

# Decisions in Gospel Ministry

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, we all know that life is full of decisions. Even Michelle had to make some decisions about which workshop she needed to go to. So we're all faced with decisions in life, aren't we?

Whether it's day-to-day small choices like workshops, or bigger things like jobs, marriages, choices with medical treatment for some of those who are older or suffering illness, where to live.

And sometimes the number of choices gets a bit overwhelming, doesn't it? And we wish that God would just give us specific guidance. You know, I'd say bring back the Urim and Thummim.

That's one way. I don't know whether some of you used to have one of these. Maybe it's still in your cupboard. Yep. Apparently nowadays this is a bit old hat, right?

You've got an app that does it, right? Sammy uses it all the time. So please God, bless my magic eight ball. Or, as we see today, maybe God could give us a vision or specific direction in a dream.

[ 1 : 0 8 ] Because the thing is that we worry, don't we? That if we make the wrong choice, particularly with a big decision, we could stuff up.

And we could have a life-changing, life-altering decision made that we feel like is the wrong thing, and then we can't reverse it. Or, it might be that if God made his will clearer, then the church wouldn't argue so much, would they?

We just have to ask Paul and Barnabas this week, because we see that they've had a falling out, because God didn't make clear what they should have done with John Mark.

And that may surprise you, because last week, we saw how the church came together across many cities to resolve their differences, and to unite around a rather, you know, a solution around a rather complex situation.

And as Paul and Barnabas were going out and sending out the message, this message was well received by the churches in Asia. So, Paul and Barnabas were a key part of this decision.

[ 2 : 1 5 ] And yet, this week, we find them at loggerheads. And we go, surely not. Not these two giants of the Christian faith.

These key workers in God's mission field. Well, it appears so, for we read verse 36, chapter 15, on the slide. Some time later, Paul said to Barnabas, let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preach the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.

That's a commendable goal by Paul. But then, verse 37, Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark with them, but Paul did not think it wise to do so because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work.

Now, if you know John Mark, his mother was the one whose house everyone gathered at to pray for Peter's release in Jerusalem. He's also a cousin of Barnabas.

And John joined Paul and Barnabas on their first journey. In fact, we read in Acts chapter 13, verse 13, on the next slide, that when they left Cyprus, John left them to return to Jerusalem.

- [ 3 : 28 ] Now, we didn't know then, in chapter 13, why? Well, now we do. Because according to Paul, John Mark had deserted them. Paul wasn't happy about that, for we read in verse 39, they had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company.

Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commanded by the believers to the grace of the Lord. Now, Luke here is honest enough to let us in on this fallout, not glossing over and making just a rosy picture of the mission trip.

And it's only a brief reference, but I think it was probably a big bust-up. This dynamic duo, the founding members of God's mission to the Gentiles, fell out on mission.

Now, imagine if you receive their prayer updates. You know, they're our gospel partners, and you read this from them. I mean, how would you react? Probably pretty concerned.

Alarmed, even, right? Now, Luke doesn't quite here tell us whether God explicitly considered Paul or Barnabas right. We can guess and speculate.

- [ 4 : 43 ] In fact, Andrew and I just had a rather sharp disagreement at the back. Andrew thinks Paul's in the right, whereas I think it's not clear. Anyway, I'm not leaving the church.

It's okay. See, I think perhaps that John Mark may have had a valid reason. Barnabas was giving him a second chance.

But on the other hand, you could also think, yeah, you know, John was being unreliable, and Paul was right not to take him along, or else the mission might be compromised.

But also you wonder, why couldn't Barnabas and Paul compromise on this? Was John Mark so important to the success or failure that they had to fall out over him? Well, I suppose we'll never know, but when we get to heaven, we'll probably find out.

Could ask Paul and Barnabas what they thought, or could ask God what he thought. Maybe that's better. But the result was, Barnabas sails to Cyprus with John, and Paul stays inland, on land, and goes through Syria and Cilicia.

- [ 5 : 50 ] And yet we see that, despite this apparent setback, there doesn't seem to be a detrimental effect on the gospel. Paul gains an extra partner in Silas, a trusted church leader, and both teams spread out and cover a wider area than would have been possible.

