

Spirit, Strategy, Strength

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Date: 24 April 2005

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[0 : 0 0] You'll need to take your Bible, which is in front of you, and turn to page 128 to Acts 15. And as you do that, I want to thank Neil for giving me permission to preach twice as long this morning, because you have two ears and one mouth.

That shows how many were listening to the children's focus. As you're finding Acts 15, I want to point out that at the beginning of each service here, we always start with a text from Scripture.

The purpose of that is to hear what God says first, so that we're in listening mode. And there was a lovely verse that Neil read to us about how early in the morning we rise and sing of thy steadfast love.

But the verses before it speak about the night before. And they say, each evening they come back howling like dogs and prowling about the city.

They roam about for food and growl if they do not get their fill. So if anyone is feeling excluded this morning, those verses should make you feel included as you hear the text at the beginning of the service.

[1 : 1 6] That was a joke. And it had nothing to do with the sermon whatsoever. And neither does this. It reminds me of the story, which I may have told before, of the minister.

There's a cartoon of the minister and his wife and family as they're driving to church on Sunday morning. And his wife is saying to him, darling, this morning, can we do things in reverse? Can you be really nice to me and the children and nasty to the people at church?

So... Well now, if it feels like we've been in Acts for years, it's because we have. And I've always wanted to get to chapter 15.

And now that we have, we're going to take a break. And a change of pace, starting next week, diving into the Old Testament. As C.S. Lewis once wrote, friendship is the least natural of all loves, the least instinctive.

It goes against the grain of the world. And I would say that one of the most precious and important aspects of life is friendship. In fact, Jesus himself speaks about his relation with us in terms of friendship.

[2 : 3 0] And to have friends who love you and who wish the best for you and who speak the truth to you and who celebrate you is a source of great joy and ongoing strength.

It certainly is for me. Most married women wish their husbands had deeper and better friends. Many men choose their friends a little like watching television, sort of with a remote control.

Statistics in North America are that most men make no real friends after high school. And after age 40, men typically make no friends at all.

I'm against the media bias against men, but I think these things are true. And this is one of those areas we don't do very well in. If you're a single person or if you're a parent, you know that the tide of the culture is moving us towards having a kind of a utilitarian view of friendships.

You know, to network rather than to love people. To hook up rather than to care. To prioritize rather than to spend time.

[3 : 41] But to have people who stand by you and stand with you over the long haul, to whom you can express your fears in confidentiality, who will stand with you in the corner, it's a great treasure.

And every friendship, every genuine friendship, has difficulties as well as joys. Because if the person is a real friend, they're not just going to affirm my choices, but they're going to help me grow and be like Christ.

And that's why friendships are never simple. One of my closest friends is an Australian, and I knew him before he became a Christian. And he's now a minister of the gospel in Australia.

We were in seminary for several years together, and somehow he appointed himself to the position of working on my character and personality weaknesses.

It was a very difficult relationship for me. But, you know, I knew he loved me, and I knew he was committed to my best. And after we left seminary, he's worked in a number of different ministries.

[4 : 49] He's never worked in a parish, so he always has weekends off. And we stay in touch regularly. Several years ago, he became the rector of his first parish.

Last time I was in Australia, we spent a few hours together. And I want to tell you, he is a man full of weakness and questions now. And it's hard for me not to enjoy the shift in our friendship.

Now, the reason I mention this is because, as we leave the council of Jerusalem in Acts 15, and the gospel of God's grace has been grasped with greater clarity, it now works itself out through friendships.

Not as though what God is doing in the gospel is over there and abstract and spiritual, and here are my friendships and here are the relationships I'm in. They come together. In fact, everything now moves around the gospel.

I don't know if children do this in Canada, but in Australia, the first science experiment I can remember, we're given iron filings and a piece of paper, and we put a magnet underneath them.

[5 : 58] Did you do that as children? And all the filings move in order around the poles. That's what's happening here in the book of Acts. Christians are shocked at the power and effectiveness of the gospel.

It leaps over boundaries outside Judaism. Pagans, Gentiles, come to faith in Jesus Christ. Very difficult for these new Jewish Christians to believe that these pagans and Gentiles could inherit all the promises of God in the Old Testament without at least obeying the ceremonial laws, Sabbaths being circumscribed.

