

The Journey Begins Again

Acts 15:36-16:5

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In the church, we should always strive for unity, but that doesn't always happen. Fortunately, God is not hindered by our failures, and that fact has given rise to an interesting phrase: multiplication by division. Of course, from a mathematical standpoint, you can't multiply by dividing. But from a practical standpoint, sometimes that's exactly what happens. A church splits and two new churches grow out of it. Both can end up being fruitful for the Lord.

This is not the ideal design, of course. While there are times when we may choose to divide and conquer, the hope would be that we are always doing those things voluntarily and in agreement and cooperation with one another. But God can ultimately use both types of division to multiply the impact He brings into the world.

Our passage this morning is both sad and encouraging. We see the great missionary team of Paul and Barnabas split up, but we also see two new ministry teams form as well. And despite the division with which they began, we know God ultimately brought blessing and restoration out of it at the end.

A New Plan

After the Jerusalem council, when Paul and Barnabas had returned to Antioch, Paul hatched a new plan.

³⁶ After some time Paul said to Barnabas, "Let's go back and visit each city where we previously preached the word of the Lord, to see how the new believers are doing." ³⁷ Barnabas agreed and wanted to take along John Mark. (Acts 15:36-37, NLT)

Paul approached Barnabas and suggested they return to the churches they had planted before and check on them. Though Paul's calling was as a pioneering evangelist, he still had the heart of a pastor. He didn't want to see these new believers languish, and he likely suspected they would come under attack from the same kinds of false teaching the church in Antioch had dealt with, so he may have desired to go to them and share the decisions of the Jerusalem council as a way of inoculating them against false teaching.

Barnabas agreed with Paul's plan. As the son of encouragement, it is no surprise that he would have been eager to build up these new churches, ensuring they were on solid ground. He and Paul were in agreement...until he suggested that they take John Mark with them again.

Suddenly, they had a problem.

³⁸ But Paul disagreed strongly, since John Mark had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in their work. ³⁹ Their disagreement was so

sharp that they separated. Barnabas took John Mark with him and sailed for Cyprus. ⁴⁰ Paul chose Silas, and as he left, the believers entrusted him to the Lord's gracious care. ⁴¹ Then he traveled throughout Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches there. (Acts 15:38-41, NLT)

Paul was not ok with bringing John Mark along with them. If you recall, Mark had left Paul and Barnabas shortly after beginning their first missionary journey. He had accompanied them across Cyprus, but when they arrived in Pamphylia, Mark decided to head home. We don't know exactly what led to that decision. It could have been that he realized missionary work wasn't as glamorous as he thought, or maybe that he'd gotten sick and headed home, or any number of other reasons. We may have felt that Mark's decision to return home was completely justified. Paul, however, did not. Paul viewed Mark's departure as an abandonment, likely not only of he and Barnabas, but of the gospel!

You can almost imagine the way the conversation went. Barnabas said, "Let's give Mark another chance. I think he'll do better this time." Paul responded, "No way! I'm not about to bring someone with us who will run home at the first sign of trouble. I need someone I can depend on, and he's shown me that I can't depend on him." I imagine Barnabas coming to his defense, "Paul, he was young. He had a lot to learn. He made some mistakes, but he's learned from them. His strengths far outweigh his weaknesses."

However the conversation actually went, Paul was adamant that he would not take John Mark along with him. Barnabas was equally as adamant that he would. As a result, they split up and formed two missionary teams.

I find myself saddened at this. Paul and Barnabas had gone through a lot together. They had experienced great joys and deep lows. They had shared many experiences and likely had many hours of long talks along the roads of the Roman Empire. Seeing this partnership end makes me sad.

Maybe you've had an experience like this before. I know I have. You serve alongside someone for years, sharing all sorts of experiences. You feel like you know each other well and love and care for one another. And then something happens that causes that partnership to break apart. It's painful. I feel for Paul and Barnabas here, because they both likely experienced grief at this decision to separate.

So, who was right? I don't know. I understand Paul's desire not to take someone who had proven themselves unfaithful before. There's the old adage, "Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me." From that perspective, I see the wisdom of Paul's actions. For what was likely to be an arduous journey, it made much more sense to take people along who had shown themselves to be reliable.

But, I also see Barnabas' perspective. Barnabas didn't want to write off John Mark because of a singular failure in his past. I suspect Barnabas saw potential in Mark and recognized that young and inexperienced people are likely to make mistakes along the

way. That's part and parcel of raising up the next generation. And if Mark had seen the error of his ways, I get wanting to give him another chance to prove himself.

