

How God Leads
Acts 15:36-16:10
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Last Sunday, someone told me they saw me run a red light earlier in the week. Apparently, he was driving behind me and witnessed my traffic transgression. I didn't really know what to say so I deflected and mumbled something about how people drive too fast today.

Before I went to bed that night, I looked outside and noticed one of our neighbors had left their garage door open. Wanting to be a good neighbor, I contacted them to let them know. I was secretly a bit smug about my final good deed of the day until I woke up the next morning only to see a text from the same neighbors, which came after I had gone to bed, letting me know *our* garage door was open. I ran to the back room and checked. Sure enough, I had left the door open all night.

Like me, do you get tired of your transgressions? Ever become unhinged by your own hypocrisy? Do you sometimes wonder if your imperfections are keeping you from living out God's purposes?

I have always found great comfort in the doctrine of God's providence. Here's a helpful definition from Got Questions: "*Divine providence is the governance of God by which He, with wisdom and love, cares for and directs all things in the universe.*"

John Piper offers this beautiful definition:

"Providence is 'God's purposeful sovereignty.' Its extent reaches down to the flight of electrons, up to the movements of galaxies, and into the heart of man. Its nature is wise and just and good. And its goal is the Christ-exalting glorification of God through the gladness of a redeemed people in a new world."

After studying Acts 15:36-16:10, I wrote down this summary statement: *God uses imperfect people to accomplish His perfect purposes.* By the way, the Bible is filled with examples of God using imperfect people for His purposes. It never glosses over the sins of people because the hero of the Bible is always God. It's all about Him, not about you.

When I was a newer Christian, I enjoyed reading missionary biographies but noticed the more I read the more I felt inadequate because many of the missionaries were depicted as almost perfect. When I was in seminary, one of my professors was Ruth Tucker, author of *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya*. Her book takes a different approach from most missionary biographies. Instead of just touting the “good things” about men and women of faith, she paints a more realistic picture of these flawed yet faithful followers of Christ. It was roundly criticized when it first came out because many did not like having their missionary heroes taken off the pedestal.

I had a totally different reaction. I liked reading about missionary mistakes and personality problems because these are my kind of people. In other words, I didn't think I could ever be like Adoniram Judson or Hudson Taylor, but when I learned what they were really like, I thought to myself, *If God can use their weaknesses and shortcomings, then maybe He can use mine.*

Because God only has imperfect people to work with, He works His way and His will through us to accomplish His perfect purposes.

We learned last week how the Jerusalem church handled doctrinal division by establishing *Jesus + Nothing = Everything*.

After the message was clarified that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, Paul was eager to get back on mission. We see this in Acts 15:36: ***“And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, ‘Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.’”*** Paul was devoted to discipleship, not just to evangelism. He knew the best way to ignite evangelism was to reproduce reproducing disciples who go with the gospel to those in their cultural contexts.

As Paul prepared to go on the second missionary journey three years after the first one, we don't read of a divine call or a church commissioning service. He simply said, ***“let us return,”*** or ‘go again’ to ***“visit the brothers in every city.”*** The word ***“visit”*** is different from how we view visiting today because it means, *“to observe, to examine closely, and to look upon with mercy.”* Paul wanted to get up close to these new Christians to see how they were holding up, and then help them with what they needed.

In our passage I see three ways God providentially leads His people.

1. God leads through disagreements. Paul’s plan seemed good until Barnabas shared his idea in verse 37: **“Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark.”** Barnabas and Mark were cousins, so it was natural for them to want to be together. The phrase **“wanted to take”** actually means, **“he kept on insisting.”**

According to verse 38, tension immediately arose on the team: **“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.”** Paul was so against this idea he couldn’t even say Mark’s name, referring to him as **“one who had withdrawn from them.”** Literally, it reads like this, **“that one!”** Our word **“apostatize”** comes from the Greek word translated here as **“withdrawn.”**

We might say Mark caved and bailed during the first journey. This is described without detail in Acts 13:13: **“Now Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia. And John left them and returned to Jerusalem.”**

