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Acts 15:36-16:10

Twenty-fourth Message

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## THE SPIRIT'S GUIDANCE: SENSITIVITY AND SECURITY

*SERIES: THE SPREADING FLAME*

Before leaving this earth, Jesus promised that when the Spirit came he would give power to witness, and he then commissioned his witnesses to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth. The book of Acts traces the fulfillment of this promise. In chapter 15 we looked at Paul's first missionary journey and that first Church council in Jerusalem when grace was on trial. The disciples made a unanimous decision which gave the Church an identity apart from Judaism and liberated the gospel to being good news for the whole world. Paul and Barnabas returned home from that meeting rejoicing, bringing with them the wonderful news that Gentile believers did not have to be circumcised or adopt a Jewish lifestyle in order to be saved.

Before long Paul was planning another road trip. His goal was simply to repeat the first journey, returning to the churches which he had established on Cyprus and in Asia Minor and Galatia. However, he soon found himself many miles away on a detour, crossing the Aegean Sea to what we now know as Europe, in obedience to a vision. This redirecting of the apostle's life was a critical turning point in the history of the world, more important than Columbus's voyage from Spain or Vasco da Gama's discovering the all-water trade route to the East Indies. Although invading Europe with the gospel wasn't necessarily in Paul's mind it certainly was in God's mind and in the mind of the Spirit. Europe would eventually become the main base for missionary outreach to the rest of the world. Thus it was from there that the gospel fanned out to the great continents of Africa, Asia, North America and South America.

How was Paul redirected from his printed Mapquest itinerary, which included following up on churches in Galatia and Asia Minor, to the continent of Europe? The answer to this question does not fit neatly into some of the formulas we often use to discover God's will. Paul probably did not understand what was going on until much later in his life, when he sat down with Luke and reflected on it. In retrospect, the apostle's journey is a rich collage of events that speak very powerfully to the issue of God's providence in our life. We will move fairly quickly through the text and then spend some time reflecting on its application to our lives.

On this particular journey the disciples will break new ground, establishing churches in three Roman provinces which they did not visit on the first missionary journey when they concentrated on the provinces of Cyprus and Galatia. On this trip they will preach the gospel in Macedonia, which is northern Greece, in Achaia, which is southern Greece, and in Asia,

which is southwest Turkey. In each case they will include the capital city in their itinerary. They will visit Thessalonica, the capital of Macedonia, Corinth, the capital of Achaia (where they will stay for 18 months), and Ephesus, the capital of Asia. In each case, Paul will later write a letter or multiple letters to these churches: the letters to the Thessalonians, the Corinthians, and the Ephesians.

We pick up the story in Acts 15:36.

**After some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are." (Acts 15:36 NASB)**

This was a wonderful suggestion. They wanted to retrace their steps on their first journey, from Antioch to the island of Cyprus, traveling across the island from Salamis to Paphos, and then to Asia Minor, up into Galatia, visiting all the churches in Iconium, Lystra, Perga and Derbe. The Greek word translated visit implies more than our English word does. "Episcopal," which means to give pastoral care, derives from this term. They wanted to encourage new believers, to teach more about God's grace, share the results of the Jerusalem Council, correct any false teaching, and build up the leaders of the churches.

This was a valuable mission for a great team who worked well together. From the beginning, when Barnabas found Paul in Tarsus and brought him to Antioch, their relationship was special. Barnabas's strong relational gifts, teamed with Paul's great intellect, were an invaluable combination. The experiences they shared on their first journey bonded them as a powerful unit.

But it was not to be. Not only will God change the itinerary, the players will change, too.

**Barnabas wanted to take John, called Mark, along with them also. But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. And there occurred such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and left, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord. (15:37-40)**

On their first missionary journey together, John Mark had left them in Pamphylia. There could have been a number of reasons for his departure: the difficulties and discomforts of that journey, Paul's growing preeminence over Barnabas, Mark's pampered upbringing. Whatever the reason, Paul con-

sidered it desertion. Barnabas, John Mark's cousin, saw the situation differently. He always did. He was the optimist, the encourager, the lover. He wanted to give Mark another chance. He may even have been offended by Paul's rejection of Mark. This wasn't a mild difference of opinion. The term Luke uses, translated "sharp disagreement" (verse 39), is the word from which we derive our English word paroxysm, which means a sudden or uncontrollable expression of emotion. This was an intense, heated, emotion-filled discussion, so passionate that it couldn't be resolved.

