



SCRIPTURE SHARED
UNSTOPPABLE
THE BOOK OF ACTS

Week 6: Miracles, Signs and Wonders

Week 6, Day 1 – Paul and Barnabas Separate

Acts 15:36-41

³⁶After some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Come, let us return and visit the brothers and sisters in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.” ³⁷Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. ³⁸But Paul decided not to take with them one who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them in the work. ³⁹The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. ⁴⁰But Paul chose Silas and set out, the brothers and sisters commending him to the grace of the Lord. ⁴¹He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Understanding the Passage:

There will be times when followers of Jesus disagree. It is unrealistic to assume that Christians would share the same mind on everything. In this case, the disagreement led to a separation between ministry partners Paul and Barnabas. Paul was resistant to taking John Mark with them on his next missionary journey because he was still frustrated that John Mark had abandoned them on their trip to Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. Paul wanted traveling partners on whom he could completely rely on and his past experience with John Mark didn't give him that impression.

On the other hand, Barnabas, whose name means “encourager”, saw John Mark as someone worthy of a second chance. He tried to persuade Paul to allow him to rejoin them but was unsuccessful. Heartbreakingly, Paul and Barnabas come to such an impasse that they are unable to continue in ministry together. Though they separate, there are two important things to note about the way in which they do so:

1. Their separation occurred after they'd taken the time to have a discussion and found that they couldn't reach a viable solution. So often, we enter into disagreements on the offensive, saying our piece and then disengaging without really listening to the other person.
2. They continued on their mission. They did not choose to isolate themselves in bitterness or self-pity but continued to evangelize and share the gospel. Rather than letting this disagreement shut down the Gentile mission, they double down – there are now two missions to the Gentiles rather than just one.

The net positives do not allow us to disregard the deep hurt and dissension that exists in this row between Paul and Barnabas. Their deep and abiding partnership has been fractured. Barnabas had taken Paul under his wing, made introductions on his behalf, and vouched for Paul to the apostles and leaders in Jerusalem. But here, we find that Paul and Barnabas both feel self-righteous about

their argument, preventing them from reconciling. It was surely a devastating situation and one that distracted them from the mission at hand.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Do you find yourself bitter when things don't go your way?
2. Though it resulted in two Gentile missions, do you think Paul and Barnabas would have been stronger had they remained together? Or do you think it was a blessing that they separated?
3. Read 2 Timothy 4:9-13. These are Paul's final requests to Timothy near the end of his life. Notice that he calls for John Mark in v. 11. What is something we can learn from that in light of today's passage?

Week 6, Day 2 – Timothy

Acts 16:1-5

¹ Paul went on also to Derbe and to Lystra, where there was a disciple named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek.² He was well spoken of by the brothers and sisters in Lystra and Iconium. ³ Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and had him circumcised because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. ⁴ As they went from town to town, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem. ⁵ So the churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily.

Understanding the Passage:

Paul has asked Silas to be his traveling and church-planting partner, but finds that he needs someone else. He finds Timothy, who we learn in a letter that Paul writes to Timothy later in his ministry, a young man whose mother and grandmother were Christ followers. Timothy had been brought up by them and was making a name for himself as a believer in his community as well. There was just one issue: Timothy's father was Greek and had not had him circumcised.

Now, why is that a problem for Paul? Paul had just finished a council meeting in Jerusalem in which he convinced James and the Pharisees that Gentiles didn't need to be circumcised in order to be accepted into the covenant.

That remains true. But Paul's focus wasn't about God accepting Timothy into the covenant (as the child of a Jewish mother and grandmother, and one who was raised in the faith, he was already a part of the covenant). Paul wanted acceptance from the Jewish people he was going to evangelize to. Paul's first stop in many cities was the synagogue, a place where Timothy would not have been allowed had he not taken the step to be circumcised. Paul made an adjustment to meet his context.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Does it seem like Paul is contradicting himself by having Timothy circumcised? Why or why not?
2. Read 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 and reflect.
3. Do you think it is okay to make adjustments for your context? How do you determine which adjustments are okay and which might be harmful or cross a line?

Week 6, Day 3 – Man from Macedonia

Acts 16:6-10

⁶ They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. ⁷ When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; ⁸ so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. ⁹ During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." ¹⁰ When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

Understanding the Passage:

Though Paul and his traveling companions thought they were headed into Turkey to evangelize, they were stymied at every turn with the Holy Spirit preventing them from doing so. They must have been so frustrated - they were traveling the whole length of Asia Minor in order to share the gospel but kept encountering roadblocks.

When they were on the last available road to them – down to the coast at Troas – and surely wondering what would come next, they are met by a man from Macedonia. Macedonia was in northern Greece – a wholly different direction from where they were headed. They had to turn around and retrace all of their “failed” steps, walking again through the land that brought so many hindrances and heartache.

There are times when God gives us a calling – and it is clear as day: share the gospel in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. But God doesn’t always make clear *how* to execute that calling. In that case, we have to pay special attention to the leading of the Holy Spirit. That may mean being ready and willing to turn on a dime – regardless of how far out of our own plans that takes us.

(Notice the change from third-person to first-person narration in verse 10. The next part of Acts will be narrated from a first-person perspective. We can assume that the author of Luke-Acts joined Paul at this point in the journey.)

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Have you ever felt like the Holy Spirit was preventing you from doing something, only to look back and realize you were being prepared for something else?
2. Try to put yourself in the place of the author of Acts. What must it have been like to travel with Paul on his missionary journeys?