Particularly hard to believe that God could just cleanse our hearts by faith in Jesus Christ, to save us only by the grace of the Lord Jesus.

And as we come to this statement of the gospel, this wonderful clarion call to the grace of God in the Council of Jerusalem, the Council also says that the transforming friendship of Jesus Christ in our lives shows itself by a commitment to worship the true God, to sexual purity, and to love of others.

In fact, those things are the most conducive things to friendship that there can possibly be. For the Council writes a letter and sends it out to the churches, the Gentile churches, which have just been newly formed.

[7 : 23] And they say, every single person who turns to the Lord Jesus Christ in repentance and faith is washed and saved, is forgiven, transformed, not by their works, but by the grace of God.

And the evidence of that work is the avoidance of idolatry and immorality and violence. And if you haven't been here the last few weeks, you can order a cassette tape as we work through chapter 15, or you can, I think you can download it online.

Today we come to 1536, and I just want to take the last paragraph in chapter 15 and the first paragraph in chapter 16, and it's really about how the gospel is worked out through friendship.

Apostle Paul is common to them both, but on the surface, it looks like both episodes are disasters. I mean, if you cast your eyes down 36 to 41, Paul says, let's go and visit the churches in Asia Minor that we planted.

Barnabas wants to take young John Mark. There's only one problem. Paul absolutely, resolutely refused to have John Mark on the team. And so Paul and Barnabas, who've been a mission team now for five years, separate and split.

[8 : 35] And Barnabas takes John Mark back to Cyprus, where he comes from, and Paul now takes a new partner, Silas, and they go to Asia Minor. If you ask any missionary what is the hardest thing about being a missionary, they all give you exactly the same answer.

It's not the working conditions, it's not the lack of money, it's not the tricky new cultural situation. It is their relationships with other missionaries, difficult of friendships in the gospel.

And this looks like a disaster, doesn't it? And the same happens in chapter 16, verses 1 to 5, when Paul and Silas come to Lystra, and they pick young Timothy for their team.

Hasn't the council just said that you don't need to be circumcised to be saved? Well, the apostle Paul, has Timothy circumcised when he joins the team? Has he lost his mind entirely?

Someone gave me recently the Darwin Awards. This is a book. Some of you may know of it. The Darwin Awards, the true stories commemorating individuals who improve our gene pool by removing themselves from it.

[9 : 52] This is a true story. In 2002, the people who live in Luhansk, which is a city in the Ukraine, were woken with a loud explosion. And when they went out on the street, it looked as though a young man had taken the life of an older party official.

This is what actually had happened. The older party deputy, who was a local politician, had been out walking his dog, and he'd come across this young cadet who was walking some women home.

The young cadet very foolishly pointed out that the dog was not allowed on a public street without a lead and without a muzzle. Not a wise thing to do. And so the two men began to argue.

Unable to resolve the matter by verbal means, the party deputy pulled out an RGD5 hand grenade, pulled out the pin, and threw it at the cadet's feet.

Immediately, his well-trained dog ran for the object, threw, and fetched it for his master. And it was the last thing dog and master did.

[11 : 02] So you've got to look below the surface at what's really going on. And I tell that story, which I was in two minds. I didn't mind telling it to the nine o'clock, but I wasn't sure about telling it here because of your sensitivity to these things.

We need to look below the surface at these stories. And I want to warn you that we're going to do a lot of flipping of pages in the Bible. And if you're not comfortable looking around the Bible, I'll give page references every time we do.

Let me remind you of the first episode with John Mark. Let me just quickly read these verses, 36 to 41 again. After some days, Paul said to Barnabas, Come, let's return to the brethren.

In every city, we proclaim the word of the Lord and see how they are. 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, had not gone with them to the work.

There arose a sharp contention so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of the Lord.

[12 : 10] And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches. So here are Paul and Barnabas in Antioch. And the ministry is growing, it's successful, rewarding.

But like a very good pastor, the apostle Paul knows that the churches that have been planted without ongoing nurture and visiting and teaching are going to fall into decay.

