God Works in Mysterious Ways to Advance the Gospel

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[0:00] Follow along with me.

And after some days, Paul said to Barnabas, Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaim 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 Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark, but Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work.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 each other. 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. Paul came down 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 at Lystra in 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.
[1:16] 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 Phrygia in Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. And when they had come 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 he sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.
So Paul is engaged in his second missionary journey, and trips require a lot of planning, don't they? Sometimes those plans don't go exactly how we planned, how we anticipated.
[2:29] I remember the first major mission trip that I planned when I was a youth pastor. It was a mission trip to the Navajo Reservation in Arizona, and we had 30 people that went on that trip.

And on the way there, our trailer got a flat tire in Winslow, Arizona. And so we were there for a while, and then we got that fixed.
And then on the way back, one of our students suffered from migraines, and she got a really bad migraine in the van. And so we had to stop and go to a hospital, which meant that we were late getting into Lubbock, Texas, where we were supposed to spend the night in the church.
And we got there at 2.30 in the morning, and the key that the guy was supposed to leave me was not there. So I called him, and he didn't answer, and so we ended up checking into a hotel.
But anyhow, a lot of unexpected things happen when you do those kinds of things. So one thing I learned, again, from that experience, and that from there on after, I would always tell our volunteers who would go with us, and even the kids, is that you need to expect the unexpected, because unexpected things are going to happen.
[3:41] Sometimes the unexpected that happens on mission trips, though, is a positive thing. It's not always a negative thing. I remember a mission trip that we took to Minnesota, and we took a girl who had been coming to our youth group, and she, I think, was forced to go by her grandparents.

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She would come, and she was always dressed in black, and she would bring her boyfriend, who we had a lot of concerns about. So she went on the trip. She didn't bring her boyfriend, and I remember the last night there was the night when she was saved, and it was Danny who shared the gospel with her and prayed with her.
And then when she came back, just a totally transformed person, she stopped wearing black. She dumped that boyfriend, and she got involved in ROTC in her high school, and now she's in the Army, and she's doing really well.
So that was an unexpected thing, but it can be positive as well, those unexpected events. All this to say, when we go on mission to advance the gospel, one thing that we can expect is, the main idea for this study tonight is that God will do unexpected things to advance the gospel.
God will do unexpected things to advance the gospel. So we see three unexpected things, at least from the perspective of Paul and others in the text that we've read, that happen here as he embarks on the second missionary journey.
[5:13] And the first unexpected thing is an unexpected separation, an unexpected separation. So after the Jerusalem Council, if you remember where we were at last week, they established that salvation was by grace through faith and not by works, and that it was therefore unnecessary for the Gentiles to follow Jewish custom in order to become Christians.

The church in Antioch resumed then their Great Commission work. And this passage marks the beginning of Paul's second missionary journey, with the results of the Jerusalem Council behind him, he was ready to move ahead with the task that he had been commissioned with, which was to reach the lost, to go to the Gentiles and preach the gospel.
So in verse 36, the phrase, after some days, indicates that Paul and Barnabas had spent, you know, a reasonable amount of time with the church in Antioch, ministering to them there.
But at the end of that time, however long it was, Paul said to Barnabas, let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaim the word of the Lord and see how they are. So this doesn't mean that Paul was bored, but that he understood what his calling was.
His calling was to advance the gospel to the Gentiles. And he wasn't the kind of minister who stayed in one place for very long, because he knew that there were many who needed to hear the gospel and who hadn't heard the gospel.
[6:45] And that was his passion, as he said in Romans 15, 20. And thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation.

And then Romans 15, 24, he added, So he was always on the move.
He knew, you know, I'm hoping to come to Rome, and I'm already making plans for where I'm going to be soon after. I'm there with you. So he was always on the go. He took the Great Commission and his calling to be the apostle to the Gentiles very seriously.
If there was a people who had not heard the gospel, he was going to find a way to get to them to share the gospel with them. That was his great ambition in life.
But Paul was also passionate about an aspect of the Great Commission, which is sometimes overshadowed by the command to make disciples. Once a disciple has been made, it is essential that the church continue to disciple that disciple.
[7:48] So Paul determined to go back to those churches, those places that he had already visited with Barnabas, that they had already evangelized with the purpose to strengthen those Christians and to help firm up the foundations that they had laid there for the churches that were there.