And then for Paul and Silas in particular, the believers in Antioch commended them to the Lord. Now we don't hear much more about Barnabas and John Mark, but there are a couple of references later in Paul's letters, and one of them in 1 Timothy 4, verse 11, Paul refers to a Mark whom he summons, he asks Timothy to summon, because he is helpful to me in my ministry.

Well, if this Mark was John Mark, then perhaps Paul later reconciles with him as well. And so we wonder, don't we, why God would allow a dispute like that to occur.

I mean, after all, if God was powerful, he could overrule Paul and Barnabas, get them to work together, see that the mission was more important than their differences. And yet, we see, despite God not doing that, that he remains sovereign, doesn't he, even over their differences.

And his work continues to grow without much hindrance. That's not to say that Paul and Barnabas should argue, and that we should encourage open disagreement like that, but it's just to acknowledge that God can still be sovereign.

- [ 7 : 20 ] God is still sovereign, sorry. And that happens as well today, don't we see, don't we? Sometimes, we will see leaders with the same gospel heart who might otherwise agree on everything else in faith and the Bible still passionately disagree on one point, and that leads them to part ways.

And our normal reflex when we hear that or see that is to be disheartened. And in a sense, there is a sense we should be sad about it.

But, we can also still remember that God is sovereign, that he's big enough to work through even these disruptions, and more importantly, to bring about his purpose through human weakness.

So, that was decision number one. But, let's move on now to decision number two where we see Paul on his journey, verse 1 of chapter 16. Paul returns to Derbe and then goes on to Lystra, both places he's been to before.

And at Lystra, he finds a disciple named Timothy, whose mother was Jewish and a believer, but whose father was a Greek. The believers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him.

[ 8 : 36 ] Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. Now again, this incident occurs very soon after the Jerusalem council and gives Paul one of two choices.

So, on the one hand, the leaders at Jerusalem had stressed, didn't they, that it's by grace that both Jew and Gentile are saved. So, really, there is no need for Timothy to be circumcised.

He's saved. And yet, on the other hand, the Jews in the area, they knew that Timothy had a Jewish mother. But because he had also had a Greek father, he wasn't circumcised at birth.

And so, Paul has to think, what should we do now here? Because Timothy wants to take, Paul wants to take Timothy along on the mission trip. Well, in the end, Paul decides to ask Timothy to be circumcised.

primarily because he does not want to have this issue of circumcision distract the Jews in particular from hearing the gospel.

[ 9 : 43 ] He was asking Timothy, in other words, to be a Jew to the Jews in order to be saved. But notice that even though that was done, Paul, in verse 4, continues to keep delivering the decisions made by the Jerusalem Council, doesn't he?

for he wanted them to realize this core message still, that core to the gospel, it is the fact that it is by grace that we are all saved.

And as a result, we see growth in the church. Next verse, or next line, so the churches were strengthened in faith and grew daily in numbers. So with decision number two, although tricky, I think this one was a bit more clear-cut for Paul.

He chose what would advance the gospel as the basis for deciding what to do with Timothy. But he ensured then that the Jerusalem Council was still being delivered, consistent message, so as the core of the gospel, the main message of the gospel was not compromised.

And so you might think that this was a pragmatic decision from Paul, that is, just get Timothy circumcised, it's easier to sell the gospel then to the Jews. But no, actually, it's a sound principle because it's saying we ought to be flexible in approach so long as the message of the gospel isn't hindered.

[ 11 : 10 ] By contrast, there's actually another occasion in Galatians chapter 2 where the Jews insisted that Titus, who wasn't half Jew and half Greek, but just Greek, insisted that he be circumcised.

But in this case, Paul stood his ground because having Titus circumcised would have undermined the truth of the gospel. The Jews then wanted to use that as a litmus test for salvation, which goes against the message that grace alone saves.

And so in that case, Paul decided it was not right to do that. And that's not the case here because Timothy was already well regarded by the believers. They knew already that he was saved.

They accepted him as a believer. So circumcision was not a salvation issue here. And so Paul could ask Timothy to be circumcised knowing that the gospel message would not be distorted but rather be used to aid evangelism among the Jews.

So here in decision number two, God worked by giving Paul wisdom to effect his sovereign will. And finally, we get to our third decision for today and this was related to where Paul should go, the direction of his journey.

