

GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL THROUGH WISE AND GODLY LEADERS

Acts 15:36-16:5

INTRODUCTION

I want to begin this morning by reminding us of one of the main things that Luke, the author of Acts, wants us to know. It is a theme he states in many different ways throughout this book. He alludes to it in the first verse of the book when he says that in his first book, which is the gospel of Luke, he “dealt with all that Jesus began to do and to teach.” The implication is that this book of Acts, his second book is a description of what Jesus continues to do and to teach through the apostles and the churches which they form. The same point is emphasized in the theme verse of the book, Acts 1:8 when he tells the disciples that when the HS comes upon them they “will receive power and you will be my witnesses.” The book of Acts is the history of the work of the Holy Spirit as he bears witness to the glory of Jesus through the church. All along the way we have seen statements like 2:47, “And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.” More recently, at the end of chapter 14 after Paul and Barnabas return from their first missionary journey they report to the church in Antioch “all that God did with them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.”

If you were going to write a history that shows that God is the one who is working in and through you and the church of which you are a part, would you have included the story of Paul and Barnabas’ sharp disagreement which we find in vv. 38-39? Would you have included the story of major disagreement in your church and among your leaders over the basic message you are declaring, which you claim is from God as we were told in chapter 15? These are not the kinds of things that we would include in a story we were writing to convince people that God was speaking to and through and acting in and through our church, our leaders. Yet, Luke, who doesn’t report lots of details in the lives of these people and could have left out these stories, decides to record these events. Why does he do this?

First of all these stories exalt the grace and power and sovereignty of God. The more we see of sin and weakness in Christians and human opposition to the gospel, to the church the more we recognize that God is the only one who could ever do this. The only explanation for the existence of the Christian church and for its spread is that God himself is at work in and through his church to spread his fame among the nations. The other thing that these stories show us is the way in which God does his work. In our text today we are given another portrait of the kinds of leaders that God uses to care for his church. God is doing the work but he is doing it through the personalities and gifts and words and actions and relationships of human beings.

MAIN POINT

God cares for his churches through leaders who...

I. Recognize that Christians need continual strengthening (15:36, 41 & 16:5)

Our story today begins with Paul approaching his faithful friend and co-worker, Barnabas and suggesting that they return to the churches they recently established in the region of Galatia. The word translated “visit” in v. 36 is most often used of God “visiting” people to help them as when Jesus raised the son of the widow in the town of Nain from the dead and the crowd says that “God has visited his people” or God visiting Cornelius by sending the HS when Peter preached the gospel or of people visiting widows and orphans and prisoners and the hungry to help them. The point of Paul’s desire to return is so that he and Barnabas can help these Christians. Then in v. 41, after Paul and Silas are sent on their way by the church in Antioch as they travel through the region on the way to Galatia they visit and strengthen the churches in Syria and Cilicia. Finally, in 16:4-5, when they arrive in Galatia they go through the churches delivering the decision reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. As a result these churches were strengthened in the faith. These leaders know that Christians need continual strengthening in the faith and so that is what they do.

There are three questions to be considered. What does it mean to strengthen Christians “in the faith?” Why do Christians need strengthening in the faith? How does God, through a leader, strengthen a Christian in the faith? To be strengthened in the faith means two things. First, it means that we develop a stronger and clearer understanding of the gospel. We are strengthened in understanding who God is, who we are, what sin is, who Jesus is and what he has done, what faith and repentance are, what forgiveness and justification are, how is it that Christians live in this world, what is the end for which we are saved, etc. In short, “the faith” refers to that body of truth that God has revealed to us and is the ground upon which we stand. Second, being strengthened in the faith also refers to having our faith in Christ strengthened. We need to have a greater confidence that Jesus will do what he promised and that what Jesus promises is superior to all else. We each need our personal trust in Christ to be stronger so that we live in greater joy and freedom and love for God and others.

Why do we need to be strengthened in the faith? We need our faith strengthened because we are in a war. Our sin nature is daily urging us to abandon Christ and to seek our pleasure in sin. The world of men that we live in is regularly communicating to us that faith in Christ is a waste of time. True happiness can be had without Jesus is the message of this world we live in. Finally, we have an adversary, an enemy of our souls who is continually seeking to undermine our faith through false teachers, by tempting us to pursue our pleasure here rather than in God himself and by regularly bringing trouble and persecution into our lives in order to persuade us that faith in Christ is vain and useless. Everyone in here should know that while you may be strong in the faith right now, it does not take much for any one of us to grow weak in the faith. Therefore, each of us needs the help of Christian teachers and leaders if we are going to remain strong in the faith.