Paul understood that the ultimate priority in evangelism is discipleship, teaching believers to obey all that Christ has commanded. And so a lesson for us to apply from this is that baptism is not the finish line of the Christian life.
And I think sometimes we can get... I mean, I understand the excitement when our baptism numbers are up, and that's a good thing, but it's not the end. It's the starting place, really.
The church's job isn't complete when that believer gets wet. Really, once they emerge from the baptismal, that's when our work truly begins, because they are a part of our church, and they are our responsibility to train and to equip and to disciple.
And so Paul understood that. As he said in Ephesians 4, 12 through 13, he understood that the church's job is to equip the saints for the work of the ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

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[9:20] And so spiritual infants need to be brought to maturity. And his commitment to maturing believers was mirrored, or mirrored that of our Lord, who spent much of his time, much of his earthly ministry with just 12 men.

Paul's philosophy of ministry is captured in Colossians 1, 28, where there he says, Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom that we may present everyone mature in Christ.
And so that was his desire, to disciple those who were saved and bring them to maturity. As Paul and Barnabas prepared for their journey, though, they stumbled right out of the gate.
As verse 37 says, Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. And the imperfect tense of the Greek verb translated wanted, or in some of your translations it might be desirous, it shows that Barnabas was persistent in making this request that John, Mark join him and Paul on this second missionary journey.
But equally as adamant as Barnabas was Paul, insisting that, No, we're not going to take him, which we see in 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 do the work.
[10:45] So if you remember back in Acts chapter 13, verse 13, when we were there, I don't know, like two years ago, maybe something like that. Your memories are that good, aren't they?

We are told there that, yeah, John Mark left Paul and Barnabas after they had set sail and after they had landed in Perga in Pamphylia.
But we're not told why John left. We don't know what the reason was. But what we do know is that Paul didn't accept that reason as being a legitimate reason to leave.
And so Paul lost confidence in Mark as a result of that. And we know that Paul was a, he was a tough, battle-hardened soldier of Christ who didn't have much patience with those who deserted the work.
However, Barnabas, as his name means, was the son of encouragement. And he insisted that John Mark, who was also his cousin, be given a second chance.
[11:51] And so in verse 39, it says, and there arose a sharp disagreement so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, which was Barnabas' hometown.

So this was not an amicable separation. Sharp disagreement in the Greek is the root word of the English word that we have of paroxysm.
Does anybody use that term, that word in their everyday vocabulary? I don't. And so I looked it up. Paroxysm means a sudden attack a violent expression of a particular emotion or activity.
So this was an explosive conversation between two men, two men who loved the Lord, two men who desired to spread the gospel, two men who wanted the church to be strengthened.
And you know, sometimes those conversations can happen in the church, can't they? We can be in total disagreement, or total agreement, I should say, about the major things about our faith and the desires that we have for our church, but we can totally disagree about the best ways to achieve those things.
[13:04] We can be passionate about the same things, but have different ideas of how best to accomplish those things. And so that's what was happening here. And so the question we ask is, who is right?

Who was right? Well, Scripture doesn't specifically tell us who was right. However, Paul was the apostle and Barnabas was not.
And so Barnabas should have submitted to that office and to Paul's leadership. And we also see that in the rest of Acts, it's Paul's ministry that is followed, not the ministry of Barnabas.
In fact, this is the last mention of Barnabas in the book of Acts. So those things seem to put the weight of evidence in favor of Paul.
However, however, we can't fault Barnabas for wanting to give Mark a second chance. Because what we find out is that Mark took great, he took that opportunity and he seized it.
[14:13] He took advantage of that second chance that Barnabas had gave him. Because later on, we know that Mark became one of Paul's valued partners in ministry, as he says in Colossians 4.10.

There he's mentioning, Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, greets you. And then he says in Mark, the cousin of Barnabas, concerning whom you have received instruction, if he comes to you, welcome

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him.
And so we see that later on, as a result of the second chance, Paul accepts Mark. Mark also became a close associate of the apostle Peter. And we read in 1 Peter 5.13, there Peter, again, giving his greetings at the end.
He says, see, she who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings, and so does Mark. And he calls him my son. So Mark had a close relationship with the apostle Peter.
And Mark was also privileged to be the one whom the Holy Spirit inspired to write one of the four gospels, which bears his name, the Gospel of Mark. So Barnabas did a remarkable job in helping Mark, in helping him turn around his life in his ministry, in his career, in ministry.
[15:30] I like what Kent Hughes said about who was right. He says, our judgment goes with Paul, but our hearts go with Barnabas. You know, up here, I think Paul was right, but here we think Barnabas.