We’re not told why he left but perhaps he was homesick. Maybe ministry was more difficult than he thought it was going to be. After all, Pamphylia was a rough mountainous region. Or perhaps he wasn’t prepared for the spiritual warfare. Or maybe he was just too young and inexperienced. Whatever it was, in Paul’s mind because Mark went AWOL, he was DQ’d. I wonder if Paul was feeling justified because of what Jesus said in Luke 9:62: **“No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”**

Because Paul and Barnabas weren’t on the same page, the first part of verse 39 says, **“And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other.”** The word **“arose”** is in the present tense, meaning their quarrel was contentious and continuous. Their disagreement was deep and extremely intense. We get the word **“paroxysm”** from the Greek, which means **“an angry attack and intense provocation.”**

In his book called, *Great Church Fights*, Leslie Flynn tells of a young father who heard a commotion out in his backyard. When he looked out the window, he saw his daughter and several playmates in a heated quarrel. When he tried to stop the fighting, his daughter looked up and said, **“It’s OK, dad, we’re just playing church.”** Ouch.

Due to this sharp disagreement, the last part of verse 39 says, **“Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus.”** Barnabas was from the island of

Cyprus and he and Paul had ministered there previously during their first missionary journey, so it made sense to return and disciple the new believers.

Verses 40-41 tell us how Paul responded: ***“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.”***

[Show map of second missionary journey and explain]

This church fight is not pretty. I wish they both would have repented and asked each other forgiveness for their anger. But, as destructive as this disagreement was, *God used these imperfect people to accomplish His perfect purposes*. Paul and Barnabas didn't disagree on *what* should be done, but on *how* it should be done. We could say Paul looked at the responsibilities of ministry, while Barnabas locked into a young man who needed to be restored.

As Genesis 50:20 says, God loves to bring good out of bad: ***“As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.”*** Here are some positive benefits which came out of this negative situation.

- Instead of one missionary team, now there are two teams seeking to fulfill the Great Commission. Barnabas and Mark headed to Cyprus and according to tradition, eventually to North Africa, while Paul and Silas went toward Asia and ended up taking the gospel to Europe.
- Paul learned from this experience because later he wrote these beautiful words in 1 Corinthians 13:5: ***“love is not easily provoked.”*** The word for ***“provoked”*** is the same word used for the sharp disagreement he had with Barnabas.
- Silas was a good pick for Paul's team because he was a Roman citizen with Jewish roots. Why would Silas be better suited than Barnabas? One commentator said, *“Because Silas didn't have a cousin named Mark whom he insisted on bringing along!”* Silas was from the Jerusalem church, was well-known in Antioch, served as a prophet, and was the human co-author of 1 and 2 Thessalonians (listed as Silvanus).
- Apparently, Paul and Barnabas reconciled later because Paul gives him props in 1 Corinthians 9:6: ***“Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living?”***

- Barnabas was able to restore and mentor Mark for ministry. Don't miss the significance of this. Barnabas was willing to have conflict with Paul in order to restore a fallen brother. Paul had labeled Mark a loser but because Barnabas was a lover, he never gave up on him. The only label he put on Mark was this: *You matter to God and therefore you matter to me.* We know from Scripture that because Barnabas poured courage into Mark, this discouraged and defeated man became a contributing member of the team once again.

This is encouraging because it reminds us, we are all in process and that sin and failure don't ever have the last word if you belong to Christ. God is not finished with me, or with you. Years ago, I saw someone wearing a button with a bunch of letters on it – PBPGINFWMY. I had to ask what it stood for: *“Please be patient. God is not finished with me yet.”* Same.

Until God finishes His work in us, we're all in process. The good news is He always finishes what He starts according to Philippians 1:6: ***“And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”***

Listen to how God changed Paul, and how He changed Mark.

- When Paul was in a Roman prison 15 years later, he wrote these words about Mark in Colossians 4:10: ***“Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, welcome him).”***
- Paul refers to Mark as a ***“fellow worker”*** in Philemon 24.
- As a demonstration of complete restoration in 1 Peter 5:13, Paul refers to him this way: ***“Mark, my son.”***
- Three years later, when imprisoned for the last time in Rome, Paul wanted Mark by his side before he died. Interestingly, he didn't have any reservations about Mark having the fortitude to make the long trip according to 2 Timothy 4:9-11: ***“Do your best to come to me soon. For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry.”*** Ironically, he mentioned three guys who left him, Luke who was still with him, and two guys he wanted to see – Timothy and Mark, the one who previously deserted him.

