

PM Acts 15:36-16:10 Decisions, Decisions

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[0 : 00] And the passage we're going to look at tonight, continuing our studies in the missionary journeys of Paul, is from Acts 15, verse 36, through to chapter 16, verse 10, page 1114 in the Church Bible.

Acts 15, verse 36. And after some days, Paul said to Barnabas, let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.

Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John, called Mark. But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work.

And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from one another. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus.

But Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

[1 : 41] Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer.

But his father was a Greek. He was well spoken of by the brothers of Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him.

And he took him and circumcised him. Because of the Jews who were in those places. For they all knew that his father was a Greek.

As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them, for observance, the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem.

So the churches were strengthened in the faith. And they increased in numbers daily. And they went through the region of Brighia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia.

[2 : 50] And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia. But the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.

So passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, Come over to Macedonia and help us.

And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Let's sing again now. This time, psalm. Let's turn now to the Bible.

Acts 15 and 16, the passage we read. I'll read again chapter 16, verse 10, by way of text. And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

[4 : 23] In BC 55, Julius Caesar made a short but very significant journey.

He crossed the channel from Gaul to Britannia, from the French coast to the Kent coast, about 35 miles.

It was the first step towards the Roman conquest of Britain. And it changed the history of these islands forever.

Just over a hundred years after that, the Apostle Paul made an even more significant journey. He crossed the Aegean Sea.

Slightly longer journey, from Troas to the, in the Roman province of Asia, over to Neapolis, and then on up to Philippi, in the Roman province of Macedonia, from Turkey to Greece, about 120 miles.

[5 : 43] So far as Paul was concerned, he was simply going from one Roman province to another. But in modern day terms, he was crossing from Asia to Europe.

And that changed the world. It was the first step, we might say, towards the Christian conquest of Europe. Paul's ministry in Macedonia, is described in chapter 16, and a very exciting story it is too.

And God willing, we'll look at that next time. But tonight I want us to look at the events leading up to that decision to cross the Aegean.

I want, in particular, to look at the various decisions that were made. There's a whole series of them here. Hence my sermon title, Decisions, Decisions.

All of us make decisions, day by day, some of them big, some small, and we don't always get them right. Here we see the apostles, making decisions.

[7 : 06] And even they, don't always get everything right. But it's interesting to see, how they made those decisions. The big decision in our text, to go to Macedonia, was of course, in response to a vision.

A very extraordinary form of guidance. But the earlier decisions, seem to have been made, simply by godly wisdom.

There are five major decisions, in this passage that we've read. And they all concern the two questions, where and who.

And we'll look at them each in turn. So the headings are going to be, where, who, where, who, where. But so that we don't miss the wood for the trees, and miss the whole point of this story, I want us also to ask a final question, why?

Why did Paul make this journey at all? And our text answers, God had called us, to preach the gospel to them.

[8 : 26] Let me remind you briefly, of the background. Paul and Barnabas, had completed their first missionary journey, back in Acts 14.

And they had returned to Antioch. And there a problem had arisen. Men had come from Judea, saying that these new Gentile converts, had to be circumcised, in order to be saved.

Council was held in Jerusalem, to consider that. And Paul and Barnabas, along with Silas and Judas Barsabbas, were sent back to Antioch, with a letter saying, that circumcision was not necessary.

But asking for certain concessions, for the sake of peace. Now the time has come for a new venture.

And so, the second missionary journey, is about to begin. And so we come to our first decision.

[9 : 39] Where? In Acts 15.36, Paul proposes a very simple plan. Let us return, and visit the brothers in every city, where we proclaim the word of the Lord, and see how they are.

That initially, is all that he has in view. Let's go back over all ground. Old ground. It's a very modest proposal.

He's concerned, for these churches, where they've preached in the past. They've only seen these churches, remember, twice. Once on the way out, when they preached for the first time, and then once on the way back, when they paused, to encourage them.

Paul's heart goes out to them, because he knows, that they're being persecuted. How are they doing? Are they still standing firm, or have they given up?