In truth, I don't think we can say that one was right and the other wrong. We know that eventually Mark did prove himself as a faithful minister of the gospel. So much so, that at the end of Paul's life, he asked for Mark to come to him because he was helpful to him in his ministry.

With Barnabas and Mark forming a new team, Paul was also left to form a new team. So Paul selected Silas as his new partner. Silas had been one of the messengers who came from the Jerusalem church to deliver the message from the council. He had distinguished himself as a trusted leader in Jerusalem and Paul must have been pleased with what he had done in Antioch. So the two of them decided to head out on this new endeavor together.

They were commissioned by the church in Antioch and headed out to visit the churches Paul and Barnabas had previously founded. But they went the wrong way! When Paul and Barnabas had traveled the first time, they'd gone to Cyprus, then traveled north and back to the east. This time, Paul and Silas headed north initially and then headed west!

We are told they visited the churches throughout Syria and Cilicia. We don't know how many of these churches there were or how exactly they were founded. Syria was where Antioch was, so it is not too surprising that there would have been other churches in the region. Cilicia was where Tarsus was located, Paul's hometown. It's possible that during his stay in Tarsus, Paul had helped found these churches too, but we don't know that for sure.

Nonetheless, we see Paul and Silas doing exactly what they set out to do. They were strengthening the churches and encouraging them. They were helping these churches that were far away from Jerusalem to feel connected to the rest of the body of Christ, and they were surely instructing them in how to deal with many of the practical issues of living for Christ.

Both missionary teams are a reminder to us that Christians need connection and constant feeding. It's not enough to have a one-time experience with Jesus. We must remain connected to Him and to the church at large if we want to continue growing in faith. Both Paul and Barnabas understood this, and though they went different directions, they were both working toward the same goal.

Paul and Silas

We don't really hear much about Barnabas for the rest of the book of Acts, as Luke chooses primarily to focus on Paul's ministry from this point forward. We know Barnabas and Mark went to Cyprus, but the Bible doesn't record any more than that.

It does, however, record where Paul and Silas went after they visited the churches of Syria and Cilicia.

Paul went first to Derbe and then to Lystra, where there was a young disciple named Timothy. His mother was a Jewish believer, but his father was a Greek.² Timothy was well thought of by the believers in Lystra and Iconium,³ so Paul wanted him to join them on their journey. In deference to the Jews of the area, he arranged for Timothy to be circumcised before they left, for everyone knew that his father was a Greek. (Acts 16:1-3, NLT)

After visiting and encouraging the churches north of Antioch, they turned to the west and headed back in the direction of the towns Paul and Barnabas had visited before. He went to Derbe, a place where they had enjoyed a great deal of success previously. After that, they returned to Lystra, the town where Paul had been stoned and left for dead.

I wonder what Silas thought about this plan. Surely Paul had told him about his reception in that city before. I think it shows us something of the character of both of these men as they walked into a city they fully expected to be hostile toward them.

While they were there, Paul became acquainted with a young man named Timothy. Timothy may have come to faith during Paul's previous visit to the city. While we can't be sure of that, we do know that Timothy had wonderfully faithful Jewish women in his life. His mother and grandmother had worked to instill in Timothy faith in the God of Israel, even though Timothy's father was Greek. That's really all we know about his father. We don't know that he was a believer, and we aren't even sure he was still living at this point.

We do know that Paul took Timothy under his wing and viewed him as his own son. He loved Timothy and saw great potential in him. He had already earned a good reputation for himself in the area (in both Lystra and Iconium), and Paul thought it would be wise to take Timothy along with them on their journeys.

I suspect Paul believed that not only could Timothy be a useful and helpful addition to the team, but that this would serve as an excellent training ground for this young leader. Eventually, Paul entrusted Timothy to be a pastor of the church of Ephesus. Timothy was young and had his work cut out for him, but Paul believed in him and was proud of the work he was doing.

But these verses record a strange detail for us. Before they headed out, Paul had Timothy circumcised, because his father was a Greek. After the whole issue with the Jerusalem council, and after Paul had argued so vigorously against those who insisted Gentile believers needed to be circumcised, it seems incongruous for Paul to ask Timothy to be circumcised now, right?

We must understand why Paul had Timothy circumcised, because that reveals the difference. Paul argued strongly against anyone who said circumcision was necessary for salvation. Paul knew that it absolutely was not required. Salvation was through the grace of Christ alone. Paul did not have Timothy circumcised as a means of saving him though. Paul had Timothy circumcised as a way of removing hindrances to the gospel.

In other words, Paul knew that some Jews wouldn't listen to anything Timothy had to say, because they would have viewed him as a godless Gentile. In order for Timothy to be able to be heard, he would need to be circumcised. The fact that Timothy consented to this gives us a glimpse into his mind. He was more concerned with the spread of the gospel than he was with what it might cost him.