If your relationship with someone has ruptured, don't give up hope of reconciliation.

Aren't you glad *God uses imperfect people to accomplish His perfect purposes?*

I like Warren Wiersbe's insight: *"If God had to depend on perfect people to accomplish His work, He would never ever get anything done."*

2. God leads as we intentionally disciple others. Listen now to Acts 16:1-3: *"Paul came also 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 and 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."*

As you may recall, Lystra was where Paul was nearly stoned to death on the first journey.

[Let's look at the map again to get our bearings]

We see four key character traits in Timothy.

- **He was a strong believer.** He was referred to as a *"disciple."* A disciple is a learner and a follower, one who is serious about Christ, not just going through the motions. *A disciple is a believer who lovingly follows Jesus and intentionally helps others follow Him.* Timothy was a full-fledged follower, not just a "fan" of Jesus.
- **He had a good reputation.** He *"was well spoken of"* by the Christians who lived around him. People knew him as a man of integrity and as a man of the Word.
- **He was available.** Paul wanted *"Timothy to accompany him..."* He understood ministry meant leaving home and facing hardship. In Philippians 2:20, Paul can't think of anyone like Timothy when he writes: *"For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare."*
- **He was willing to do whatever it took to build bridges.** Some have criticized Paul for having Timothy circumcised so soon after the church at Jerusalem decided to not require this of Gentile believers. If you look at it from a bridge-building perspective, it makes sense because this would allow Timothy to go into synagogues and Jewish homes to preach the gospel.

This principle is fleshed out in 1 Corinthians 9:20-23: ***“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 (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under 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, that I may share with them in its blessings.”***

When it comes to salvation, Paul did not require Titus, a Gentile, to be circumcised (Galatians 2:3) but he did have Timothy, who was half-Jewish circumcised so he could preach the gospel to Jews.

Many commentators believe Paul led Timothy to Christ on his first missionary journey and point to 1 Timothy 1:2, ***“To Timothy, my true child in the faith.”*** While that might be the case, I believe it was primarily his grandmother and mother who sowed the seed of the gospel in his soul.

Listen to 2 Timothy 1:5: ***“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.”*** The word ***“sincere”*** means ***“genuine, without hypocrisy or pretense.”*** The King James translates this as ***“unfeigned faith.”*** Timothy’s faith was not a false façade. He was the real deal.

As Paul was reminded of Timothy’s sincere spirituality, he recalled the godliness of his grandmother Lois. While tracing his family tree of faith, he used the phrase, ***“a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois....”*** The word ***“dwelt”*** means ***“to inhabit, to take up residence, to be at home with.”*** One Greek expert translates it this way: ***“To house in you continually.”*** Faith didn’t make a guest appearance a couple times a year. Instead, her faith was a full-time, year-round resident.

Lois then passed on a legacy of faith to her daughter Eunice, who had the same kind of all-in faith: ***“...and your mother Eunice, and now I am sure dwells in you as well.”*** Paul is convinced that Timothy’s faith commitment can be traced through his mother and grandmother. Observe the word ***“dwells”*** is in the present tense, meaning Timothy’s faith was alive and active.

If you’re a grandparent and want to learn how to become more intentional in evangelizing and discipling your grandchildren, would you join me for the *Legacy Grandparenting Summit* on Thursday and Friday, October 21-22? This is a national event that will be simulcast here at Edgewood and is designed to help you

become a “*grandfluencer*” who will make a grand impact on your grandchildren. You will receive wisdom and direction from engaging speakers and gain support by being with other grandparents. You can sign up on our website or app. Stop by the table in the south lobby for more information.

As Paul intentionally disciplined others, we see the results in verse 5: “*So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.*” I pray our church will become more established and that we too will increase in numbers daily as more and more people are reached with the gospel of grace. Please join me in praying Psalm 85:6 for Edgewood: “*Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?*”

Aren't you glad God uses imperfect people to accomplish His perfect purposes?

God leads through disagreements, and He leads when we disciple others. Thirdly, He leads when we're devoted to follow Him.

