Closed Doors and Open Hearts
Acts 15:36-16:19

Now, there's masses we could talk about from this passage. But I've just got two simple points today, with just a few sub-points thrown in for free!

Making Progress
Now, life is rarely straightforward, is it? You meet some people, and their careers or their lives, seem to follow a straight line: no detours, no dead ends. But for the rest of us, life can be a bit more complicated. In fact, at times, it can feel like you're stumbling around in the dark, and you don't feel like you've got a grip on what's happening, or any clear sense of what your next step should be

And I say all that because in this passage, there are three things that go on, that if you'd been living in the middle of it, you might have thought, 'I don't get this. Why is this happening?', but through it all, in all the confusion, God was at work. And he was at work to ensure the good news of Jesus kept on spreading.

The first episode is the split:

Painful Divisions
Now, if you remember from last week, the early church and her leaders had just avoided a potentially very messy split over the issue of whether gentiles needed to be circumcised to be saved. And they'd come to the unanimous decision that we're saved by God's grace, through faith. And Paul and Barnabas, these two great and good church leaders, come back from that meeting, and what do they do? They stumble straight into a horribly divisive argument, that ends up with them walking away from each other, with all the pain that would have involved for them and for others: v39, 'And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other.'

Now, before we look at why that happened, just ask yourself, 'why does Luke tell us about this in the first place?' Because it's not exactly flattering to Paul and Barnabas is it? They're called by Christ to love one another, to prefer one another, and they've been commissioned by God to spread the message of grace as far as they can, and then they can't even seem to live it out between themselves. So why does Luke write this up, and put it in Acts, for every generation that follows to see? Because it happened. And Luke is an honest historian. And he doesn't sweep inconvenient truths under the rug, and he's not painting some idealised, magical picture of the saints. Acts isn't hagiography. And that should tell you that you can trust him as a writer, both in the other stuff he writes in Acts, and when he writes about Jesus in his gospel. None of this is make-believe.

But why provoked this big fall-out? Well, Paul suggests that he and Barnabas should revisit the churches they'd recently planted, and Luke tells us, v37, that 'Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark.' But Mark had let them down on their first missionary journey. Verse 38, '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.'

Now, Luke never tells us why Mark had deserted them all those months before. Was it because he was homesick, or disagreed with the gospel going to the

gentiles, or just couldn't face the long hike over the Taurus mountains? We don't know. All we know now is that Barnabas wanted to give young Mark a second chance, and Paul didn't. And neither side was willing to step back.

So what can we learn from them? Well, firstly, Luke doesn't give us any real clue who he thinks was right or wrong here. And all these centuries down the line, commentators still can't agree on who was right. Should the success of the whole mission have been put at risk for the sake of one young man being given a second chance? That's Paul's position. Should a young man really be tossed on the scrap heap of life because of one past mistake, and that in the name of Christian ministry? That's Barnabas' position. And sometimes the hard truth is that in circumstances like this, it's not always clear what the right decision is. And that should keep us humble when we are involved in a dispute where good people disagree.

Secondly, the remarkable thing is that God continues to use people like Paul and Barnabas, and seeming failures like Mark, and you and me, despite our many faults and fall-outs. Now, that does not excuse them. And we absolutely should work hard to reconcile and live in peace with one another, and stick together. But even through this painful dispute, God works. And in the sovereignty of God, two mission teams develop out of the one, and two fronts of mission are opened up in place of one. And so God will use even our failings, and our miss-steps to see his will be done.

Thirdly, this bust-up reminds us that even good and great men like Barnabas and Paul are not Jesus. And neither are any of your leaders here or elsewhere; we've all get feet of clay. Which should remind us to put our faith and hope and confidence in Jesus, and not in men who are so prone to get it wrong.

Fourthly, this split should tell us again about the power of the gospel to restore people. You see, Paul takes Silas and heads off into Turkey. And the rest of Acts is all about Paul and his exploits. Barnabas takes Mark and heads off to Cyprus, and we hear nothing more about him. Barnabas simply falls off the pages of history. He waves goodbye to his career as an apostle on the cutting edge, all for the sake of a young man who had deserted him. But we do hear about Mark.

And this young man, who so easily could have ended up on the scrap heap, gets restored by Barnabas. And later we find him working alongside the apostle Peter, who calls him 'my son'; Paul comes to depend on him and at the end of his life he wants Mark at his side. And Mark writes one of the gospels, probably the first - so what you know of Jesus is in large part because of this young man's writings. And if church history is correct he eventually made the trip to Egypt, where he spent his life planting churches, and gave his life, as a martyr for the cause of Christ and the gospel.