Are they growing? Are they spreading the word? I suppose, with some stretch of the imagination, you could describe this, as a kind of prototype, of the Presbyterian oversight visitation.

[11 : 05] Here are the apostles, going out, to see how these churches are doing. It was, however, a very challenging proposal.

It involved hundreds of miles, of travel, people, and they would be putting, their own lives, at risk. Now, how did Paul come up, with this plan?

There's no vision, telling him to do this. There's no extraordinary guidance, as far as we know. He's simply guided, by godly wisdom, and by a spirit of love, and sacrifice, in the cause of the Lord.

I'm sure he prayed. Paul tells us elsewhere, to pray without ceasing. I'm sure he prayed himself. But this is what the Lord, had laid on his heart.

It's a good, and it's a sensible thing to do. Now, there is a principle here, in this proposal, that, we ought to, nurture, any work, that we begin.

[12 : 25] Wasn't enough, for Paul, just to settle down, quietly in Antioch, and leave these churches, to get on with it. Wasn't good enough, for him to go on, somewhere else, and just forget about them.

These churches, still needed him. He must go back, and visit them. It might be a little controversial, but the free church, needs to, remember this.

Plant new churches, by all means, but don't forget, about the old ones. So, here's the first decision.

Nothing dramatic, just revisit the churches. But we can't doubt, that they were guided, by the spirit, because this is so much, in line, with the mind of Christ.

Christ. But now, a second decision, has to be made. Who? On their first journey, they had taken Mark, as an assistant.

[13 : 36] And Barnabas, wants to take him again. In other words, he wants to go, with the same team. Paul, doesn't. And that leads, to a quarrel.

Verses 37 to 39, Barnabas, wanted to take with them, John called Mark, but Paul thought, best not to take with them, one who had withdrawn, from them, in Pamphylia, and had not gone, with them to the work.

And there arose, a sharp disagreement, so that they separated, one from another. Here's a reminder, to us, that even the, greatest of men, can disagree, and sometimes, over the most, trivial things.

It's a warning to us, to beware, of disagreements, which can so easily, get out of hand. The history, of the church, is sadly, the history, of quarrels.

In Scotland, more than anywhere else. And godly men, have often, separated over, over matters, that, to future generations, seem incomprehensible.

[15 : 00] We look back, at Paul and Barnabas, and we think, well, surely they could have, worked that out, between them. No, they couldn't. Great men, though they were.

We need to be, on our guard, ourselves, that we don't let, trivial matters, divide us. Who was right, between them?

Well, most people, seem to side, with Barnabas. Having written, a book on Barnabas, I suppose, I should be, on his side as well. He comes across, as the kinder, and the more, gentle, of the two.

But I think, a case can be made, for both sides here. Paul could point, to the words, of the Lord Jesus, Luke 9, 62, no one, who puts his hand, to the plough, and looks back, is fit, for the kingdom of God.

And Barnabas, could have reminded, Paul of Jonah, who ran away, from the Lord, and yet he was, given a second chance, and mightily, used by God.

[16 : 07] Or, perhaps even more, to the point, and even closer, to hand, Peter, who had actually, denied the Lord, and yet, was restored.

Hardline, or soft? That's the issue here, isn't it? I'm reminded, of a dispute, among the, covenanters, as to whether, they should, listen, listen, to, the curates, as they called them.

The men, who had been intruded, upon parishes, in 1662, when, the ministers, had been, cast out. And later on, whether they should, listen to, ministers, who had gone, back to their churches, having accepted, the indulgence, that was offered, by Charles II.

second. Some were gentle, over it. Yes, these brothers, perhaps they made a mistake, but, perhaps we should be kind, to them.

Others took a hard line. They've compromised. They're not worthy, of our respect. We have nothing, to do with them. Hard line, or soft?

[17 : 26] You can see, both points of view. Maybe, Barnabas, was also influenced, by Mark, being his cousin. Or, maybe Paul, simply thought he was.