Who was right? Scholars have the own paroxysms debating the issue. This was a perfect illustration of the problem of balancing the interests of the individual with the work as a whole. Maybe both were right. Barnabas can't be blamed for wanting to give his cousin a second chance; Paul can't be condemned for fearing to trust him again. Depending on how God has made and gifted us we can come down on one side or the other in this conflict.

The unthinkable happened. Paul and Barnabas went their separate ways in the service of Christ. This is the last we read of Barnabas in Acts as he parts company with the most influential servant of Christ ever. He takes John Mark and sails to Cyprus, and in doing so sails out of recorded history. Paul leaves the man to whom he owed more than any other person.

**And he was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.**

**Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. And a disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek, and he was well spoken of by the brethren who were in Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted this man to go with him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. (15:41-16:3)**

This time in Lystra must have been an emotional period for Paul. This was where he had received the stiffest opposition. In fact, he was stoned and tossed out of the city; everyone thought he was dead. Arriving in Lystra, he was immediately impressed with a young man named Timothy. This man and his Jewish mother probably had become believers during Paul's first missionary journey. His father was Greek (the verb tense in verse 3 leads some scholars to think the father was no longer alive at this point).

Was Timothy part of that circle of disciples who stood around the bloody and beaten Paul and prayed for him? Had he been drawn to the gospel the same way the apostle had been through the stoning of Stephen? Paul had gone through a Stephen-like experience, though not to the point of death. Timothy watched and was drawn to the Christ for whom Paul was willing to suffer so graciously. Apparently Timothy had demonstrated tremendous spiritual growth in the few years since Paul's first trip. He is ready to respond when the apostle asks him to join him and Silas. So a rare and beautiful friend-

ship was born. Paul grew to love Timothy, even calling him his own son.

Timothy the teenager begins his missionary career in a rather memorable way—with a circumcision ceremony! Some scholars wonder why Paul had Timothy circumcised when the apostle had fought so hard at the Council of Jerusalem to resist circumcision in the case of Titus, who was a pure Greek. But Timothy was both Jew and Greek. Paul knew that Timothy would maximize his evangelism opportunities among Jews if he were circumcised. Without it he would continually offend Jews. Thus Timothy agreed to remove that stumbling block.

So now the team expands to Paul, Silas and Timothy. Timothy is a great asset. Being half-Gentile and half-Jewish, he could bridge both cultures. Had Mark come along they might not have been able to take on another intern. Perhaps God used the failure of Paul's relationship with Mark and Barnabas to soften him and help him in his training of young Timothy.

So the expanded team continues the missionary road trip.

**Now while they were passing through the cities, they were delivering the decrees which had been decided upon by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem, for them to observe. So the churches were being strengthened in the faith, and were increasing in number daily.**

**They passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia; and after they came to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them; (16:4-7)**

They revisit the churches which Paul had established earlier, teaching and encouraging new believers. When Paul finished his ministry in Galatia he wanted to go southwest and minister in Asia (not the continent of Asia, but the small province called Asia that we looked at earlier, where Ephesus is located). Apparently the apostle desired to go straight across Turkey to Ephesus, in the province of Asia. He could take the Via Sebaste, about 150 miles to Colossae and another 150 miles to Ephesus. But the Lord frustrated his attempt. Later we learn that he did go to Ephesus, but it was not God's will for him to go there at this point.

Paul then tried to go north to Bithynia to minister in the prosperous cities around the Black Sea. But again he was hindered. How did the Holy Spirit restrain them? We are not told. Was it through the removal of a subjective sense of peace? Through difficult circumstances? Did he have transportation problems? Was it an illness? We know that Luke, who was a doctor, joined them right after this in Troas. In verse 10 the pronouns change from "they" to "we." Maybe Paul was ill and needing a doctor and they met Luke in Troas. We don't know how God restrained them. We are not told.

But though he is frustrated, Paul knows that God is in control of his life. The Spirit had something in mind. He had not brought them this far without planning something for them.

There seemed only one alternative. They had come from the east, and they cannot go either north or south, so they continue to move west, the only direction allowed.

**and passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. A vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." When he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. (16:8-10)**

Here in Troas God uses another method to communicate his guidance to Paul. A Macedonian man appeared in a vision or dream, with an urgent plea, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." When Paul awoke he knew that the last months had been for a reason. The closed doors were only for the purpose of leading to this open door. The no of the Spirit led to a yes of clear direction. That word translated "concluding" (verse 10) means, "to come together, to coalesce, to bind or knit together, to see the way things agree, pointing a direction." As the team considered and discussed the vision in the context of everything that had happened, it all came together: they knew that God was calling them to Europe. And so there came about one of great turning points of history. You and I are here in this place because of it.