How does God strengthen our faith? First of all know that it is God who strengthens your faith. Consider this one statement of that fact made by Peter, “And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.” However, also know that it is through the work of human teachers and pastors that he does it. We see it here in this text and we’ve seen it before in Acts. Our souls are strengthened in the faith through the faithful teaching and counseling of God’s word by called Christian teachers. Where would I be today without the faithful teaching, encouragement and exhortation of dozens of other Christian leaders? What a debt I owe to Jesse, the man I met a few weeks after I became a Christian and who met with me and invited me into his home and stayed up late answering my questions. He invited me into my first Bible study, which he led and then helped me begin my first Bible Study. I think of Steve Wilson, my pastor when we lived in Houghton, MI who met with me and asked me hard questions and made me think about the gospel. I think of the many staff members of Campus Crusade that I served with, both men and women who challenged me and helped me to grow as a Christian. There are all the authors, dead and living and pastors whose teaching I’ve sat under and my seminary professors, especially Dr. Larson and Dr. Grudem. Where would I be without these faithful men and women who have taught me and counseled me by the Word of God? God knows how weak I am and has continually sent to me teachers and leaders to instruct me and lead me.

Every person in here ought to know that he or she needs to be strengthened in the faith. Every parent, every small group leader, every elder and pastor among us must be convinced that this is our most urgent task: people need to be strengthened in the faith. No matter what other kinds of help people may need, the most important help that Christian teachers, pastors, parents, elders, and leaders give is help in knowing the gospel and relying upon the promises of the gospel.

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II. Are sinners who remain faithful to Christ (15:37-39)

Verses 37-39 are one of those passages that convince me of the truthfulness and trustworthiness of the Bible. If this book is merely a piece of propaganda to promote the Christian religion then what is a story like this doing in it? Think for a minute who Barnabas and Paul are. These two men were specifically called by the HS to preach the gospel among the Gentiles. They have preached and performed miracles together. They have been persecuted and experienced all the deprivations of traveling away from home and country together. They have stood together for the gospel in opposition to other professing Christians who have tried to pervert the gospel. They are close friends. Yet, they cannot compromise and figure out a way through this simple matter of what to do about John, who is called Mark. On the first journey Mark turned back and went home instead of continuing with Paul and Barnabas. So self-righteous and intractable are each of them that they have a sharp disagreement and can no longer work with each other. This is not a pretty picture. It is an ugly event that calls into question the character of two of the most prominent Christian teachers and leaders of the early church.

Luke, in telling this story does not take sides. There is no indication in the text that one of them is wrong and the other is right. The point of Luke is that they both are wrong. What is wrong with Paul that he is unwilling to forgive Mark's previous failure? Mark has returned to him and is seeking to go on the trip. It would surely seem that he has some sense of his failure and is willing to make things right. Paul himself knows how insightful and helpful Barnabas is. When no one in the church in Jerusalem was willing to accept him because of his previous "failures" it was Barnabas who stood by him and helped him to be accepted. Why can't Paul trust Barnabas' assessment of Mark in the same way the church in Jerusalem did when they trusted Barnabas' endorsement of Paul? But then also, what about Barnabas? Mark had failed in a very significant way. He had made promises to go with them and had abandoned them and refused to continue in the work. Calvin, in his commentary says about Mark, "It was no more lawful for him to break his promise... than it is for a husband to leave his wife or for a son to forsake his father." He violated the holiness of his calling as a co-worker in the gospel with Paul. So why can't Barnabas trust Paul's judgment? What about the church in Antioch? How is it that they were not able to intervene or to help these two men arrive at some sort of compromise?

The result of Paul and Barnabas' stubborn refusal to compromise is that they have this sharp disagreement. The word that is translated here is sometimes used to describe God's anger against idolatry. These men are angry with each other and each feels fully justified in his position. Rather than remaining friends and co-workers they split up and go their separate ways. This story is a clear description of the sinfulness of these two Christian leaders and of the inability of the church to help them. However, both of these men go on in faithful service to Christ. Barnabas goes with Mark to his home country of Cyprus and Paul, after choosing Silas, goes back to Galatia. In Paul's later letters he refers positively to both Barnabas and Mark. Mark goes on to write one of the four gospels. Barnabas does not abandon Jesus nor his calling to preach the gospel and neither does Paul. Both men are shown in this story to be sinners but also that Jesus continues to use them.

This is such an important message to be communicated. It is so easy, especially in our celebrity obsessed culture for Christians to put pastors and teachers up on a pedestal and treat them as if they are no longer sinners. It is easy for Christian leaders to forget that they are sinners, especially if they have an adoring following. On the other hand, it is also very common for Christians to be scandalized when they discover that their pastor or their favorite Christian leader is a sinner. While Christian leaders must be models of Christian faith that does not mean that they do not sin. I love Eugene Peterson's description of churches and their pastors. He says, "The biblical fact is that there are no successful churches. There are, instead, communities of sinners, gathered before God week after week in towns and villages all over the world. The Holy Spirit gathers them and does his work in them. In these communities of sinners one of the sinners is called pastor and given a designated responsibility in the community. The pastor's responsibility is to keep the community attentive to God." This passage shows us the biblical fact that Christian leaders are sinners who are used by Jesus as they faithfully teach people the gospel so that men and women and children trust in Jesus, not the pastor.