Anyhow, they were unable, to agree. Actually, I think, that both of them, were guided, by godly wisdom here.

As far, as they understood it. And, their problem was, that they weren't listening, to what the other one, was saying. You see, sometimes, wisdom is not given, just to one man, alone.

Sometimes, it's given, to two people, or to the whole congregation. And, we do sometimes, have to listen, to people, who disagree with us.

I'm reminded again, of the Covenanters, when, when, Cromwell, wrote, to the General Assembly, consider it, possible, brethren, that you may, be mistaken.

[18 : 39] They didn't, consider it possible. They went to war, and they lost. Neither Paul, nor Barnabas, considered it possible, that they were mistaken, and so, they split up.

The rift, does seem to have been healed, eventually. Paul later wrote, approvingly, of Barnabas, and he later, asked for Mark, to be sent to him, because he would be useful, in the ministry.

But, for now, they go their separate ways. That in itself, I suppose, was the wisest course, in the circumstances.

But that raises, another question, where? Where will each of them go? Verses 39 to 41, Barnabas took Mark with him, and sailed away to Cyprus.

But Paul chose Silas, and departed, having been commended, by the brothers, to the grace of the Lord. And he went through Syria, and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

[19 : 54] In other words, they divided the territory, between them. Cyprus was the obvious place, for Barnabas to go, since he came from Cyprus, while Paul and Silas, take the mainland.

Who is Silas? Well, we've met him in chapter 15, as one of the men, who was sent, with Paul, to Antioch, to deliver the decrees, of the council. He is also described there, as a prophet.

And he had stayed, in Antioch, preaching. Tried, and tested, godly man. So, a sensible choice, and a sensible plan.

Godly, wisdom, again. We hear no more, about Barnabas, in the book of Acts, but tradition has it, that he established, a strong church, on Cyprus, and that he died, as a martyr, in Salamis.

There is a, a small monastery there, which I visited, where, you can see, what is traditionally, believed, to be his tomb. Barnabas, no doubt, mentored Mark, and tradition, has it, that Mark, later preached, in Egypt, and that he, was the author, of the gospel.

[21 : 18] Paul, and Silas, meanwhile, strengthen, the churches, on the mainland, and they go on, to the regions, beyond. So, the Lord, blessed them both.

I think, that's wonderful. Here, are these two men, quarreling, with each other, making a complete, mess of things, and God, blesses them both. That's how gracious, our God is.

God, works all things, together, for good, to them, that love God, even, sometimes, our quarrels. I'm reminded, of our own experience, in Lincoln, where, our church, had been, founded, before we came, as a result, of a very, acrimonious split, with a town center church.

But the end result, under God, was that two, strong churches, were formed, in different parts, of the city. And yes, there was a measure, of reconciliation, later.

From now on, the book of Acts, follows, Paul and Silas. And straight away, there's another, who, decision, to be made. Paul and Silas, begin their journey.

[22 : 41] They get as far, as Lystra, and, they're feeling, their need, of an assistant. But who, will it be? Well, they find, a suitable, assistant, in Timothy.

Chapter 16, verses 1 to 3. Paul also came, to Derbe, and Lystra, a disciple, was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman, who was a believer. But his father, was a Greek.

He was well spoken of, by the brothers, at Lystra, and Iconium. Paul wanted Timothy, to accompany him. And he took him, and circumcised him, because of the Jews, who were in those places.

For they all knew, that his father, was a Greek. Might seem surprising, that Paul, would circumcise, Timothy, given, given that they, actually, had in their hands, the decrees, from Jerusalem, saying that circumcision, was not necessary.

But this was, for the sake of the work. Paul knew, these cities, and the opposition, that they would face, from the Jews. I have to say, it also showed, extraordinary commitment, on the part of Timothy.

[23 : 56] choice of Timothy, was a practical decision, based on gifts, and qualities, and the recommendation, of the church.