Because it is the most natural thing for us as Christians to slide away from the gospel. Despite the fact that they'd had the gospel preached by the apostle himself, and despite the fact that they had seen the Holy Spirit do amazing things, the apostle recognizes the churches needed strengthening and encouragement.

And it is true, it doesn't matter how old a church is, every congregation, every Christian, you may have been a Christian for a very long time, we all need to hear God's word with a sense of expectancy and urgency.

But there's a problem. And something comes between Paul and Barnabas that leads to a separation, to a split. They had been brought together by God.

[13 : 22] They had worked together now as a mission team for at least five years. They had seen God create churches through them. They had suffered together terrible persecution.

But they split because Barnabas insists on taking John Mark with them, and Paul will absolutely not take him with them. Now, John Mark is the Mark who wrote the second gospel that we have in the front of the Bible.

He wrote it much later. He was a young man during Jesus' ministry. His mother was a wealthy woman who owned a very large home in Jerusalem, which in itself was unusual.

It's likely the place where Jesus and the disciples had the last supper in the upper room. We know it's certainly the place where the early Christians met in the early chapters of Acts.

And when persecution breaks out in chapter 12 under Herod, Mary still opens her home to the disciples, even though it's going to cost her and put her in danger.

[14 : 28] And Paul and Barnabas set out from Antioch with John Mark on the first missionary journey. Just turn back a page to chapter 13, verse 5. At the end of that verse, it says they had John Mark to assist them, which means he wasn't the water boy.

He was a full participant in the work. And he went with them through Cyprus, and he saw the remarkable ministry and the terrible opposition they had at Cyprus. And at chapter 13, verse 13, when Paul and Barnabas decide to sail to the mainland, John Mark has had enough, and so he leaves them.

He goes home to mum, the big house in Jerusalem. And in chapter 15, verse 38, the passage I've just read to you, the Apostle Paul sees this as a character flaw.

It's not just someone who is homesick for mum. This is deserting the mission. As Paul says, he had not gone with us to the work. At a key moment, when the pressure was on to stand with the Apostle and with Barnabas together, John Mark abandoned them and fled.

And what a tragedy it was to lose him at Perga. I mean, if his gospel is anything to go by, he is a brilliant evangelist and teacher. He knows the Old Testament up and down. He's got an agile mind.

[15 : 54] He understands the Greek culture. To lose him would have been a terrible blow. Very difficult. Most disappointing. Here's the thing. The Apostle Paul does not write John Mark off as though he's no longer a Christian.

But neither will he allow John Mark to go with them as part of the team. Because when things got difficult, John Mark abandoned and betrayed the mission. He can see that John Mark is a Christian, but he can also see that John Mark's service is conditional.

What guarantee does Paul have that when things got tough again, which they would, John Mark would not abandon them? It's not his Christian faith that is at issue, but his courage at that key moment of decision.

Paul won't take him. Now, do you think Paul the Apostle was right? Don't you think it would have been easy to have given in to Barnabas?

I mean, after all, wasn't it Barnabas who stuck up for Paul when Paul first came to Jerusalem and everyone thought he was a fake? You'll have to decide for yourselves.

[17 : 03] But I think Paul was right for two reasons. The first is that in verse 40, it seems that the church in Antioch sides with Paul and they take Paul and Silas and they commend them to the grace of God and commission them to ministry.

The other reason I think the Apostle Paul is right is going to take us wider in the Bible and I want us to do a little bit of Bible hunting. Please keep your finger in Acts 15. We're going to come back there again and turn right in your Bible to Colossians chapter 4, verse 10 on page 190.

Every evidence we've got in the New Testament points to the fact that this experience was very important for John Mark. Rather than making him embittered and ending the friendship with Paul, it actually was used by God to turn him from someone who is unreliable to someone who is trustworthy.

And here in Colossians 4, verse 10, Paul is writing from prison in Rome and look at who's with him. Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, greets you and Mark, the cousin of Barnabas, concerning whom you have received instructions.

If he comes to you, receive. Very interesting. Turn right to Philemon, a couple of pages. Page 202.