And all because Barnabas would not drop him. But why? Why did Barnabas refuse to desert a young man who had deserted him? Because that is the very heart of the gospel, and Barnabas saw it. You see, the gospel tells us that Christ laid his life down for rebels and deserters, for people like Mark and you and me, to give us a second chance, and so Barnabas does the same.

You see, whilst we should admire and even emulate the energy and the dynamism and the single-mindedness of a man like Paul, when we understand what Jesus has done for us deep down, then it will also give us a heart like Barnabas – prepared to live out and even lose out for the gospel of the second chance in the lives of others.

But the second surprising episode that keeps the gospel spreading is Paul deciding to circumcise Timothy:

All things to All People

So Paul and Silas head up to Lystra which they had visited on the first journey. And there they meet this young man named Timothy; and Luke says, v2, 'He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium.' Now, given that Paul has recently preached the gospel in Lystra, you'd think Timothy probably became a Christian through Paul's preaching. Except, you'd probably be wrong. Because Luke tells us here in v1 that he was 'the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer.' And years later, when Paul writes to Timothy he says, 'I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well' (2 Tim 1:5). And it seems likely that his Grandmother and mother became Christians and they then explained the gospel to Timothy and he also became a Christian.

So, all you mums: In the rest of this chapter we get all this supernatural stuff: the Holy Spirit's guidance, visions, the Lord opening people's hearts, demons being cast out. And in comparison to that, changing nappies, or clearing up the sick, or preparing another meal, or helping with the homework, or reading bedtime stories, just seems very unglamourous and unspiritual. But here is a young man, whose life has been profoundly altered, not by supernatural stuff, but by his very ordinary mum and grand-mum telling him about Jesus. So don't believe the lie that what you do is meaningless. The Lord is at work in you reading bedtime stories just as much in an apostle preaching.

But what on earth is Paul doing circumcising Timothy in the first place. I mean, hasn't he just gone to war over this very issue and won the argument that you don't need to be circumcised to be saved? And why is he prepared to bend and flex over this issue, but he appears to be so hard and inflexible when it comes to young Mark?

But he's not circumcising Timothy so Timothy can be saved, is he? He knows Timothy's already saved, by Jesus grace. He's circumcising him, so that *more* people can get saved, so that more doors of ministry might be opened for Timothy and for himself, amongst Jews who don't yet know about Jesus, but who do know that Timothy's dad is a gentile.

And so what at first sight seems like inconsistency, and you think, 'what is going on here?' is actually the opposite. It's Paul being entirely consistent in wanting to do everything he can to keep spreading the gospel, and have nothing hinder that or hold it back. And Paul does not want himself and Timothy to get bogged down in peripheral side-debates, 'is Timothy circumcised or isn't he? Is he a Jew or

isn't he?' So he nails it, so they can both just talk about Jesus. It's why Paul says to the church at Corinth, 'To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews…. To those outside the law [to Gentiles] I became as one outside the law… that I might win those outside the law… I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel' (1 Cor 9:20-23).

But there's a third episode here, that if you'd been on Paul's team would have left you scratching your head and thinking, 'God, what are you up to here?' And that's how God guides them.

The Leading of the Spirit

You see, Luke tells us that as the team travelled they visited the churches in southern Turkey they'd established, and God was clearly blessing their work, v5, 'the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in number daily.'

So, to start with, after that rocky start with Barnabas, things were going great. Until, they reached the end of where they'd been before and start wanting to go on to new areas. And then the trail went cold. Luke says, v6, 'they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia.' Which means that Paul was clearly wanting to get down into south east Turkey, probably to the city of Ephesus, to preach the gospel there. And the Lord says, 'no' you're not going there. Closed door.

So, they keep walking, and decide instead to try and head north: v7, 'When they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.' So these guys are walking for miles, and so far all the guidance they are getting is 'no'. Now, Luke doesn't tell us how the Holy Spirit blocked their way. Was it some internal check, or a prophetic word, or they didn't have enough money? He doesn't say. All we know is that Paul tries *this*, and God blocks him. Paul wants to do *that*, and God closes the door on him.

And they must have been thinking: 'God, what are you doing?' Now, I don't know if you've ever experienced life like this, but you don't have to have lived long before you go through times like this: you want to do God's will, you want to do the right thing, and all you get is 'no' and God shutting doors in your face. And for them, this must have gone on for weeks, because they literally walked for hundreds of miles.

