

Acts 16-17: The Sovereignty of God in Evangelism

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At the end of Acts 15, we see that Paul and Barnabas had a “sharp” disagreement about whether they should take John Mark with them on their second missionary journey. Mark had deserted them back in Acts 13:13, but wanted to rejoin them. Paul said no, but Barnabas said yes. Who was right? What was God’s will? Did Mark deserve a second chance, or was he too unreliable for such important work? The answer was yes and yes, and God would bless their sincere efforts either way. They split up into two evangelism teams, and went to different places, and I am sure God blessed Barnabas’ team as He did Paul’s. By the sovereignty of God they all did what they thought was right, and twice as much work got done as a result. Because he lost Barnabas, Paul picked up two very valuable disciples who would become Paul’s life long helpers in the ministry, Silas and Timothy.

On his second missionary journey, Paul’s team retraced Paul’s steps in Asia Minor revisiting the churches that Paul planted before. Travelling through Asia Minor going west, they decided to go north up into the area known as Bithynia, but the Spirit impressed upon them to continue going west to Troas. If you are like me, you are wondering what is wrong with Bithynia, but for reasons only God knows, He wanted Paul to go to Macedonia and Greece. Don’t weep for Bithynia, because we learn in 1 Peter 1:1 that God sent someone else there, because Peter sent his letter to the believers there. God gave Paul a vision of a man in Macedonia saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” Paul caught a ship across the Aegean Sea to Neapolis, the port city near Philippi. It was at this point that Paul picked up Luke as a companion, as Acts 16:10 begins the “we” narrative.

Philippi

Philippi was named after Alexander the Great’s father. It was the first European city where Paul would preach the gospel and plant a church. Most of the citizens were Roman citizens, and they had no Jewish population as proved by there was no synagogue. We can imagine that Paul was looking for the man in his vision, and he was certainly used to talking primarily to men. Paul’s group heard that people gathered at the river to pray, but when they got there, only women were assembled. They sat down and began speaking to these ladies, and lo and behold, a woman named Lydia was prepared by God to hear and believe the gospel. She and her whole group believed in Jesus and were baptized. The first westerners to be converted by Paul were a group of ladies, and the first European to cause Paul trouble was a girl in Acts 16:16. She was a fortune teller who made her masters a lot of money, but apparently she was able to do this because she had a demon. She was bothering Paul so much that he commanded the demon to come out of her. When her masters realized their “gravy train” was over, they were enraged at Paul, and had him arrested. Paul spent the night in prison with his feet in stocks, but at midnight God caused an earthquake to open the doors of the jail so they could leave. While the bad guys thought they had disposed of Paul, God had His own plan to save the jailer and his whole family. The jailer showed up, and seeing the doors open, feared he was in big trouble. In those days if a jailer lost his prisoners, he would change places with them. He was ready to kill himself when Paul yelled out that they were still there. After Paul explained to him who they were and what happened, the jailer asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” Paul led him into a saving faith in Jesus along with his entire household. So far, Paul had gone to a different country than he intended, saved women while he was looking for men, healed a girl that irritated him, and was thrown in jail, but it turned out for good by saving the jailer’s family. It was just another day of evangelism for God’s people! Take a minute and think of the incredible change of heart of the jailer. In verse 27 he drew his sword to kill himself, but a short time later he is saved unto eternal life. Back in verse 23, Paul and Silas were getting a terrible beating and having their feet placed in stocks, and I can’t help but think they were wondering, “What good can come from this?” Yet God used it all to do great things.

The Unknown God in Athens

After fruitful work in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea, Paul left Luke in Philippi, and Timothy and Silas in Berea, then Paul travelled on alone to Athens (Acts 17:14-15). As Paul was hanging out in Athens waiting for his disciples to meet him, his spirit was provoked by the Holy Spirit concerning all the statues of idols he saw in Athens. Therefore he began going to the local synagogue to reason with the Jews, and then he would go into the market place to reason with the Gentiles. The leading Greek philosophers of the day were Epicurean and Stoic. These philosophers were always ready to hear something new, so they invited Paul to come to their regular meeting place for Athens’ favorite sport, “debate club” at the Areopagus. In Greek that meant the Rock of Ares (a Greek god). Later, this hill was called Mars Hill. The Roman author Petronius wrote that “It’s easier to find a god in Athens than a man.” That’s how many different statues and idols they had—one for every occasion,

vocation, and pursuit of man; and just in case they missed one, they erected a statue to an unknown god. That struck Paul's fancy so he used it in his address to the philosophers on Mars Hill. In Acts 17:23, Paul told them that the unknown god that they worshipped in ignorance was really the one and only God who created all things, and is all powerful.