Week 6, Day 4 – Conversion of Lydia

Acts 16:11-15

¹¹ We therefore set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis,¹² and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. ¹³ On the Sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. ¹⁴ A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. ¹⁵ When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us.

Understanding the Passage:

Following the call of the man from Macedonia, Paul and his companions traveled from Troas in Turkey across the Aegean Sea to Greece. When they arrived in Philippi, they sat down and spoke with women who were gathered outside of the city gates. According to conventional Greco-Roman norms, conversing with women as Paul and his companions did would be out of the ordinary and frowned upon. Women were low on the social scale and were rarely given the agency to make decisions about their faith and practice of religion. But we shouldn't be surprised by Paul's willingness to meet with the women and tell them about Jesus. Paul believed that the gospel was for *all* people, and he wouldn't have let gender concerns suppress it (Galatians 3:28).

Recall the work of God in Peter's first sermon (Acts 2) in which the Israelite's hearts were pierced and they came to see their sin and need for forgiveness. Peter's preaching, just like Paul's preaching in Philippi, was an instrument that God used, but the ultimate work belongs to God. In verse 14, it says that the Lord opened Lydia's heart.

In addition to being an unusual convert because she was a woman, she also stands out because she was rich. Of all of the gospel writers, Luke is the most attentive to the perils of wealth. From Mary's Magnificat in Luke 1 to his concern for the poor in the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6) to his parable about Lazarus and the Rich Man (Luke 16), it is clear that Luke prefers the poor and marginalized. He warns that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. And yet... we see Lydia - who we know to be rich because she deals in purple cloth, an extravagance at the time - becoming a part of the family of God through baptism.

What makes her different? Why does Luke include her story? It is likely less about her wealth or status, but what she did with those things.

1. She was clearly the leader of her household. No man is mentioned, and the scripture says "she and her household were baptized." This shows her using her influence to bring her family and servants into the fold as well. It was not enough for her to become a Christ follower and experience the freedoms, forgiveness, and grace that entailed. She brought others along with her so that they could have new lives as well.
2. She used her wealth to support Paul and his companions, inviting them to stay with her as her guests and providing for them. Staying with Lydia gave Paul and his companions the bandwidth to evangelize without worrying about supporting themselves. This partnership with Paul led to Lydia's home becoming the place where Christ's followers gathered for worship in Philippi (Acts 16:40).

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. What is your idea of hospitality?
2. How do Lydia's hospitality and generosity encourage you to share of your resources?
3. It's tempting to say, "when I have more, I will help." Challenge yourself to think about what resources you have that you could use to further the mission of the church now. Write those down and pray about them. This may be financial or opening up your home, but it also may be time or a willingness to run errands or mentor someone.

Week 6, Day 5 – Paul and Silas in Prison

Acts 16:16-34

16 One day as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a female slave who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. 17 While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." 18 She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour.

19 But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. 20 When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men, these Jews, are disturbing our city 21 and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us, being Romans, to adopt or observe." 22 The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. 23 After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. 24 Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

25 About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. 26 Suddenly there was an earthquake so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken, and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. 27 When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. 28 But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." 29 The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. 30 Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" 31 They answered, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." 32 They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. 33 At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. 34 He brought them up into the house and set food before them, and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

Understanding the Passage:

It would have felt completely relatable to most of us if verse 25 read, "about midnight Paul and Silas were crying out to God and begging to be released." Or if it read, "about midnight Paul and Silas were so overcome with fear of being killed that they worried that God had abandoned them." But as scripture records it, Paul and Silas were steadfast in their faith. They were singing hymns!

We don't know the exact content of their prayers, but we do know that whatever hope they demonstrated through those prayers was convincing to the other prisoners. When the doors of the jail were opened by the earthquake, it wasn't just Paul and Silas who stayed behind – all of the other prisoners were there as well.

Wait... they stayed?!

The scripture doesn't tell us that Paul and Silas were preaching. It doesn't say they were sharing the gospel message and evangelizing. They were *simply practicing their faith*. They were demonstrating hope in a hopeless situation – even with painfully flogged backs and an inability to move around because their feet were fastened down.

The prisoners were watching them... and people are watching you right now. People are making decisions about God and about following Jesus based on your life. They aren't looking for you to

deny that there are times when things are hard, but they are looking to see if you become totally hopeless in the midst of it. Our lives are – often – the only Bible that people may read. How we pray and praise makes a difference.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. How do you think Paul and Silas were able to pray and sing hymns while imprisoned? To what truth about God might they have been holding fast?
2. Paul did not take advantage of the opportunity to flee. Why was his decision remarkable? What would you have done?
3. What truths about God would lead Paul and Silas to pray and praise? Who was listening and what would their likely reaction be?

Video Discussion Questions:

1. What was the purpose of miracles, signs and wonders in Acts?
2. Why don't we see signs and wonders like those of the 1st century? Are signs, and wonders still for us today, or were they just for the apostolic age?
3. How do you think God is still active in enlivening the church even if we don't see extraordinary miracles today?
4. Where have you seen God in smaller, quieter miracles?
5. Even though there are many miracles, signs and wonders that take place in Acts, they were still not normative. Acts covers about 30 years of early church history, so it's clear that the miracles, signs and wonders were not daily events. What do you think that says about their purpose and value?
6. How are Christian evangelists (meaning, all of us!) authenticated today if not by miracles, signs and wonders? What does that mean for our witness?

Prayer requests and other notes.