
- Trust Him when the doors close and when others open.
- Trust that God is providentially at work in your life, as a loving Father, leading and guiding you to his purposes.
- And keep the gospel central!
- God's providence will not fail you and His gospel promises will not fail this world!

APPLICATION AND REFLECTION

In light of today's message....

- What did I learn about the gospel?
- How can I apply what I learned about the gospel to my life?
- With whom can I share the gospel this week?