But whilst it can seem like God isn't listening, or is being obstructive, all along God is positioning you to be where he really wants you. And that's exactly what happens here. Verse 8-9: 'So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas [which was a port on the Aegean Sea]. And a vision appeared to Paul.' And then they get the lead they've been looking for. Then God opens the door. But it has taken them weeks of walking, and aching legs, and scratching of heads, to get there. And sometimes God just takes his time, and sometimes he will squeeze you, and block you to move you into his way. And when nothing seems to be working it can seem very uncomfortable and disconcerting. And it's only with hindsight, that you can look back and say: 'Ah, that's what you were doing God.'

And Paul's vision was of a man from Macedonia, across the Aegean Sea, saying 'Come over and help us.' Verse 10, '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.' And the 'we' there tells you that now Luke has joined the team for the first time. And that's what they do. They get on a boat and head for Macedonia, and for Europe.

Changing Lives

Now I don't know if you've heard this before, but there was a prayer, used by Jewish men every morning, that said, 'Blessed are you God that you have not made me a Gentile, a woman or a slave.' Which is nice, isn't it ladies? Well, having landed in Europe, Paul and the team make for Philippi. And it's there that Luke tells us how the gospel impacts the lives of exactly the kind of people who Jewish men would look down on, and in particular two very different gentile women.

The first woman, Lydia, would have been very respectable. She was a business woman, dealing in expensive purple cloth for the wealthy. She was probably single, a home-owner, with a household. She was also spiritual. Luke calls her, 'a worshipper of God' which means she was probably a gentile who was sympathetic to Judaism.

And we all know people just like Lydia. Some of you may even be like Lydia yourself, male or female: successful, well-off, well-respected, spiritual, moral, but not yet a Christian. And sometimes people like that can be the hardest to reach with the gospel, because it seems like they, or you, if this is you, don't *need* anything. Which is what makes what Luke says here all the more revealing. Because he tells us that she heard Paul preaching and, v14, 'The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.' In other words, God steps in to open the heart, and to save, a respectable, well-to-do person like you and me.

You see, the gospel is not just for those who *we* think are needy. It's for all of us. And it's precisely because *our* hearts are closed to *our own* sense of need, our need to be reconciled to God through Jesus, that God turns the key in the lock, opens the door, and let's the light in. And if you're here and you're like Lydia, well to do and prosperous, but not yet a Christian, pray that God would open your heart, and let you see the truth of the gospel of Jesus. And for the rest of us who are already Christians, but have friends or family or colleagues who are like Lydia, take courage from her example. Because ultimately she wasn't saved by Paul's amazing preaching, was she? The real evangelist here was God. And that should give us hope: we simply need to be faithful to do our part, and open our mouths when we get the opportunity and pray – to the God who opens hearts, that he would open their heart to believe.

But the second woman we meet here could not have been more different from Lydia could she? In fact, this gentile, female slave is everything a Jewish man thanked God he wasn't. If Lydia was respectable, this demonised slave girl was at the very bottom of the social spectrum. And if this passage tells us that the good news of Jesus is for the respectable, then the gospel is also for the used and the abused and those trapped in the grip of darkness.

Luke tells us, v16, that she 'had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune telling.' Literally, he says she had a 'python spirit'. And that comes from Greek mythology, where the temple of the god Apollo was guarded by a snake. And the spirit of this snake inspired female followers of Apollos to be able to see into the future. And your average person in the street would fear people like this young girl, with such a spirit, because of the curses they could bring, because of the blight they could put on your futures. So using her was lucrative business for her owners, as they made money from her misery and other's fear, as this python spirit, squeezed the life out of her. It's what religion for money and the powers of darkness do to you.

And day after day this young woman followed Paul around, crying out, 'These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation' (v17). Now, PR men will tell you that there is no such thing as bad publicity. And whilst last week we saw that good people can be wrong; here we see that bad people can be right. But that doesn't mean you jump into bed with them. And the gospel is a million miles from the kind of fear and superstition that this young woman's owners were profiting from. And Paul wants nothing to do with this kind of endorsement. And in the name of Jesus he commands the evil spirit to leave her and Luke says, v18: 'it came out that very hour.'

Now, when her owners saw that their little money making scheme was over, they were less than happy. Money in their pockets was simply more important to them than this young woman's life and dignity.

As we finish, just compare that to Jesus. At his name, this evil spirit, squeezing the life out of this girl, has to flee, so infinitely greater is Christ than the powers of darkness. And yet it's this same Jesus who humbled himself, and allowed himself to be mocked and degraded and abused and ultimately killed by these same powers of darkness. And he did it to rescue the abused and the manipulated and the trafficked, like this girl, just as much as he did for the respectable like Lydia. And it's in rising from the dead that he forever broke the hold that darkness can have on us. Understand that, and our own fears will flee. Get that, and like Paul, we'll do everything we can, in every way we can, to see that gospel spread to the respectable and the abused alike.