Anyhow, although they apparently never ministered together again, Paul and Barnabas, we know that Paul and Barnabas eventually did reconcile their differences because Paul later wrote approvingly of the ministry of Barnabas in 1 Corinthians 9, verse 6.
So what's the application for us here? Well, I think it's important for us to understand that we might not always see eye to eye with each other, but we should desire to seek reconciliation at some point when we don't see eye to eye with one another because a Christian's enemies should not be other Christians, should not be members of the body of Christ.
And sometimes those separations, though, do end up working for the better despite how painful they might be to endure in the meanwhile.
So after this unexpected separation, we read in verses 40 and 41 that 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.
[16:56] So what do we know about Silas? Well, Silas was one of the leaders of the Jerusalem church. We get that from Acts 5. Acts 15, verse 32, describes him as a prophet.

He was someone who was good at preaching the word. As a Jew, he could gain entrance into the synagogues, which was important as they tried to spread the gospel to the Jewish people.
And he was also a Roman citizen, like Paul. And we'll find that out in Acts 16, verse 37. And so that gave him the same protection and benefits that Paul had.
Syria was the region around Antioch, and Cilicia contained Paul's hometown of Tarsus. And so many of the churches in that region were no doubt founded by Paul. So that's where he and Silas first went in order to strengthen those churches.
So there's an unexpected separation. And then next we see an unexpected partner. An unexpected partner. In verse 1 of chapter 16, it says, Paul came down to, or came also, excuse me, to Derbe and to Lystra.
[18:06] A disciple was there named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. And so Paul and Barnabas, if you remember, had visited these cities on their first missionary journey back in Acts chapter 14.

And Lystra, if you remember, was the scene of some pretty remarkable events. At first, Paul and Barnabas were accepted by the people they thought that they were gods.
They thought Barnabas was Zeus and Paul was Hermes. And then after Paul and Barnabas explained that, no, we're not, stop worshiping us, then the Jews who had chased them out of some previous towns that they had visited came and found them there and then turned the people against Paul and Barnabas to the point where Paul was stoned and they thought that he had died, but he miraculously recovered.
And so that was a pretty interesting time at Lystra. But it's there at Lystra, here, where Paul and Silas met Timothy. Had Paul and Silas followed that same exact route from the first missionary journey, they would not have come to Lystra until the end of the trip.
But by going to Lystra first, they were able to meet Timothy and bring Timothy along with them so that he could be a part of the entire trip instead of catching on at the tail end.
[19:31] And so Timothy was blessed to be able to gain this much-needed ministry experience that would be beneficial to him and the future that God had for him because he would play a key role in Paul's life.

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Timothy would eventually become basically Paul's right-hand man. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 4.17, that is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord.
And then we have 1 and 2 Timothy, which were, again, books of the Bible inspired by the Holy Spirit, which Paul wrote in which he gave instruction to Timothy who was a young man in ministry as he was pastoring churches.
And so Timothy, we see here, was the son of a Jewish woman whose name was Eunice, who was a believer, and so was his grandmother, Lois. And we learn that from 2 Timothy 1.5.
But Timothy's father was a Greek. And the use of the imperfect tense of the verb there instead of the present tense seems to indicate that at this point in Timothy's life, his biological father was dead, which likely then further strengthened the bond that would develop between Timothy and Paul as Paul became much like a father figure in Timothy's life and him very much like a son to Paul.
[20:56] Timothy's background also being both a Jew and a Gentile aided immensely in his missionary service as well because, again, he was a young man, maybe late in his teens, possibly early in his 20s, but the fact that he had such a background made him, again, an effective minister as he, with Paul, sought to share the gospel with both Jews and Gentiles.

And we learn in verse 2 that he was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. And so we know that a key requirement for being a church leader is that you be above reproach.
So Timothy, even though he was a young man, was qualified for service in ministry based upon that account.
And in verse 3, we see that Paul recognized Timothy's value and potential. And so it says there that Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him and he took him and he circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places for they all knew his father was a Greek.
Now, here, when we read that, we might pause with a question. And we might say, wait a second, we were just in chapter 15 and we just read about the Jerusalem council which convened and which decided that circumcision was not necessary for salvation.
[22:27] So why did Paul take Timothy to go get circumcised? Well, the text doesn't say that Timothy's circumcision was performed so that he would be saved.

