

Acts 15:36-16:10 - DiCicco

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[0:00] When I was younger, my brothers and I got a gift that would change my life forever! And I don't mean I got a gift that sparked some sort of new interest.

I didn't get my first scrapbook that Christmas. I mean that in a very real sense. I wouldn't be standing here today if my brothers and I hadn't torn open one Christmas morning the special extended edition of The Lord of the Rings.

We loved those movies. I mean we could quote not just the 12 hours of actual film, but we could quote a lot of the 10 hours of extra behind the scenes footage that came with the special extended editions.

And it was that footage, the behind the scenes footage, that introduced me to a group of islands in the south of the Pacific called New Zealand. So when I was at the end of high school looking for a missions program to fill my gap year and I scrolled past a school in New Zealand, I thought say no more.

So I went to New Zealand. It was in New Zealand that I met Jasmine, who would become my wife. It was in New Zealand that the Lord turned my heart back towards the local church and in particular to study at Moody Bible Institute.

[1:15] It was because of my time in New Zealand that when we were wrapping up our time at Moody trying to figure out what to do next, we thought we would go back, spend some time with her family. And I pastored there for three years.

And I mean, long story short, all of this led to the moment where a little over a year ago, you all voted to call me to serve on the team of pastors here at Holy Covenant Church.

So without tearing into a box of DVDs given to me by my Uncle Dan some December, almost two decades ago, I would not be here this morning. This might seem like a really random chain of events.

Maybe it is, but actually it's the hand of God working in my life down to the very details of what DVD we opened two decades ago.

In case if you don't know what a DVD is, which very well might be true, you can ask your parents about that later. Maybe you don't buy that.

[2:16] Maybe you don't buy the whole God guiding in really flippant details like that. But wouldn't that be more comforting?

Whether you're a Christian or not, wouldn't it be nice to know that all of the details in your life add up to something truly meaningful? Don't we want these moments in our lives to add up to something like this?

I tell this story because it illustrates what we see in the passage Michelle read for us. What looks like a surprising chain of events, even in the story of this book, Acts, teaches us the simple truth that God gets his work done.

The three scenes in our passage this morning, and they're surprising. It's a surprising chain of events. The team that we've been reading about in Acts is split.

Timothy, after the council, is circumcised. And then Paul, this missionary who's been on the move for a long time, is stopped. As we take a closer look at these surprising events, I hope we're persuaded by each link in the chain that God gets his work done.

[3:26] We've said before, as we've been studying this book, that Luke, the author, is not just recording history. He's teaching through story. And this text highlights what theologians call God's providence.

His real, meaningful activity in all things. God gets his work done. And if this is true, then it's one of the most comforting truths out there.

If you're not a Christian, or maybe you're not sure that this is true, that God is guiding down to the very details of our lives, I hope that as we go through this passage, that you'll see that what looks like just a surprising chain of events is really in no way random.

As we see this together, my prayer is that we would be confident in the providence of God, that we'd leave here comforted by his work in our lives, and also challenged to work hard with what he's put before us.

This is a tall task, so let me pray one more time before we look more closely at our text. Almighty God, would you give me the tongue of one who has been taught by you, that I may know how to sustain with a word those who are weary.

[4:45] Gracious God, would you open our ears to hear your voice, that we may learn to do what is pleasing to you. Through Christ our Lord. Amen. Okay, Paul and Barnabas.

These two were the inseparable and unstoppable team of the early church. We've been reading about them for weeks, and at the start of our passage, at least, they're gearing up to go out again. They had just returned from the Jerusalem council to Antioch with a letter to their church, bearing the decision of the council in Jerusalem. The council that Tad really helpfully touched on last week. The council that really was a landmark moment for the early church, for theological clarity. Holding that faith alone in Jesus is the means by which anyone, everyone has access to the eternal life and forgiveness on offer in the gospel.

The word that Paul and Barnabas have been spreading. A landmark moment for Christian unity. The letter that they are bearing calls the non-Jewish believers brothers.

[5:54] Acknowledging that by faith, both Jews and Gentiles are members of the same family. So, Paul and Barnabas, they were at the center of this conflict that sort of launched the council.

Defending Gentile believers in Antioch from people who came up from Jerusalem. We read it in chapter 15, verse 1 last week. They said that, Well, but Paul and Barnabas defended their Gentile friends from this teaching and it led to the council at Jerusalem.

But Paul and Barnabas had been partners in the gospel long before this moment. We don't even have to leave our passage to be reminded of that. Paul's suggestion in verse 36 points to this. Let's return, he says, and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are.

