

ACTS 15: 33 – 16: 12

DEFERENCE and PROVIDENCE

Last week we saw how the Jerusalem council handled a hot – button issue within the church with wisdom and deference as they navigated a very serious theological issue. Faith is the only thing needed to enter the kingdom, but we must then walk with deference to the sensibilities of others, especially when crossing cultural lines. This can get sticky and cause some hard feeling among people groups, even today. This week we will see how God, in His providence used another sticky situation to turn lemons into lemonade and how the Apostle Paul used the findings of the Jerusalem council to ensure he would have as little drama as possible when going back into territory dominated by Gentiles with very few Jews. Let's look at how God works to carry out His plan of the ages while navigating the culture and quirks of His people. He does the same thing with and for us today.

36 Then after some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us now go back and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they are doing.” 37 Now

Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark. 38 But Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work. 39 Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus; 40 but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of God. 41 And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

The ruling of the Jerusalem council was a great victory. Salvation through grace, by faith is the bedrock of Christianity. We can see that Paul, Barnabas, Silas and others stayed in Syrian Antioch building the church by teaching and encouraging and no doubt training up leaders and installing them as necessary. They apparently did this for a time. I believe Paul was writing or had already written his letter to the Galatians at this time. But then we see that Paul was anxious to get back to the churches he had founded on his first missionary journey through Asia Minor (modern day western Turkey.) As we read it, we see that he approaches Barnabas about going back through the region to check on everything. I'm sure he wanted to keep moving

forward with the Gospel as well as to reinforce what was determined at Jerusalem.

We don't read at this point that he arrived at this idea by prayer and fasting. He may well have done so, after all, Luke can't necessarily state this every time, but it is interesting that though he eventually goes, God changes his destination during the trip. We will see that later. But what jumps off the page at us is that before he left, there was some contention between he and Barnabas about who was going with them. This wasn't any small disagreement. The word, "contention" is a Greek word that essentially means a 'knock down, drag out fight', in the verbal sense, at least. When used in a medical context, the word literally speaks of someone who is convulsing while feverish. We can't blame Paul for not wanting to take John Mark with them. After all, he left the last trip and went back home to his mother. Paul doesn't want any issues this time. He doesn't know what he might run into and has to have people he can count on in a pinch. Thus far, John Mark has proven he is not the man. But Barnabas feels differently. **John Mark is his cousin, (Colossians 4:10)**. I'm sure Barnabas, living up to his name, "Son of encouragement) has taken the time to talk to his young cousin and let him know how important it is for him to stay with the plan. At any rate, Paul and

Barnabas can't come to an agreement, and though we know from later epistles that they reconciled, they determine to go on the same mission but via different routes. Barnabas and John Mark sail to Cyprus, from whence Barnabas was born and Paul takes Silas via the land route into Western Turkey.

We all want the two to act like adults, to act like Christians should act – after all, we never have any disagreements within the church, do we? As is most often the case, both men have some valid points. And if, in fact, the idea of this journey was done on more of a whim than after much prayer and fasting, we can expect this sort of thing to happen every now and then. But let's look at what has happened, and in hindsight, we can see that God used this cover more ground. God has taken this opportunity to split his forces. Now He is mounting an assault from two fronts. Barnabas and John Mark are in Cyprus, (we don't read any particulars about their journey), but nevertheless, we can be assured they had some successes. And Paul and Silas, as we shall see, will not only re – cover some old ground, but will also take new ground. There are now two missions going on instead of one. God, in His providence, has taken lemons, (the argument) and made lemonade! He does the same with us today.

Rom. 8:28

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.

1 Then he came to Derbe and Lystra. And behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a certain Jewish woman who believed, but his father was Greek. 2 He was well spoken of by the brethren who were at Lystra and Iconium. 3 Paul wanted to have him go on with him. And he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in that region, for they all knew that his father was Greek. 4 And as they went through the cities, they delivered to them the decrees to keep, which were determined by the apostles and elders at Jerusalem. 5 So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and increased in number daily.

Paul and Silas have gone through Derbe, stopping to see those in the churches established in their last missionary journey and eventually get to Lystra. It is there that Paul met a young man who was well thought of and took him under his wing. Paul began grooming him for ministry. But look at what he did next. He circumcised him. Why would he do that? I mean, didn't they just fight for the belief that

circumcision wasn't necessary? Yes, they did. Then why circumcise this young man? Let's begin by asking why he wasn't circumcised in the first place. His mother was Jewish and that is the way the Jews determined whether or not someone was a Jew – through the maternal line. But his father, being a Greek, didn't want/ have him circumcised at birth. Therefore, to the Jewish community, he would have been thought of as Greek and not Jewish. But he was a believer, this would have put him in the category of a "God – fearer." We have already seen this term in Acts. So, was he saved? Yes, he was. Then why circumcise him? Is Paul being inconsistent? No, he isn't. First of all, Timothy wasn't being circumcised in order to be saved. He was already saved. The whole issue with that we read about in the last chapter had to do with salvation – whether or not a man had to be circumcised in order to be a Christian. That is not the issue here. Look at verse four. As Paul went around to the churches, he told everyone about what had come out of the Jerusalem council. That means he was telling everyone that the Gospel was circumcision neutral. OK.... Then why did he circumcise Timothy? He did it out of deference. Paul, as was his pattern, began teaching in the synagogues in order to find common ground for the Gospel. He would then turn to the Gentiles in the area. We will see this again and

again. In order to do that, in order to be able to teach in the synagogues and have Timothy help him, in order to have credibility to those who didn't know the Gospel and to keep down any drama, where the message might get lost, he had Timothy circumcised. He did it out of deference to the Jewish community. Had he not done this he wouldn't have been able to get off jump street. It was deference to the sensibilities of the Jewish people he was trying to reach. Is this inconsistent with the decree of the Jerusalem council? No, it's not. Remember what James said in the letter to the Galatian churches? Namely, that they should avoid things sacrificed to idols, blood and things strangled, as well as fornication? That was said not as a threshold for salvation, but because of the cultural sensibilities of the Jewish community. And that is all Paul is doing here. Look at what he says later in 1 Corinthians.