Paul proceeded to tell the Athenians how to know the unknown God:

1. Recognize that God is the beginning of all things. Everything that is has its beginning in Him.
2. Recognize who God is—Creator, Ruler, Sustainer, Revealer
3. Recognize what God has said. We should all repent because judgment is coming. Jesus is the man God has appointed having furnished proof by raising Him from the dead.

They listened to Paul respectfully until he mentioned the resurrection, and then many in the crowd shouted him down. The Areopagus was the last place you would think that Paul would get any conversions because of the arrogance of those philosophers, but amazingly several people believed, and among them were two very important Athenians. Dionysius was a member of the council, and church tradition tells us that he became the first Bishop of the Church of Athens. Amazing what God can do while we wait around for friends.

In Weakness and in Fear and Much Trembling

Corinth was an important port city on the isthmus of Greece. It was a land bridge of 4 miles separating the Aegean Sea from the Adriatic Sea. Corinth had a harbor on each side. Ships could travel an extra 200 miles around the tip of Greece or they could dock at Corinth. Therefore there were many sailors and merchants and people from both Asia and Europe in Corinth. It was an international city of much activity. Think San Francisco or New Orleans in its peak. Archaeologists have uncovered the famous Temple of Aphrodite (the love goddess), which boasted of 1,000 prostitutes. Of course they called them priestesses. Morally, Corinth was a wasteland. People in the first century coined a phrase in Greek, "korinthiazō" which meant to act the Corinthian, which is to say to be a debauched fornicator. Into this wild and wooly town, about 51 AD, Paul ventured alone.

Later, in his Letter to the Church of Corinth, Paul reminded them that when he first came into the town, he was scared to death. His point was that since he came in "weakness and in fear and much trembling", they could be sure that the gospel they believed was delivered by the Holy Spirit, and their faith rested on the power of God and not Paul. Think back about what Paul had been through—in Philippi he started a riot and was beaten and thrown in prison, in Thessalonica he was persecuted and threatened, in Berea he was run out of town, and in Athens he was mocked and shouted down. Now he walked into Corinth with no money, no help, and knew no one there. Fortunately, he hooked up with a Christian couple who also were foreign to the area, and together they made a living making tents. On the Sabbath, they would go to the synagogue there and reason with the Jews from the Scriptures. Finally, Silas and Timothy showed up with some support money, and Paul could devote himself completely to preaching the gospel. In Acts 18:6, a fierce resistance against Paul and his message threatened to harm them. In Acts 18:12, the Jewish religious leaders rose up to arrest Paul and brought him to trial before Governor Gallio.

Do not be Afraid...for I am with You

Even before his arrest in Corinth, Paul was scared so God gave him a vision in which He assured Paul that God had a lot of work for Paul to do there, and God would bless his efforts. This was one of six visions that Paul received as recorded in Acts, all coming at crucial points in his ministry. God gave him four reasons to fear not and continue:

1. a direct command, 2. God is with you helping you, 3. God will protect you, and 4. God had many people in that city who would believe in Jesus. From this we can derive that many people belong to the Lord who are not yet saved, and they will not be saved until they hear the gospel. Therefore God sends His spokespersons out to them with the message. Paul stayed in Corinth for 18 months preaching and teaching. In the last scene recorded about his stay there, we have quite the comedy about how God came through providentially for Paul (Acts 18:12-17). Paul's accusers brought him before the Governor who said to them—this is not about a crime, it is nonsense about your religious stuff, so the governor turned away while the people there proceeded to beat up Paul's accusers for wasting their time. God has a sense of humor.

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