Have you ever looked back on an experience and wished you could relive it? Kids, summer has come to a close. I remember when I was younger, when August came around, I sort of wished it was June so that I could do it all over again.

Have you ever wanted to relive the good times? Well, that is not what Paul is doing. I mean, in the first place, they weren't very good times for him, but in the second place, when he says, Let's go back and see how they're doing, he's not just planning a trip to see his friends.

[7:18] This trip was the trip where Paul and Barnabas had both faced death together for the sake of the gospel. The church in Antioch had sent them out and in every city they went to, there was opposition, so much opposition that if you remember this, their opponents in Iconium followed them all the way to Lystra, stirred up a riot, and had Paul stoned.

And they dragged him out of the city and left him for dead. Paul says, Let's go back. Barnabas is on board. Paul and Barnabas were unstoppable. In the face of this kind of opposition, they're an example to us of a persistent witness for the gospel.

And more than this, an example of partnership. I mean, can you get much closer than staining your shirt with the blood of the man who had become your brother as you moved from town to town? Barnabas was the one with him in all these cities. He probably would have been the guy to, I don't know, pick Paul up outside of Lystra and put him on his shoulder and walk him back into town. These two were tight.

They'd faced death together. Yet, both Paul and Barnabas are united. They want to go back to these cities. They want to see how they are, probably to make sure that these cities had stood their ground against the kind of teaching that had sparked the council in Jerusalem.

[8:35] Paul and Barnabas are united on this. Let's go back, strengthen the church, continue to preach the word. No surprise there. But, they hit a snag.

Barnabas wants to take Mark with them. He had started the last journey with them, but left them in Pamphylia. Luke only mentions this in passing in chapter 13, really just to prepare us as readers for this moment.

But, both in chapter 13 and here, there's no real detail on why Mark left. Paul seems to think it's best not to take with them somebody who shrank back from the work.

So, maybe that was part of it. Barnabas, or Mark was afraid, or just maybe a little flaky. Barnabas maybe has more of a restorative approach.

You know, Mark feels bad. He shouldn't have left. He's here now. He's ready to go again. Barnabas wants to take him. He's ready. The problem isn't for Paul so much that he left us as it is that he left the work.

[9:39] Paul maybe sees danger in letting something like that slide so easily. After all, this is hard work. Yet, Paul and Barnabas are united on every other thing. They're even united on going back into these cities where they faced death before.

And yet, over Mark, the team splits. really? Over this? Is that, is that at all surprising?

These two who had faced death together, you know, martyrdom, fine. But Mark, I don't know. one question for us as readers is what do we do with this?

We've, we've gone through Acts and we've seen multiple times there are stories in Acts and it's our job as readers to sift out which stories are prescriptive, tell us what to do, which stories are descriptive, tell us what has happened.

What's a model for the church and what has just happened as the church was being made. Some people see no problem with this split. Sometimes this passage is used and people give examples about churches who find theological disagreements and decide to amicably split.

[10:51] I mean, look at Paul and Barnabas. They had a sharp disagreement, they went their separate ways. I'm not sure that's why Luke put this here. I think the contrast between this moment and the landmark moment that comes before in Acts 15, this landmark moment for Christian unity and the council, it draws a strong contrast.

Not to mention the fact that it's not a theological question which divides Paul and Barnabas. It's a pragmatic question. Of course, it touches on important things in theology and who was called to the ministry and what that means, but follow John Calvin's lead, it's no threat to doctrine.

It's not a danger to anyone's salvation, yet they split. if this book of Acts was a story about Paul, this would be a really low point in the story.

And this is his friend, his brother, Paul has bled with him. The break between these two men would be a huge moment, but that's not the story Luke is telling. Acts is not a biography of early church leaders, not primarily, even though we learn a lot about them.

It's not a story really about the birth of the early church, even though that takes center stage for a long time. This book is written to draw the church in to God's work through God's word in our world.

[12:14] And so when the surprise comes, when the team is split and Luke sort of brushes past it and moves on to the fact that Paul goes on to get the work done and the church continues to be strengthened, the church is reminded in this, that God, or that the word works despite our weakness.

I mean, just look at verse 41, right? Luke brushes right past this. Barnabas heads west. Paul goes north with a man named Silas.

He goes through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches. The word works. The team is split, yet the church is strengthened. What should be weakness doesn't hinder growth because the word works despite our weakness.

The word works despite our weakness when we struggle to share the gospel in a way that sounds coherent at all with our friend or our neighbor. The word works despite our weakness when we find it hard to find the right words during home group or catechism.