[18 : 28] He's in prison again. And I want you to see how the Apostle Paul now refers to John Mark in verse 24 of Philemon.

Start at 23. Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greeting to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

So now John Mark has moved from being someone he won't trust to someone who is a fellow worker. Turn backwards to 2 Timothy, chapter 4, verse 11, on page 200.

Now this is the last letter from the Apostle. He is in prison in Rome for the final time, and he knows he's going to be executed. In verse 11, we read this. He says, Luke alone is with me.

Get Mark. Bring him with you. He is very useful in serving me. Isn't that striking? Such is the trust and friendship that Paul now has with John Mark, that as he knows he's going to face death, likely by execution, Paul wants Mark with him.

[19 : 37] One more piece of evidence. If we go back to Mark's Gospel, turn left to Mark's Gospel, chapter 14 for a moment. This evidence comes from Mark himself. Page 49.

After Paul's death, John Mark worked with the Apostle Peter in Jerusalem. And you know that Mark's Gospel is Peter speaking and Mark writing.

And in chapter 14, we are in the Garden of Gethsemane, on the last night before Jesus is crucified. And Judas has brought soldiers to arrest Jesus.

And I want to pick it up at verse 50. Speaking of his followers, Mark says, They all forsook him and fled, and a young man followed him with nothing but a linen cloth about his body.

They seized him, but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked. Verse 50 says that all the disciples forsook him and fled.

[20 : 43] But Mark chooses to focus their forsaking and betrayal on this one young man. The word for young man here is someone who's exceptionally strong and valiant.

I think it's an irony. And the linen cloth that this young man is wearing is designer clothing, only affordable by the wealthy. And all the church fathers of the early church agree that Mark is speaking about himself.

He was there in the Garden of Gethsemane, and it's not enough for him to say that all the disciples fled. He wants to add his own confession. For Mark feels that he abandoned Jesus in the Garden, and he abandoned the ministry once at Perga.

And it is my guess that this is why Mark had such a strong connection with the Apostle Peter, who you remember denied Jesus three times on this very same night.

And after Jesus rose from the dead, when he first saw Peter, he acted as a true friend to Peter. He doesn't avoid the issue of betrayal.

[21 : 57] Jesus' big concern is not Peter's self-esteem or validating his decisions, but confronting him with love and restoring him to friendship. And three times in that conversation on the beach with the risen Jesus, Jesus says to him, Peter, do you love me?

Peter, do you love me? And it is through that conversation that Peter is restored and commissioned to ministry.

And I think Paul is acting as a true friend to John Mark here. Do you not think it is in the most difficult circumstances that God opens our hearts to growth and to effectiveness and to creativity?

Where we see who we are and we see who God is. I think we learn more from our failures than we do from our successes. I certainly do. That is when we need true friends, true friends, who will help us humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God and seek his help.

John Mark. So let's go back to Acts and let's look very quickly at just the last few minutes at Timothy, chapter 16.

[23 : 15] You remember when Paul and Barnabas first went to Lystra. Lystra tried to treat them as gods. And when Paul and Barnabas would not be treated as gods, they stoned Paul and left him for dead.

And now five years later, they return and there is a young man named Timothy. Timothy saw the suffering of the apostle and came to faith. And Timothy would be a great addition to the team.

His mother was a Jew. He had been raised in the scriptures. There was only one problem for him and that was his father was a Greek. He was an uncircumcised man. And if they were going to go into synagogues and offer the gospel to Jewish people, Paul wanted to avoid any offense.

He wanted to take away any reason that people would have to not listen to them. So while circumcision was not needed for salvation, as a missionary policy, it's useful.

You know, it might be unnecessary for acceptance with God but strategically helpful for acceptance with non-Jews. I have a friend who decided that he would reach out to smokers.

[24 : 21] And so he decided to have a service where the rule was you had to be a smoker and you had to smoke during the service. He was not an Anglo-Catholic.

He was an evangelical and I think that he was trying to do wrong-headedly a little bit what Paul is doing here to take away any barrier that might be in front of people to coming to faith in Jesus Christ.