Again, no extraordinary guidance, no halo of light, appeared over him. God didn't speak, with a booming voice, this is the man. They simply recognized, here was someone, suitable.

Godly wisdom. Sure, they prayed over it, but the spirit of God, was quietly, directing them, to the right man. And it was, the right decision.

Timothy, later becomes, a key worker. So, in verse 4 and 5, they went on their way, through the cities, delivered to them, the decisions of the council.

The churches, were strengthened, in the faith, and they increased, in number, daily. Mission accomplished. But now, they have, another decision, to make.

[25 : 01] Where? They've gone through, the area, they'd planned to go to. Where next? They have a general call, to preach the gospel, to the whole world.

But where, in particular, should they go? For a while, they're uncertain. If we imagine, the apostles, always absolutely, confident, knowing God's will, on everything.

No, it wasn't like that. There were times, when they really, didn't know. There are several, false starts, in verses 6 to 8.

They went through, the regions of Phrygia, and Galatia, having been forbidden, by the Holy Spirit, to speak the word, in Asia. And when they'd come up, to Mysia, they attempted, to go into Bithynia. But the spirit of Jesus, did not allow them.

So passing by Mysia, they went down, to Troas. In each case, they're doing, the logical thing. They're following, the Roman roads. But sometimes, it takes more, than logic.

[26 : 11] The Lord had, other plans, which needed, special guidance. How the spirit, guided them, we're not told.

Maybe it was, by a word of prophecy. Silas, remember, was a prophet. Maybe it was just, some inward conviction. We sometimes, have inward convictions, don't we?

Which can be, of the Lord. Though they must, always be tested, by scripture. Maybe it was, in some providential way. Doors, being closed, to them.

That again, is a common experience, for ourselves, isn't it? one door opens, another closes. And that can be, the Lord's way, of guiding us. Why the Lord, should forbid them, to preach, in certain places, again, we're not told.

Maybe it wasn't, the right time. Maybe Philippi, was more urgent. Certainly, these forbidden, areas, did hear the gospel, later.

[27 : 23] Paul, later went to, Ephesus, in Asia. And from there, the word went out, throughout Asia. One Peter, is addressed to Christians, in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.

And some, think that Peter, himself, went to those areas. But right now, the Lord had, other plans, for Paul. And that brings us, to the vision, in verse 9.

A vision, appeared to Paul, in the night. A man of Macedonia, was standing there, urging him, and saying, come over to Macedonia, and help us. One of the promises, in Joel, quoted by Peter, on the day of Pentecost, was that, in that day, when the spirit, was poured out, your young men, shall see visions, visions, and your old men, shall dream dreams.

And Paul, was certainly a man, who saw visions. There was that vision, in the temple, when he was told, to go to the Gentiles. There was a vision, in Corinth, when he was told, to go on preaching, without fear, because I have much people, in this city.

There was that vision, during the shipwreck, when he was told, everyone will be safe, but you must be cast up, onto a certain island. Well here we have, the famous vision, of the man, of Macedonia.

[29 : 03] How he knew, he was from Macedonia, we're not told. Maybe, the distinctive style, of dress. But there's no doubt, what it meant. Verse 10, when Paul, had seen the vision, immediately, we sought to go, to Macedonia, concluding that God, had called us, to preach the gospel, to them.

Immediately notice, once they were sure, of the Lord's will, then, they must obey it. Same with us, we may go through, many weeks, or months, of uncertainty, about something, but when we are certain, then we must do, what the Lord, has directed us.

There is incidentally, a subtle change, of pronoun here, which could easily, go unnoticed. Up till now, they had traveled, to all these various places.

Now, we, sought, to go to Macedonia. So it seems, that Luke, had joined them, at this point. What a moment, to join, Paul's mission.

Now the question arises, should we expect visions? Certainly, there are some Christians, today, who claim to have visions.

- [30 : 33] The general, view, in the, reformed churches, is, no. The word, is sufficient. The Westminster, confession says, that, these, former ways, of God, revealing his will, have ceased.