The word works despite weakness when a child asks hard questions and we really have no idea how to answer but we have to say something. So take comfort, church, church in the word.

[13:25] The word works despite our weakness, despite our tiredness, despite our ability, emotion, preparation, devotion, and even intentions.

So take comfort. The word works despite our weakness. But is it possible to get too comfortable?

Because what we see in the next episode, by contrast again, is Paul being shrewdly strategic as he prepares to preach this word.

In 16 verse 1, Paul goes with a man named Silas and they're sort of going backwards, the backwards way of the first missionary journey. They're working from the end going back towards the beginning.

So they start in a city called Derbe and go to Lystra. Remember, Lystra is where Paul had been stoned and dragged out of the city, left for dead. When Paul gets there, he finds the church in Lystra in good health and he finds a young man named Timothy, well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium.

Paul wants Timothy to come with him. But then Paul does something else that's surprising. Tad teed me up for this one last week. You see, Timothy was only half Jewish.

[14:43] His father was a Greek. Apparently, Timothy had never been circumcised according to the custom of Moses. Paul had faced situations like this before. Not all of his companions were Jewish.

He traveled to Jerusalem with Titus at one point, but he said even he wouldn't let Titus be forced into circumcision in Jerusalem. This makes sense, right?

After it was Paul who opposed the believers who came to Antioch commanding that anyone who wanted to follow Christ had to be circumcised. But what does Paul do with Timothy? When Paul recruits him for ministry, Paul has Timothy circumcised.

This is so shocking to some commentators that they say, Paul simply wouldn't have done this, therefore this must be some kind of error or addition or someone else put this in the Bible because this is not Paul.

We know that for sure. I think actually what's on display is very consistent with Paul. We've certainly not seen the last of the kind of thing that Paul is doing. Timothy is circumcised because Paul seeks every advantage for the gospel.

[15:53] Paul seeks every advantage for the gospel. It's right there in verse 3, right? Paul circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places for they all knew that his father was a Greek.

Timothy wasn't a Gentile. He wasn't like Titus. He was Jewish but his uncircumcision as a half-Jewish man was a significant offense to all of the Jews in the area.

Remember, these are the Jews who chased Paul from Iconium to Lystra and had him stoned. So this is a real threat not just to their ministry but to maybe even Timothy's life. But more than that, if Timothy's traveling with Paul, he has influence, he has an effect on the way Paul's ministry is perceived to these Jews and Paul will not tolerate any obstacle to the gospel.

And so Timothy is circumcised because Paul seeks every advantage for the gospel. First it seems surprising but really it's perfectly consistent.

Paul's point, both I'm certain in his arguments against the people who came to Antioch and later in Galatians is that circumcision is of no value in itself.

[17:05] It is dangerous like Tad said last week to tie it to faith to make the link that these people do when they come up to Antioch when they say unless you are circumcised you cannot be saved.

Like Tad pointed out last week, to confess Jesus and add anything else to it like circumcision as necessary to salvation is to lose Jesus himself. You can't have Jesus and something without losing Jesus.

Yet in itself circumcision is no problem to Paul. What seems surprising is consistent with what Paul says in Galatians. Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything. Only faith working itself out in love and it's this love which actually drives Paul to circumcision.

Love for his fellow Jews. We heard earlier in our scripture reading that Paul is a member of the household of Israel and his earnest desire is that they would be saved and so love for his fellow Jews who are already resistant to the message of this murdered Messiah drives Paul to seek every advantage for the gospel.

That's important to note that Paul's not going to remove obstacles to the gospel that are a part of the gospel. Resurrection wasn't really any more believable in that day as it is today.

[18:25] And the whole point of Acts is that these believers go out and witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It's what the whole faith is based on. Paul has a whole chapter in 1 Corinthians 15 we went through last year on the resurrection and its importance, its centrality to our faith.

Yet, Paul takes every advantage for the gospel. He puts it this way in his letter to the Corinthians, I have made myself a servant of all that I might win more of them.

To the Jew, I became a Jew. Maybe for instance by circumcising Timothy. That I might win Jews.

To those under the law, I became as one under the law.

Even though I myself am not under the law. That I might win those under the law. To those outside the law, I became as one outside the law. Even though I'm not really outside the law, but I'm under the law of Christ, Paul says.

I've become all things to all people so that by all means I might save some. And I do it all for the sake of the gospel. Paul goes as far as his Christian freedom will allow for the sake of others.

[19:34] Seeking every advantage for the gospel. Do we take every advantage for the gospel? Some of you have been doing debate this year.