But I want to emphasize with you that Timothy was very young and very sickly. He had a lifelong stomach ailment. He was shy, he was timid, and he shrank from difficulty.

Not perhaps the person you would choose to replace John Mark in your team. Let me show you how Paul has to protect him. Keep your finger in Acts and turn right to 1 Corinthians chapter 16 for just a moment on page 168.

The wonderful verses. 1 Corinthians chapter 16 verse 10. Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth and he says, When Timothy comes to you, see that you put him at ease among you.

[25 : 43] He sounds like a naturally angular and shy person. He's doing the work of the Lord as I am. Let no one despise him. Why would Paul need to say that? He's obviously not a very impressive person outwardly.

But there is one thing that stands out with Timothy. That was in chapter 16 verse 2 in the book of Acts. He was well spoken of.

Very interesting later when Paul writes the letter to Timothy. Timothy is the pastor of the congregation in Ephesus. in chapter 3 of 1 Timothy. He says, The first requirement to be a minister of the gospel is that a person must be above reproach.

And the last requirement is that he must be well thought of by outsiders. Very interesting to me, yesterday in Ratzinger's comment, the National Post author Gerald Owen wrote about hearing Ratzinger some years ago in a Canadian hockey stadium.

And I read to you, he says, The cardinal was soft-spoken, his English decidedly accented, and the sound system was imperfect. His lecture was calm and thoughtful. He refrained from discussing particular controversies of the day, although he outlined principles highly relevant to the controverted questions of what it is to teach Catholic theology.

[27 : 08] At one point, the cardinal, still speaking in a mild tone, quoted Jesus, whoever is the cause of scandal to one of these little ones who believes, it would be better for him to be cast into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck.

He was plainly applying these words to priest teachers, both with authority, who misled other believers. Though those words were spoken over a decade ago, they come with special poignancy on the back of the abuse by Catholic priests of children.

Imagine the suffering that might have been prevented if the Catholic Church had taken seriously this command to the Apostle Paul, to the young Timothy.

Young Timothy becomes the Apostle Paul's most trusted friend. He sends him on assignment to Pelosi, to Corinth, to Thessalonica, and to Philippi.

He collaborates with him in writing six New Testament letters. Timothy is with him in prison, and I want to turn to one last passage to show you the affection they share together, and it is in Philippians chapter 2.

[28 : 18] That is on page 186. Philippians 2, reading from verse 19, Paul says, I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I might be cheered of news of you.

I have no one like him, who will be genuinely anxious for your welfare. They all look after their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But Timothy's worth you know, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel.

I hope therefore to send him just as soon as I see how it will go with me, and I trust in the Lord that shortly I myself shall come also. Very striking, but what controls their friendship is the gospel.

But what motivates Timothy and what motivates Paul are the interests of Jesus Christ. And I can't think of anything finer, and there is nothing with deeper potential for our friendships in this life and in the life to come than seeking the interests of Jesus Christ.

When we do that, it enables us to see other people as God sees them, serve them, give to them, love them as God does. And I commend to you that model of Paul and Timothy.

[29 : 48] Those of you who are older, who can enter into mentoring relationships with younger people, speak the interests of Jesus Christ. Well, now I must conclude, but I want to show you one more thing before we leave the book of Acts.

If you would turn back to 15 and 16, and I want to read the last two verses in 16, 4 and 5. Chapter 16, verse 4, chapter 16, 5 and the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.

The wonderful picture, the message of the free grace of free grace of God in the Lord Jesus Christ, when that is delivered to the churches, it gives strength and growth.

The basis of our acceptance through Jesus Christ opens up true friendships, and everywhere the message goes, the same thing happens. In chapter 15, 32, it strengthens the churches.

In chapter 16, 41, it strengthens the churches. In chapter 16, verse 5, the churches are strengthened in the faith and increase in numbers daily. That shows that when the gospel is clear, and when Christ Jesus is the center, it has enormous potential.

[31 : 21] Others are attracted to Jesus Christ, we grow in faith, and the grace of God creeps out through our friendships towards others, making our friendships themselves to be the place and channel of the blessing and grace of God, not just in this life, but and the life to come.

Let's pray. Okay.