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III. Look for potential leaders (15:40 & 16:1-3)

It is highly instructive that Paul, when Barnabas leaves him, does not go on his journey alone. Instead he sends for Silas to come and join him on his trip to Galatia. Remember, Silas was one of the two leaders from the church in Jerusalem who had come down to Antioch with the letter from the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. He was a prophet and had shown his ability to teach the gospel when in Antioch as he spoke many words encouraging and strengthening the brothers. The church in Antioch endorses Paul's selection of Silas and commends them to the grace of Christ and sends them off to strengthen the Gentile churches of Galatia.

When they arrive in Lystra, which if you will remember is the town where Paul was stoned, dragged out of the city and left for dead a couple of years before this, the members of the church take the initiative to tell Paul about a young man named Timothy. Timothy is the son of a Jewish mother who has become a Christian and a Greek father. The testimony of the church regarding Timothy is a positive endorsement. Why did they tell Paul about him? The church in Lystra recognized in Timothy God's call and gifting for him to become a preacher of the gospel. So Paul takes this highly recommended person to assist him in the preaching of the gospel. As we have two letters Paul wrote to him we also know that Timothy, through his travels with Paul became a gifted pastor who led the church in Ephesus through some troubled times. In his second letter Paul tells Timothy to do what he has done. He says, "The things you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also."

God wants current Christian leaders to be on the lookout for others who may be able to join them in the work. It is God's will in every local church to multiply the number of men and women who know the gospel and live and gospel and are able to teach the gospel to others. This is why we've hired Steve Krug as our Associate Pastor of Discipleship. It is his job to establish a process that enables to find, equip and support a growing number of growing spiritual leaders. This selection isn't only the responsibility of Steve as when Paul chose Silas but also is a responsibility of the congregation. There are people among us who should be leaders but whom the current leadership may not know and so if you know someone whom you think would make a good spiritual leader to tell one of the elders and pastors so we can encourage and equip that person in leadership, as Paul did with Timothy. In healthy churches there is a growing number of growing spiritual leaders that are being trained and supported as they work to strengthen the faith of others. Current leaders, working with the congregation are responsible to find and equip these new leaders.

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IV. Adjust to the people while being inflexible about the gospel (16:3-4)

Luke puts vv. 3 & 4 together on purpose. In v. 3 we are told that Paul circumcises Timothy before he takes him along with him on his work of preaching the gospel. In v. 4 we are told that Paul and Silas are delivering the decrees of the apostles and elders who are in Jerusalem. Exactly what were the decrees of the apostles? Paul and Silas were telling the Gentile churches that they didn't have to be circumcised or obey the Law of Moses in order to be saved. So in v. 3 Paul circumcises Timothy and in v. 4 he is telling the churches that no one needs to be circumcised. What is going on?

Why does Paul circumcise Timothy? It was well known among the Jews who lived in the region where he was traveling and preaching the gospel that Timothy's father was Greek, that is, non-Jewish. Thus, the Jews knew

that he was not circumcised. Paul knew that if he brought Timothy into a Jewish synagogue in order to preach the gospel the people would not be listening to him but they would be judging him for permitting this Jewish boy to remain uncircumcised. Timothy, because he was Jewish through his mother was living in disobedience to the law and so no Jewish person was going to listen to anything that Paul, his mentor had to say. So Paul does not circumcise Timothy because he cannot be a Christian without being circumcised. Rather he does this so that Timothy would not become a distraction from the gospel. He adjusted to the cultural expectations of the Jews so he could preach the gospel to the Jews. This is an example of what he says in 1 Corinthians 9:20-23, “To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.” Paul does not circumcise Timothy because of what God thinks about circumcision but because of what the Jews think.

At the same time, as v. 4 says, everywhere he goes in the Gentile churches he declares that they do not need to be circumcised to be saved. The gospel is a gospel of free grace. God accepts sinners who trust in Jesus because of what Jesus did, not because of what they do. Jesus is the fulfillment of the law and so we do not obey the law but trust in Christ who has done all that the law requires. So Paul and Silas and Timothy are absolutely inflexible when it comes to the gospel. As Paul says in his letter to these churches in Galatians 5:2-6, “Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace... For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” The act of circumcision is irrelevant. It is the motive that matters. Timothy is not seeking to be justified by the law but to be like a Jew so that he can save Jews.

Good leaders are willing to do things and not do things so that others are not offended by them so that they can share the gospel. At the same time good leaders are fiercely loyal to the gospel of grace and oppose any and all who try to add to it or change it in any way because it is this gospel which saves people and which strengthens the Christians. Those who would lead others spiritually are always accommodating themselves to others. Leaders evaluate their conduct in light of the fact that they want people to listen to them. Leaders are flexible and non-dogmatic about all kinds of things that matter a great deal to others. There are all kinds of things that spiritual leaders refuse to fight about. However, leaders are absolutely, resolutely inflexible when it comes to the gospel of grace. They are willing to fight and to die to protect the glory of Christ as the only Savior who needs no help from anyone in saving sinners.

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