Here it is helpful to understand Jewish culture. For Timothy, in this time, in this context, to refuse circumcision would appear to the Jews that he was renunciating his Jewish heritage.
So, Paul's circumcision of Timothy had nothing to do with salvation. He did it to avoid placing any kind of unnecessary stumbling block in the way of his being able to reach Jews with the gospel.
And so, Timothy's circumcision granted him full access to the places like the synagogues where they would go to try to share the gospel with the Jews in the hopes that they would believe.
And really, this is what Paul would do, wasn't it? We see in 1 Corinthians 9, 19 through 22, where he talks about what he's willing to do to win people to Christ.
[23:38] There he says, For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all that I might win more of them. To the Jews, I became as a Jew in order to win Jews.

To those under the law, I became as one under the law although not being myself under the law, that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law, speaking of Gentiles, I became as one outside the law, not being outside the law of God, but under the law of Christ, that I might win those outside the law.
To the weak, I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people that by all means I might save some. And what's interesting with Timothy is that another young protege of Paul's was Titus.
And Titus, unlike Timothy, was a full-blooded Gentile. And Paul did not circumcise Titus because to do so would be to capitulate to the Jewish legalists.
So what's the application here for us? Well, from Paul's actions concerning these two men, we learn an important principle about being an effective missionary or about being an effective evangelist.
[24:51] Missionaries must be sensitive to the unique characteristics of the culture in which they work. They should avoid giving any unnecessary offense while at the same time refusing to compromise the scriptures.

We've referred to that as contextualization. Have you ever heard of that? You guys know Hudson Taylor? You're a missionary to China. And he would dress in their clothing.

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And why did he do that? Well, he wanted to remove any kind of stumbling blocks so that he could preach the gospel to them. And he became like them in ways that did not compromise his faith so that he would have more opportunities to witness to them.
And that's what happens a lot today. I know a lot of my missionary friends, they have to learn the culture they're going to go to so that they can better fit in so that they can remove any kind of stumbling blocks so that they can have more opportunities to share the gospel.
I think it's interesting if you've seen, we don't see it as much anymore, but some tribes in Africa where they're dressed in suits and ties and, you know, it's because not only did they get the gospel but they also got our culture, which, you know, it's more important that we give them the gospel or our culture.
[26:09] Well, we want to give them the gospel. And I would say, you know, conversely, it can work in the other way. Like, for example, on a Sunday morning, I think about what I'm going to wear because I don't want what I'm going to wear to distract from the message that I'm preaching.

And so, in our church, you know, we have a certain expectation of what the pastor should wear or whatever people on the stage should wear. And so, if I came in shorts and flip-flops and a tank top some Sunday morning, you would not be paying attention to what I would be saying.
You'd be wondering, why is he dressed like he's just come from the pool or maybe he's on his way there or something. Maybe I will. Maybe I will.
And if I do, I'll say, Oscar said it was okay. So, yeah. And I have witnesses, too. So, if you have a problem, go talk to Oscar and he'll hit you with his cane if you give him any...
Anyhow, Paul's meeting with Timothy was not planned according to him. Paul didn't set out on this missionary journey thinking, you know, I'm going to meet this young man and he's going to be my right-hand man and my protege, my partner with me in ministry.
[27:21] He wasn't expecting that kind of an encounter. But, though he wasn't expecting it, God divinely arranged it. God was not unexpected in that.

This was fulfilling God's purposes. And so, here we're reminded of the sovereignty of God and how he is the one who truly directs our steps. It wasn't an accident that Paul and Silas ended up going to Lystra and there they came across Timothy.
In verses 3 through 4, it says, as they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance 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 so, there Luke's summary statement reveals the effect that good doctrine has on the church.
And, when the church is committed to discipleship, the churches were blessed to hear the news that came out of Jerusalem, the results of the Jerusalem Council, that salvation was indeed by grace and that encouraged them to then to continue to engage their community, which we see produced more disciples.
So, good doctrine is a blessing to God's people in the church. And then, the third unexpected thing, we see an unexpected detour. An unexpected detour in verses 6 through 10.
[28:49] So, again, it says, and they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia. As they went through these regions, Paul decided to go further west into the province of Asia.