How hard do you seek an advantage when you're presenting your case? How many arguments? How much preparation? How great of an effort goes into the debate final?

How much do you hang on the way you phrase your words and the way you say them in those final moments of your last part of the speech? Yet how prepared are we to share the gospel?

Even if just part of what Luke is doing in writing this book is to draw the church into the work of the word in this world, are we prepared to join the work? Charles Dickens said he had one goal in writing which was to rouse the emotions of his readers.

He wasn't just writing for fun, he was writing for social reform. And if it's important for Dickens to rouse the emotions of his readers, might it be important for us?

[20:44] Because I think Paul actually does something similar here except instead of rousing emotion, he takes every advantage to remove the negative emotion from his presentation, from the word that he brings with him.

Do we do this? When we consider our friend or our co-worker, our neighbors who need to hear the gospel, are we willing to lay down some freedom for their sake? Do we seek every advantage for the gospel?

Do we strip away every obstacle we can, even laying down some of our own freedom as Paul mentioned in 1 Corinthians, for the sake of our neighbor? Because Paul acts as if the witness to the word hinges on this.

So maybe we also should seek every advantage for the gospel. That poses another problem because what if I get it wrong?

How do I know which mistakes will be covered like the split between Paul and Barnabas and which moments are so crucial that they rest on how well I take advantage for the sake of the gospel?

[21:49] And if I'm able to rouse the emotion of my listener to persuade them of the veracity, the truth, the importance of this claim, which is it?

Does the word work despite my weakness or do I need to seek every advantage for the gospel?

Let's look at the final episode in our passage. Timothy's circumcision isn't the last surprise.

The team is split, Timothy is circumcised, but the last link in the surprising chain of events is instructive for us. Paul is stopped. Paul, who is giving everything he has, taking every opportunity, seeking every advantage for the gospel, he's on the road.

You can see it even in a book like Romans. He has plans. He's on his way to Spain. He has plans for the farthest reaches of where the Roman Empire is. He's got a strategy and a plan.

He takes off toward Asia. That's north of where he is, but he's stopped, Luke says, forbidden to speak the word in Asia. He's forced to take another route.

[22:56] So still hoping to head north towards the Black Sea, he tries to go through Bithynia, but again, in verse seven, the spirit of Jesus did not allow them. Luke doesn't tell us how the spirit stopped them, only that the spirit of God is herding Paul like a sheep towards Troas, where he wants him to go.

And in Troas, Paul has a dream, a vision in the night. Verse nine says, a man of Macedonia was standing there urging Paul and saying, come over to Macedonia and helped us. So we concluded God wanted us to preach the word in Macedonia.

It's a good call. Paul makes plans to go to Macedonia. Dan will pick this up next week. Paul sails from Troas in obedience to the spirit of God. Paul is not one to sit around.

He had a strategy that he stopped. Stopped even from speaking the word in Asia in verse six. Why? Why does God stop Paul from doing a good thing?

It's because God guides the work of his witnesses according to his plan. Again, if this were the story of Paul, Luke might hang on here a little bit.

[24:07] Tell us the way they were stopped or the frustration or the confusion. If this was a biography of Paul's life, again, this would be a big moment, but it's not a biography of Paul's life.

The book of Acts draws the people of God into the work of God and our confidence is in that God guides the work of his witnesses according to his plan. And Paul rests in God's guidance. Paul had good reason to trust God. Paul knows the book of Numbers. Remember, we went through this last year. When the people of God followed the presence of God through the wilderness, wherever the pillar of fire or cloud went there, the people of God went. Maybe Paul was comforted by the story of Joshua. When the people of Israel are following this new leader out of the wilderness and into the promised land, God tells the people to let the ark go before them so that you might know the way you shall go because you have not passed this way before. In the same way, Paul rests in God's guidance. Because this is not the story of Paul's missionary efforts.

[25 : 13] This is the story of God's work in the world through his word. And so the way we answer the question, is it the word that works despite our weakness or do we seek every advantage for the gospel is by following Paul's example, by resting in God's guidance.

because this surprising chain of events really highlights the simple truth. Remember that God gets his work done. God has been at work in each of the links in this chain in slightly different ways, but it is God who gets his work done.

I think it's actually this truth that fuels Paul's efforts in taking every advantage for the gospel. Paul works hard because he knows through him God is working. In one of his letters, Paul says that he toils in the ministry of preaching, struggling with all God's energy that he works within me.

Paul is at work because God is at work. God works through his witnesses and because God gets his work done, Paul seeks every advantage for the gospel. Because God gets his work done through witnesses, Paul pours all he has into his work.