1 Cor. 9: 19 – 22

19 For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; 20 and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; 21 to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might

win those who are without law; 22 to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. 23 Now this I do for the gospel's sake, that I may be partaker of it with you.

Explain: became a Jew (But he is a Jew). Became lawless.

There is no compromise with the Gospel here. Example: Going to other cultures. Dress code and customs. Being sensitive. No need to offend. Showing deference, not boasting in my “rights” or liberty.

So, Paul is being pragmatic in order that he may be effective in sharing the Gospel. That’s all this is. And we see the results. The church was encouraged, and it was growing. What more could you ask?

6 Now when they had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia. 7 After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them. 8 So passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. 9 And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A

***man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.”
10 Now after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them.***

Do you remember how I remarked that it seemed that Paul wanted to go on this journey, but that we didn't read of any prayer and fasting? And it may be that Paul did pray and fast – once again, we shouldn't expect Luke to write that he did every time. But what we read in these verses may, at least, imply that he didn't. Because what we see here is that Paul's original plans have been foiled by the Spirit.

MAP

It was logical that from Lystra, Paul would head west, through the Lycus Valley to Laodicea and then to Ephesus on the coast. That made sense. It was logical. It was practical, but he was forbidden to go to “Asia”, the Western section of what we now call Turkey. So, God steered them in another direction. This would add about 200 miles to their trip. On foot, that would have taken around two weeks. Imagine them trying to figure what was going on during this

time. The point is that they were obedient. Timothy was probably wondering what he had gotten himself into. And then it got worse. Once they got to Mysia, they thought they would go to Bithynia, but once again, the Spirit told them no. How they got this revelation, specifically, we aren't told. God has many ways of getting His message across. Maybe the doors were shut to them. Maybe they heard a voice. Maybe it was a deep, growing, personal conviction. We can't be sure, but they were listening and heeding whatever was going on with them.

MAP

At this point, there is only one way to go – South to Troas. (Near the ancient city of Troy.) But now they are in the very place they were told not to go! What were they to do now? Does this remind you of the story of Abraham, when God called him out of Ur of the Chaldees? God only told him to go. He didn't give him any more clues until he had obeyed and left home. We hardly ever get all the clues regarding what God wants us to do at the beginning of the mission. We must be obedient in the little things and more marching orders then come along the way. As they were pondering their next move, it happened.

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Now it all made sense! God was moving them to another continent. They were to take back even more sacred space. Remember, that the Gospel was to be taken to the ends of the earth? Well, here we go. God, in His providence, was expanding their territory. Apparently, they never considered, at least at this point to cross over into Europe! If you believe in providence, as I do, then you have to be doing at least two things. You have to be paying attention and you have to be patient. If we believe in the providence of God – that He is steering our circumstances, then we must realize that we are not only going where He wants us to go, but also that we are going there WHEN He wants us to go. We are on His time - table, not ours. And if you are paying close attention to any part of your Bible, then you must see that God doesn't get in a hurry. We are now a few thousand years into His plan.

11 Therefore, sailing from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace, and the next day came to Neapolis, 12 and from there to Philippi, which is the foremost city of that part of Macedonia, a colony.

They then got on a boat and crossed over into Europe. I wonder if Paul was thinking that he may be headed to Rome. I don't know, but I can imagine Paul trying to figure out what was ahead.

But we can't always know what is ahead and it is fruitless to try to read the tea leaves of every circumstance. Paul just kept moving forward. When doors were shut or he was convicted of something, he just kept moving forward, knowing that God was guiding him. He believed in the providence of God. It didn't always make sense. It wasn't always practical or even prudent, but it was what God wanted, where God wanted and when God wanted. That was all that was important. But we also see that even though he knew God was in control, this didn't give him any reason to be haughty. He showed deference to those to whom he was ministering. There was no need to offend anyone. There was no need to speak of his liberty or his rights as a Christian. The goal was to minister to as many as possible in order that he might win some. That was the end goal. And it should be ours also.

Walk in your vocation as an imager of God. If you do that, He will steer you on a daily basis. Some days it will make total sense and maybe nothing stands out to you. But there will be a day when doors are shut to you. There will be a day when you are detoured. There will be a time when you don't get the job even though you were the most qualified and everyone said you were the shoe – in. But providence moves according to God's plan in His time. And throughout all this, we defer to the weaker vessels. We don't step on their culture or their sensitivities when they don't compromise our faith. We defer in order to show the love and character of God. We are patient, knowing that we are on a mission – His mission. And He is responsible for the results. We are only responsible for our obedience. Go and walk in the calling to which you have been called.