This principle is something Paul taught clearly in his letters—we should be more concerned with what is best for the Kingdom than we are what is most comfortable, preferable, or easiest for us. This raises a question: what are you willing to endure for the gospel? Are you willing to be inconvenienced, to go without something, to give of your energy, to be embarrassed, to devote some of the time you could be using for leisure or relaxation? Timothy's example reminds us that we should be willing to give up the things of this world to reach others with the gospel.

After Timothy's circumcision, they departed for the remainder of their journey, seeking to visit the churches Paul had planted before.

⁴ Then they went from town to town, instructing the believers to follow the decisions made by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. ⁵ So the churches were strengthened in their faith and grew larger every day. (Acts 16:4-5, NLT)

As they traveled to the churches, they informed them of the decisions of the Jerusalem council. They were hoping to prevent these churches from being led astray into a legalistic gospel, knowing there were many who were trying to convince them of exactly that. They continued to teach and build up these churches, so they would continue to serve the Lord faithfully in their absence. The result of these efforts was that each day, the church continued to grow.

Conclusion

So as we conclude this passage that gives us the origin story of Paul's second missionary journey, let's draw some lessons from it.

First, past failure doesn't disqualify you from being used by the Lord. Failure has the potential to be our greatest teacher. It should lead us to a place of self-reflection. When you mess up, whether it's by falling into sin, by making a huge mistake, by making a poor decision or whatever else, don't allow your failure to define you. Ask yourself what you can learn from it, and what you need to change to be an even better servant of the Lord. Often, those who have failed are much more gracious to those around them as well. So don't let your failures define you. Let them teach you, and they will not be wasted.

Second, God's plans are not thwarted by our failures. I'm not sure if either Paul or Barnabas actually failed in the breakup of their partnership. Maybe their personalities just weren't going to mesh anymore. I'd like to believe that if they'd taken a bit more time, they could have worked through things and come to an agreement, but that may not be true. What we do know is that God wasn't hindered by the fact that these two

men separated. In fact, He caused the ministry to multiply and raised up new leaders. Was the breakup of Paul and Barnabas God's will? I don't know. But I do know that God used it. So when you feel discouraged in ministry; when you feel like you've failed and let the Lord down, remember that He isn't hindered by your foolishness or failure. Maybe it's not the right or ideal way, but God can still work through it.

Third, if we want to see a new generation of leaders, we must be patient with them and champion their efforts. Ironically, though Paul and Barnabas disagreed on John Mark, they seemed to agree on the need to champion younger believers who would become leaders in the church. They both brought young men under their wings and helped them grow into the kind of leaders the church needed. I can't imagine it was all smooth sailing. Surely both Mark and Timothy made mistakes. And they were surely different than their mentors. Timothy was not Paul, but he did have many skills he could use for the Lord. Paul chose to be patient with him and encourage him to use the gifts God had given him.

If you've ever tried to cook or build something with a child, you know that it's probably going to take you longer and be messier than if you did it on your own. But you also know that's the only way they'll be able to learn to do things for themselves. We must be patient with young leaders, even though the process of letting them learn will likely be slower and messier than we'd prefer. Champion them, look for the ways they are improving and highlight their successes, rather than berating them with all the ways they aren't who we'd like them to be yet. Choose to encourage them and celebrate their progress. Encourage them to be all who God made them to be. If we do, we will see the next generation of Marks and Timothys being raised up in our midst.

Finally, effective ministry often requires sacrifice. Timothy's willingness to be circumcised showed an incredible dedication to the ministry he felt God had called him to. How often do we avoid doing what God has called us to because of what it might cost us? I think of many missionaries and pastors who give up the things the world says are important, because they place a greater value on the ministry the Lord has called them to. But this attitude shouldn't be limited to those in full-time ministry. We should be willing to be inconvenienced and to sacrifice certain things on the altar of carrying out God's calling. What would you most struggle to give up if God called you to? There's a good chance whatever that thing is might be holding you back from being all God has called you to be. We must learn that our lives are about something bigger than our comforts and pleasures. When we recognize the great importance of serving the Lord, everything else must become secondary.

Paul and Barnabas recognized God had given them a job to do. That job was to bring the gospel to people who had never heard it, but they recognized the job didn't stop there. They needed to build up churches and the young believers, so they could become mature and stand on their own, multiplying the work of the kingdom. We should have the same focus. Building God's Kingdom should be our top priority. If we will do that, we'll see it spread in the same way that Paul, Barnabas, and the others did.

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