That region was important. Later, that region would be the home of the churches of Ephesus, Smyrna, Philadelphia, Laodicea, Colossae, Sardis, Pergamum, and Thyatira, the seven churches in Revelation.
However, at this point, God had other plans in mind for these missionaries. So, as we read in the rest of verse 6, that they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia.
And so, for whatever reason, that way was blocked. And so, Paul and Silas and Timothy decided that, you know what, we'll go north. And so, in verse 7, we read, and when they had come to Mysia, they attempted to go to Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.
And again, we're not told why, they were prevented at that time from going there. But with nowhere else to turn, in verse 8, it says, so passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas.
[30:03] So, here we see that, you know, they weren't sure where God wanted them to go, but they knew that eventually God would reveal that to them.

And so, instead of staying stagnant, they just kept moving, and at last, they did receive instruction in a very amazing way. In verse 9, it says, and a vision appeared to Paul in the night.

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A man of Macedonia was standing there urging him and saying, come over to Macedonia and help us. Macedonia was across the Aegean Sea on the mainland of Greece, and in it were located the important cities of Philippi and Thessalonica.
We're familiar with those cities, and more significant, this would be the first entry of the gospel in the continent of Europe. And so, having received this divine summons, Paul did not hesitate.
In verse 10, it says, and when Paul had seen the vision, immediately, he sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.
[31:09] So, this missionaries team experience illustrates basic principles of knowing God's will to move ahead and to allow him to close doors until the right opportunity comes along or is reached.

So, the application here for us is that, you know, God will sometimes put us in a place where we can't figure out which way to go. Like the Israelites says, they were led out of Egypt, and they were led by God to the Red Sea, and it looked like there was no way out, but God provided a way.
And in providing that way, they saw the awesome power of God on full display. And so, God will often put us in these situations where we just have to trust in Him.
We just have to be faithful and trust that, you know, I don't see, you know, we're trying to go here, that way is blocked, we're trying to go here, that way is blocked, but you just remain faithful to know that God has a plan, and that patience is a fruit of the Spirit.
Impatience, as we see throughout Scripture, often leads us into making really bad decisions for ourselves that have really bad consequences for others, and decisions that we later regret.
[32:33] So it's always better to be patient, and to trust in God, and to trust in His timing, and to trust in His provision, because sometimes doors that seem open will close, and they close so that other doors will open, and when they open, we need to step through them immediately, just like Paul, and Silas, and Timothy.

And so next week we'll see what happens as they accept that invitation, and they go into Macedonia. But here's the main point of application for us.
Difficult circumstances sometimes provide avenues through which the gospel advances. Difficult circumstances sometimes provide avenues through which the gospel advances.
And so we can go back to Paul and Barnabas in that separation. Well, as a result of that, instead of having one missionary team, we had two.
And even though we don't have a record of what Barnabas and Mark were doing during that time, that Paul and Silas and Timothy were ministering, we know that they were ministering.
[33:47] We know that the gospel was spreading. And so that was a difficult circumstance for those men to go through. Eventually they reconciled, but the result was that the gospel was spreading through two missionary teams in different directions.

And so we may not understand all the time why we go through difficult circumstances in the church or in life, but if you know that you are saved, you know that God is sovereign, you know that He's got a plan, and He works all things together for the good, no matter how you might perceive it, God is always at work and He is sovereign and we can trust in that and live our lives by faith and with patience.
Let's pray. Lord, we thank You for this time that we've had together. We thank You for Your Word. We thank You for its instruction for our lives. Lord, we know that You are sovereign, that You, as Your Word says, work all things together for the good.
And Father, the Bible is filled with page after page of examples of that. Lord, help us to be patient. Help us, Lord, to trust in You.
Even when we go through things in life where we're trying to advance the gospel and we feel like we're stuck in a place where we don't know where to go, Lord, I pray that we would be patient and trust in You and just continue to wait knowing that You will provide that avenue for us to walk down, that Your Word would continue to go and the gospel would continue to spread.
[35:16] So, Lord, help us to be faithful to what You've commanded us to do, to go and make disciples and to disciple them. And to teach them, Lord, that they would know how great You are.

And we ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

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