I mean, he's proud. He says, I've worked harder than any of the other apostles, but not I, God who works through me. And when Paul's human efforts are not enough, when he makes mistakes, when he's stopped, when he's put in prison or beaten or left for dead, Paul isn't worried because God gets his work done.

[26 : 40] Even in Philippians, when there are people preaching out of selfish ambition, intending to put Paul down or somehow get a leg up over his ministry, Paul says, that's great. As long as the gospel is going out, as long as the word is getting his work done, Paul has comfort.

The word works despite Paul's weakness. And so Paul can rest in God's guidance. As we go throughout the rest of the book of Acts and these missionary journeys get more and more fraught and dangerous, this will be put to the test.

The closer we get to Jerusalem and then the closer we get to Rome, but Paul never loses sight of this, that God is in real and meaningful ways working in every moment.

This is what we mean when we talk about God's providence. This is what Paul rests in, not just a vague sense of guidance, but God's real and meaningful action in every moment.

Calvin said something like, not a single raindrop is outside of God's control. Providence can be incredibly comforting.

[27 : 54] It should be humbling. It will be challenging and truthfully, it can actually make life a little more messy. Because to acknowledge that God is at work, it doesn't clean up all the hard parts of life.

To hold providence when things are going well is one thing, but what about when life is hard? You know, when you've been beaten and stoned and left for dead outside of Lystra? What about when the pain won't let up?

Holding to the doctrine of providence makes the experience of suffering simultaneously easier and much more difficult. And the sermon is really not the place, at least this far into the sermon, to try and address the problem of evil or the question of suffering, but let me just say providence needs to come into how we understand these questions and how we think about starting to answer them. I'd be happy to talk with you after the service or this week. I'm sure the other pastors would be as well. Providence doesn't clean up the mess just because God's real meaningful action doesn't mean that he just snaps fingers and lets things happen.

We talked for almost an hour about what it means to approach God in prayer and to ask him for the things that he has given us to ask him. You don't even have to go there, just look at our passage.

[29 : 13] How is God at work in this surprising chain of events? The clearest example is when Paul is stopped. Normally this is what we think of or maybe what I was trained to think of in my years in YWAM.

This is what we think of when we think of God at work. It's a vision. The Spirit stopping Paul in his tracks. It's clear, it's decisive, it's an obvious act of God. There is no question God is at work. And God doesn't use ordinary things here. He just gets the work done. He goes above the normal means. But even in Acts, visions aren't very normal.

Visions from God. This is above the normal means. But God is also at work when Paul circumcises Timothy. He's at work through normal means.

Using Paul's awareness, Paul's opportunities, Paul's ingenuity to make a way for the word to work. God works through his people. His providence is displayed as he works not just above means, but through means.

[30:16] Even when the team is split, God is at work. What should be a setback becomes still a success, still strengthens the church. God works to advance the gospel despite the divide between Paul and Barnabas.

God's providence can work against means as well. God's real and meaningful action in every moment is maybe clearest in the word of the gospel itself.

If you remember as far back as Acts chapter 4 when the believers were beginning to be persecuted and they prayed for boldness in the face of opposition. They prayed to God, they said, truly in this city, in Jerusalem, there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, Herod and Pontius Pilate, Gentiles and the people of Israel to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

The most decisive moment in history, the death, the resurrection of the Son of God was planned by God, governed by his providence, but comes through the wicked intentions and actions of evil men. It comes through the hand of his enemies. And against their plan, God gets his work done. Instead of ending the kingdom of the Messiah, they inaugurate it. God gets his work done.

[31:35] Above, through, or against any means that are raised against it. There are truly a lot of factors that led to my first coffee with Dan Godoy a little while ago.

The Lord of the Rings was just one small factor. There are a lot of threads, many of them stretching back more than a decade. I can trace a lot of them in my mind, and all of them celebrate exactly the truth that's on display in our text today, in this surprising chain of events, that God gets his work done.

God gets his work done, and the word works despite our weakness. God gets his work done, so we should seek every advantage for the gospel. God gets his work done, so we should rest in the guidance of God.

God, and as we go out today, as we go in peace into whatever surprises wait for you this week, go out comforted in the work of God in your life.

Go out challenged to work hard at whatever he's put before you, and go out confident in the providence of God who gets his work done. Let's pray.

[32:51] Amen. Amen. God over all, would you graciously do your work in our hearts by your spirit?

Work through us as we go from this place today. Would you make us confident in you, in your work for us, your work through us, and sometimes your work despite us?

Would you help us in all things to hold to the work you have done in your son, in whose name we pray. Amen.