Having said that, Samuel Rutherford, who was, a commissioner, at the Westminster, assembly, so if anyone understood, the Westminster, confession, he did, he speaks, approvingly, of certain, prophecies, that were made, by John Knox.

Some of the, covenanters, were said, to have, prophetic gifts. So perhaps, we should be, a little careful, as to what, the confession, means.

Perhaps, these, prophecies, of Knox, and of the, covenanters, perhaps, it's a question, of terminology. Perhaps, we should view them, simply as, divine, insights.

I think, some of the, later, Scottish, preachers, the verse, was quoted, from the Psalms, that the secret, of the Lord, is with them, that fear him.

- [31 : 55] God, can speak, in any way, that he wishes. Sometimes, in scripture, he has spoken, in extraordinary ways. Guide me, O thou great Jehovah.

Well, how did he guide the Israelites? By a pillar of cloud, and fire. We certainly, don't expect that today. Wise men, came from the east. How was he, were they guided?

By a star. We don't expect that either. Here, how is Paul guided? By a vision. It was an extraordinary, occasion.

We don't necessarily, expect to be guided, like that today. We expect to be guided, generally. By the word, and by the spirit of God, within.

But even in these, less dramatic ways, it is still, the same spirit. And we must still pray, for the spirit, to guide us. And we must still, listen to the spirit.

- [33 : 00] Whatever form, that guidance takes. Don't imagine, that the quieter, guidance we receive, is somehow inferior, to the guidance, Paul received.

It's just as genuine, just as precious, and just as much, from God. But on this occasion, God did speak, through a vision.

Why? Well, I think perhaps, most likely, because, this was a big, world changing, decision. And one, that they might, never have made, by themselves.

They might have, sat there in Troas, for weeks and weeks, and never have guessed, at the idea, of going to Macedonia. They were thinking, Asia Minor. They needed, a divine word, to turn them around, and send them, over to Greece.

Finally, we need to ask, why? Why were they needed, in Macedonia? Well, the answer, is obvious, stated plainly here, to preach, the gospel.

- [34 : 22] gospel. This was, Paul's, great, driving force, in life, to preach, the gospel. These Macedonians, like everyone else, in the world, were lost.

They were, struggling through life, in the darkness, of sin, and they were, facing the judgment, of God, when they died. They, desperately, needed, to hear, the good news.

To hear, the news, that Christ Jesus, came into the world, to save sinners. To hear, the good news, that there, is a God, who so, loved the world, that he gave, his own son, to die, for our sins.

To hear, the good news, that whoever, calls on the name, of the Lord, will be saved. And that is still, what the world, needs to hear today.

Scotland, needs to hear, this word, of the gospel. We, we might have, many issues, that we love, to debate, amongst ourselves, and there's no harm, in that, if we do so, in love, and humility.

[35 : 44] But let's never, lose sight, of the big issue. We're here, to preach, the gospel. Scotland, needs the gospel.

Dumfries, needs the gospel. The whole world, needs, the gospel. They need to hear, that Jesus, saves.

We, we speak, of a Macedonian, call, whenever people, hear, of the need, of some particular place, and, respond to it.

Without, any need, for a vision, to convince them. Christians, have heard, of the need, in different parts, of the world, and become convinced, that they should go, even at great, personal cost, to themselves, to become missionaries.

The spirit, has laid, these places, upon their hearts. They've heard, as it were, Africa, calling to them, come over, and help us.

[36 : 51] Or, South America, calling, come over, and help us. Perhaps, one day, someone from our church, will hear, some Macedonian call, and will respond, and go to some, distant part, of the world.

Or, simply to somewhere, else in Scotland, can we not hear, the towns, and villages, all around us, saying, come over, and help us. Or, maybe, it's simply, Dumfries, saying, stay here, and help us.

may all of us here, believe the gospel, with all our hearts, that's the first step, isn't it? You can't preach to others, what you don't believe yourself.

And, may the whole world, hear, and believe, and be saved. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.