[ 12 : 22 ] So we read in verse 6, Paul and his companions traveled through the region of Phrygia and Galatia having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mycenae they tried to enter Bithynia but the spirit of Jesus would not allow them to.

So they passed by Mycenae and went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him come over to Macedonia and help us. So if you want to, you can look at that map it's a bit small but you can look at the other one on the slide as well and you can see where all these places are.

Bithynia and Mycenae they're all in Turkey and Paul's been traveling trying to head north. And surprisingly for the very first time and maybe the only time we read in the Bible that the Holy Spirit was stopping Paul from preaching the word.

This is probably the only instance in the Bible where someone is being stopped from preaching the word. Now we're not given the exact details. It could have been, maybe it was bad weather or something that stopped him or opposition or an impassable road.

We don't quite know but Luke is pretty clear isn't it? That it's the Holy Spirit and the Spirit of Jesus that was stopping them from heading any further. And then one night Paul gets a vision of a man begging him to come across to Macedonia.

[ 13 : 44 ] And as a result verse 10 after Paul had seen the vision we got ready at once notice the we I think here's where Luke starts to maybe join this journey or something we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

So the Spirit had blocked Paul's progress in Asia because there was a greater need gospel need in Macedonia or Greece.

And so here again we see yet another way in which God guides sovereignly directing the progress of the gospel. With the first decision God was working despite human failure.

In the second God was giving Paul wisdom to work out what his will was. And then here in the third situation God was using circumstances and even intervening supernaturally through a vision to reveal his will.

So many and various ways in which God was directing and working to effect his gospel plan. Now in one sense we could have skipped over this passage today because it's one of these passages where you know it's not quite the high point of any part of Acts is it?

[ 15 : 03 ] Not like the conversion of Paul or the conversion of Cornelius and his family or even the Jerusalem council where you have this high point momentous occasion. Instead all we have is a bit of an in-between passage of you know how did Paul get from here to there?

How did they sort of split up? Paul and Barnabas? How did Silas and Timothy get on board? It's sort of nothing really happens and yet things do happen don't they?

Because God is working in and through these so-called mundane circumstances to achieve his will. And even though God is working there is a sense in which we don't really know how and why and all the specifics of things is it?

And we could be critical of God and say you know why did he have to wait until Paul felt like he was being frustrated from going north and then give him the vision?

You know couldn't God just give him the vision at the start when he was in Antioch? And so we have some questions of detail don't we in various parts of this passage.

[ 16 : 13 ] But to ask that question is sort of a bit arrogant isn't it? To think that we're the Lord's equal. As the other reading in Isaiah 40 said who can fathom the spirit of the Lord?

Next slide. Or instruct the Lord as his counselor? No one. Who did the Lord consult to enlighten him? And who taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge and showed him the path of understanding?

Well the answer to that is no one. God himself keeps his own counsel and he's entitled to isn't he? And yet we read over and over again that God actually despite this prerogative reveals himself to us and his will to us.

Not just in the big events like the Jerusalem Council but also in the mundane events of the in-between sections as it were. Now he does not reveal everything all at once and even at the end he does not reveal everything in total.

But God in this passage does show us that he does reveal his will and not only that that he affects his sovereign will all the time even despite human weaknesses and failure.

[ 17 : 26 ] And this applies not just with gospel ministry as with Paul and Barnabas and John and Timothy here but it applies in all situations of our lives doesn't it?

Our own lives our own ministries everything. Now on Wednesday night I was part of one of the young adult groups for their study the one that's doing the big picture course and as you all do as young adults you always have your icebreaker question to start things off I don't know why your group's not that icy but you need a icebreaker question and the one that was said last Wednesday was if you could undo anything in your life what would it be?

And I shared this with the other two congregations earlier and they came up to me and said there would be 101 things that would change with my life. So I'm not criticizing those who have that.

But anyway I don't normally enjoy icebreaker questions but this one in particular this one really stumped me because I genuinely did not have an answer. because as I look back there's nothing in my life really that I want to reverse.