Before we partake of the Lord's Supper together, let us reflect for a few minutes on the providence of God and its application to our lives. The following definition of providence has been very helpful to me: *Providence is the belief that the events of our lives are not ruled by chance or fate, but by our sovereign and loving Lord who works out his plan and purpose in the lives of all his children.*

First, in these verses it is very clear that Jesus is the Lord of the Church, and he is the one directing the events of these missionaries. God is in charge of determining the strategy by which the Western world will be reached by the gospel. We are not told how God did this, which leads me to believe he has an untold number of ways by which he leads us. We can never predict or anticipate his direction. All we know is that he will give it, and all we need to do is to want God's will. If we want that, and if we belong to God, then it becomes his responsibility to get us to the right place at the right time. We have to trust.

I must admit that though I am totally committed to this principle, I find it very difficult at times. A little over three years ago I was faced with what was, in hindsight, the most difficult decision I have ever made. My wife Kathy's parents live in Atascadero, about 10 miles north of San Luis Obispo. We are very close to them, and they have a warm and close relationship with our three sons. We have always wanted to live near them so that our family could be part of their daily lives.

The small church which they have been part of for many years was looking for a pastor. After praying about it and talking with Kathy and our boys, I decided to submit my name

as a candidate. I had a wonderful time interviewing with the search committee and the board of elders. I felt a kinship with the leaders. It seemed that what they needed was a great match for my gifts and personality. So it looked like that was where we were headed. I kept our elders and pastoral staff informed throughout the entire process, and they were very supportive. I preached at the church, and at the end of the process, the elders asked me if I would come in July of 2002. They gave me a few weeks to make a decision.

Those were difficult days. This was a significant decision that would change both our family and the relationships of two churches. Many lives would be affected. The weight of the decision was difficult for me. Kathy and Tim were very dear during that time. Tim was only 13, going into the seventh grade, and he would be greatly affected. But he said to me, "Dad, if God wants us to go, I can make new friends." In one of my moments of anguish, Kathy said to me, "I really can't make this decision for you. It is God's call on your life. I just want you to know that I will never second-guess your decision."

I wanted God to give me a vision, but he didn't. He made me make a choice. Well, as you know, I didn't accept their offer.

That process taught me a lot about myself. Though I second-guessed my decision for some months, God has confirmed to me in a number of ways that it was a good decision. I am right where he wants me to be. It is his responsibility to lead us, to get us to Troas, by whatever means he decides.

Secondly, this passage reveals that God guides us in spite of and through our conflict and failure. Was it God's will for Paul and Barnabas to have a fight and split up as a result? I hardly think so. We certainly can't use the providence of God as an excuse for a fight. And yet God used it for good in both men's lives. Now there were two missionary teams instead of one. Silas enjoyed specific qualities that Barnabas did not have. He was a Roman citizen, a prophet who probably spoke Greek. Although Barnabas was a great loss, Silas was a great gain. Often through our failures, especially relational failures, God does his greatest healing.

That is true in my life. God has used and continues to use unresolved relational conflicts to humble me and allow me to see myself more clearly, to know his grace and love. We are all broken people. Don't let past failures or even immaturity prevent you from stepping out to do what you think God wants from you. A struggling and even puzzled apostle Paul stepped out, expecting God to lead him.

The only prerequisite to finding God's will is to want it. Did you notice that when it became clear to Paul what God wanted, he *immediately* obeyed? God reveals his will to those who want it. James reminds us that God gives wisdom to those who want whatever he gives, to those who are abandoned to his will. Are you willing to obey no matter what the answer is? Are you willing to stay in that hard place? Are you willing to

lose your job? If we are willing to give up our girlfriend or our boyfriend, to let our child go, to do anything God wants, then he will give us wisdom. He will let us know what to do.

The message of this text is the assurance of the guiding of the Holy Spirit in our ordinary lives, through ordinary and even difficult circumstances. We need to be confident that God is guiding us even when we hear no voice and see no vision. Don't put God in a box. Don't expect him to act based on how he has always acted in your life. God directs through every situation, through the events we perceive as either good or bad. We don't know why God directs us west when we expect to go north. Why God didn't give Paul a vision at the beginning instead of at the end we can't explain.

But this we know: God directs us through every situation, the apparently good and the apparently bad. The powerful indwelling Spirit is able to get us to Troas by whatever means he decides to use. We must yield to his caring hand. G. Campbell Morgan said, "It is better to go to Troas with God than anywhere else without him."

God will lead us according to his perfect plan for our lives and ministries.

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