
Acts 15:36-41

Paul and Barnabas Part Ways -- John Mark -- The Grace of God

Ministry Reading -- February 6, 2008

Opening Reading -- Acts 15:36-41

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And some days after Paul said unto Barnabas, Let us go again and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they do. And Barnabas determined to take with them John, whose surname was Mark. But Paul thought not good to take him with them, who departed from them from Pamphylia, and went not with them to the work. And the contention was so sharp between them, that they departed asunder one from the other: and so Barnabas took Mark, and sailed unto Cyprus; and Paul chose Silas, and departed, being recommended by the brethren unto the grace of God. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, confirming the churches.

Unity in Service: The Highest Step and the Next to Last

Unity in service -- the phrase almost needs no comment after reading this passage. What we have here is a sad case where a unity that had borne much fruit was broken. The exercise that Paul proposed was a good and right one: to go back and visit every city where they had preached the word of the Lord and see how the believers fared. Many good things come from such follow-up ministry -- confirmation, encouragement, the bringing forward of new believers.

The Psalms of Degrees, from Psalm 120 to Psalm 134, are sometimes understood to have a moral or spiritual progression -- an ascending staircase. The next to last of them, Psalm 133, is devoted to unity: how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity. Had that been the last psalm of the series, unity would have appeared as the highest goal, the summit. But it is only the second-to-last step. The last psalm -- Psalm 134 -- is the beholding and blessing of the Lord, who stands in His house by night. Unity, precious as it is, is not the ultimate object. The Lord Himself is. And in this sad parting, the flesh had pushed what should have been a step on the way into a barrier.

What Barnabas Determined

The difficulty begins with Barnabas and a determination. He determined to take John Mark with them. How much better it would have been had he been able to say: Brother Paul, if that is what you think, I will not press this and impose my preference. Let us go together as we did before. But something had entered in -- not leaven, which is a different matter, but something that we might call the sweetener of natural affection. John Mark was Barnabas's cousin (Colossians 4:10). And the journey, as it happened, began at Cyprus -- which was Barnabas's own home territory (Acts 4:36). The flesh within us is so subtle that Barnabas might well have told himself, entirely sincerely, that he was simply retracing the original journey in order. And yet, the flesh in us is capable of exactly that kind of self-deception. We can talk ourselves into thinking that what is in fact natural feeling is simply a reasonable plan.

Acts 13:13 -- What John Mark Actually Did

Acts 13:13

Now when Paul and his company loosed from Paphos, they came to Perga in Pamphylia: and John departing from them returned to

Jerusalem.

To understand what Paul objected to, we must go back to Acts 13:13 -- the verse that underlies the whole matter. Acts 15:38 describes it as departing from them at Pamphylia and going not with them to the work. Darby's translation is stronger: he had abandoned them. An active word, not merely passive absence. But Acts 13:13 adds one piece that is not in Acts 15: John Mark returned to Jerusalem. He did not simply go home. He returned to the center of Judaism.

Paul had been sent with the gospel to the Gentiles -- his mission was outward, away from Jerusalem. The first journey had been specifically validated: sent forth by the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:4), with Paul and Barnabas named as the ones separated to the work. John Mark was along as an attendant, as verse 5 of chapter 13 says, but he had not been separated by the Holy Spirit to that mission. He was something like Lot accompanying Abraham from Ur -- not personally called, but going along. And when difficulty came, he left. He not only left -- he went back to Jerusalem. How does that smell? Whatever else may be said, the direction of his departure had a character to it that was more than a mere personality matter.

What John Mark Missed -- And What He Wrote

Acts 13:14 is the verse that immediately follows John Mark's departure. He was there with Paul until verse 13, and then he was gone. And what came next -- beginning in verse 14 -- was the persecution at Antioch in Pisidia, then the persecution at Iconium, then the stoning at Lystra. Those are the very three persecutions that Paul singled out years later when writing to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3, to encourage him to endure in the darkness of the last days: 'Thou hast fully known my doctrine, manner of life, persecutions, afflictions, which came unto me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra.' The persecutions that Paul drew on as an encouragement to faithfulness in the closing days -- those were precisely the ones that John Mark had turned back before reaching. He avoided the road

that led straight through those trials.

And yet it is this same man -- who had been an attendant and had failed in that service -- whom God chose to write the Gospel of Mark, in which the Lord Jesus is presented throughout as the perfect Servant. Every time Mark picked up his pen to write another sentence about the moral excellence of the Lord's service, he did so as a man who knew he had himself been a failure in service. The perfection of Christ's servitude shines the more brightly against that background. God's grace is everywhere in this.

The Prepositions and the Last Mention of Barnabas

Darby's translation of verses 39 and 40 is instructive. Verse 39: 'And Barnabas, having taken Mark, sailed away to Cyprus.' Verse 40: 'But Paul, having chosen Silas, went forth, committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord.' The contrast between 'sailed away' and 'went forth, committed to the grace of God' is not without meaning. The brethren were not in fellowship with Barnabas in the same way they were with Paul. The same happy expression of fellowship that had attended the departure on the first journey was not there for Barnabas now.

And this is also, sadly, the last mention of Barnabas in the Acts of the Apostles. His service is not taken up again. Paul refers to him once or twice in the epistles in favorable terms -- in 1 Corinthians 9:6 he speaks of himself and Barnabas working -- but as to any further record of his actual ministry, there is none. God overruled these things for good, because Paul's choice of Silas gave Silas a place of valued service as an apostolic delegate. But the loss of Barnabas from the recorded story of God's work is a sobering thing.

Paul and Apollos: A Different Kind of Case

It is worth setting alongside this sad episode a contrasting one -- the Apostle Paul and Apollos, in 1 Corinthians 16:12:

1 Corinthians 16:12

As touching our brother Apollos, I greatly desired him to come unto you with the brethren: but his will was not at all to come at this time; but he will come when he shall have convenient time.

Here is Paul, desiring a particular brother to go to a particular place for the Lord's work. And Apollos's will was not at all to come at this time. Paul does not press the matter. He says: he will come when he shall have convenient time. And the matter drops. Apollos was the Lord's servant, not Paul's. Paul could entrust him to the Lord.

The difference between those two cases is instructive. In the case of Barnabas, Paul sensed something of a more serious character than a servant's judgment about the right timing for a particular ministry. In the case of Apollos, there was nothing of that kind -- just the question of one servant's sense of whether a particular moment was opportune. And Paul left it entirely in the Lord's hands. That is the proper limit of our concern about another servant's service. We stop well short of manipulating another's calling when there is no serious issue at stake.

The Grace of God: The Only Sure Foundation of Christian Service

The last word of the chapter, as Paul and Silas set out, is grace: 'being recommended by the brethren unto the grace of God.' Christian service, wherever it is truly such, rests entirely on the grace of God. Philanthropy is found everywhere in the world -- even among atheists and agnostics -- and it may be admirable in its way. But it does not advance the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, and it does not address the true problem of the human race: the ruin of the fall and the need of a Savior. Where the grace of God is not the foundation and the

atmosphere of the work, it is not service to Christ, whatever its outward form. Paul and Silas went forward in Syria and Cilicia -- confirming the churches -- committed to that grace alone.

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Lord willing.