I guess the verse that comes to mind is Romans 8 verse 28 that all things work for good to those who love him who have been called according to his purpose. So anyway in the end as it came around to me I said look I have no answer because I didn't want to change anything and then they all poo-pooed me that's a standard pastor's answer you can't give that you've got to give something so in the end I said something like okay if you want I will redo if you want me to reverse something I would redo our bathroom renovations which is true because yeah you can talk to Alyssa about this but we sort of didn't design it that well so we've had to live with it over the last 20 years but on hindsight it's character building so you know I wouldn't have reversed it either but anyway now many of you I mean the reason I raise this is because I know many of you who are Christians as well will know this but if we continue to be faithfully walking with the

[ 19 : 37 ] Lord and trusting with him we do over time don't we as we look back and see what God has done in our life we begin to understand even if not in full we begin to understand God's good purpose in our lives even through those things that we wish didn't happen even through the tough times because God does show himself faithful and that God's spirit does work in us to grow us in our understanding of what he's trying to do in our lives as we read his word and we gain wisdom as to what God's purpose is and that's the same with us as a church isn't it that for those of us who have been coming to HDD for a while we can look back at our congregation and our church and we can give thanks to God can't we for we see him at work even though there are times you know there are ups and downs and we may not understand everything that has happened in our own history and of course when we read the book of

Acts and we read the Bible that's the ultimate testimony isn't it of God's goodness and God's sovereignty and ultimately also his revelation of this good purpose and sovereignty for God works in and through all of history doesn't he to achieve his purpose using both the big events and the small events good people and bad people everything works for good to achieve God's purpose in our lives but also in this world and I think the more we know and the more we understand this the more it should impact us in two ways one of two ways the first is that it should give us a deep assurance of God's guidance in our lives even when he doesn't specifically reveal his counsel to us in the here and now we can be assured God will still direct our paths there's nothing we do that will step us out of his sovereignty because

God's bigger than our mistakes what we're called to do instead is to trust in him and his son and to continue to walk in his ways which leads me to the second impact and that is that along with this assurance we then also ought to have confidence to step out in faith we need to be prayerful but we can know that as we step out in obedience God will guide us you know sometimes we're so paralyzed aren't we what if I make the wrong decisions we don't need to feel like that or think like that because God will direct us and guide us shape our circumstances open and close doors of opportunities whatever it may take you know I'm not sure he'll give us a vision he may but whatever it is he'll give us the wisdom he'll give us his word to guide us so that when we step out and make those decisions we don't need to be afraid to make the wrong move now that's not a license to be careless and arrogant to keep sinning because

God has got us covered but we've seen isn't it that even through his servants individually but also guiding the church collectively and so as a bit of an application for example as we begin starting up the 5pm congregation next year we can you know it can be a bit daunting isn't it scary to say okay one third of you just go to Blackburn it's costly to do these kind of things and yet if we're prayerful we're dependent on God and Andrew and I continue to pray and seek the Lord's will and now with Peter and Ricky then when we do step out we can do so by faith can't we humbly depending on God and yet knowing it's okay we're not going to stuff out in that sense because

God is going to be guiding us you see from a human point of view we can't put too much pressure on we're the first movers in our lives if we don't decide this we don't do that nothing else is going to happen but actually if you think about it if we believe that God is sovereign and he is then from a cosmic point of view everything we do everything that occurs in our lives really only comes to pass because God is the first mover right he's the one who initiates sins he saves everything comes from God first what we're called to do instead is to respond by faith and obedience that's what we ask to do or we could respond by fear and rejection and disobedience that's another way too but that's not the one I'm recommending for you instead because we believe in him and his sovereignty let's respond by faith and obedience knowing that

[ 24 : 59 ]    God is the one actually that moving is moving ahead of us that he's already planned out history and he's bringing it into pass and what we need to do is listen hear his voice read his word use his wisdom and step out in faith let's pray our sovereign and loving God thank you for giving us your spirit as a constant guide and counsel revealing to us your will both in your word and through the spirit's wisdom to make decisions in life help us to have your big gospel plan in Christ Jesus always in our minds so that we may walk by faith and obedience to your word and give to us the peace and joy that comes from knowing you are our good shepherd in Jesus name we pray amen calamans to we can't among people that when you talk noise about 2 and turn carried out ourvi.com