3. God leads when we're devoted to follow Him. Listen now to verses 6-10: “*And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. ⁷ And when they had come up to 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 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.’ 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.*”

[Let's go to the map again]

This missionary team did not stand still. Actually, that's a good principle. If you want to know God's will, don't just sit around as a spiritual sluggard. Get up and start serving. God will open and close doors as you attempt to go through them. Notice the different directions the team endeavored to go.

- They traveled from the **east**.
- They tried to go **south** into Asia but were forbidden by the Holy Spirit.
- Next, they attempted to go **north** into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.
- Notice how verse 8 begins, “*So...*” They didn't want to go east and go back home, and because they were prevented from going south or north, they

decided to go as far west as they could, stopping only when ***“they went down to Troas,”*** a seaport city. When they could go no further, they rented an Airbnb on the beach (just kidding) and waited for God’s directions.

The areas of Asia and Bithynia were filled with unreached people, but the Spirit had other plans for this team at this time. Both regions were reached later as spelled out in 1 Peter 1:1: ***“To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.”*** God’s timing is often a mystery to us, but it is always perfect.

The importance of listening to the Spirit as you serve is spelled out in Isaiah 30:21: ***“And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, ‘This is the way, walk in it,’ when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left.”*** As the saying goes, *“God can’t steer a parked car.”* If you want to be led by God, get moving in ministry. If you’re not sure where you’ll end up, be like Abraham in Hebrews 11:8 and go, allowing Him to lead you: ***“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.”***

Here’s what I wrote down: *If you say you must know everything before you’ll go anywhere, you’ll end up going nowhere and doing nothing.*

As Paul wondered what to do next, verse 9 records something supernatural: ***“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.’”*** Perhaps this was a fulfillment of Acts 2:17 which says, ***“young men will see visions.”*** The word ***“urging”*** means this man was *“beseeking or crying”* for these missionaries to come over to provide help.

Note how quickly the team obeys in 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.”*** The word ***“immediately”*** means, *“straightway or instantly.”* I’m reminded of Psalms 119:60: ***“I hasten and do not delay to keep your commandments.”*** Notice the use of the pronoun ***“we.”*** This means Luke, the human author of Acts, had joined the team with Paul, Silas, and Timothy.

I appreciate this insight from a pastor:

“Sometimes people don’t serve the Lord because they’ve never experienced a dramatic ‘call’ to ministry. But this Macedonian call did not come to people who were doing nothing; it came to men who were actively serving the Lord. It was not a call to begin serving the Lord or to become a missionary, but rather a clarification of direction in an existing ministry...start doing something to serve Jesus Christ, and He will redirect you if He needs to.”

The gospel ended up reaching a whole new continent and eventually spread through Europe. Next weekend, we’ll see how the gospel exploded in Greece, the cultural center of the world, and later how it extended all the way to Rome, the political center of the world.

Let’s summarize. *God uses imperfect people to accomplish His perfect purposes.*

1. God leads through disagreements.
2. God leads as we intentionally disciple others.
3. God leads when we’re devoted to follow Him.

Putting Into Practice

Let’s consider a few ways God may prompt us to put this message into practice.

1. Reconcile a ruptured relationship. Satan stirred up false doctrine in the church and then he unleashed fierce discord among two brothers. We also read in Philippians 4:2 about two sisters in Christ, who once served side by side, and were now out of relationship with each other. Paul urged them to reconcile: ***“I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord.”***

Who will you reach out to this week to begin the process of reconciling a broken relationship? Take care of this before we celebrate communion next weekend.

2. Reach out to someone who may feel sidelined. Do you know anyone who has been knocked down or knocked out? God may want to use you to bring encouragement to them.

On New Year’s Day, in 1929, Georgia Tech played the University of California in the Rose Bowl. A player named Roy Riegels recovered a fumble for California but became confused and ran 65 yards in the wrong direction. One of his teammates

tackled him before he scored for the opposing team. When California attempted to punt, Tech blocked the kick and scored a safety.

This all happened in the first half, and everyone wondered how the coach would handle Roy Riegels in the second half. During halftime the coach was quiet while Riegels sat in the corner crying. Just before going back on the field the coach announced, “*Men, the same team that played the first half will start the second.*” Everyone on the team headed to the field, except for Riegels. He didn’t budge. The coach repeated himself, but he still didn’t move. Finally, he said, “*I can’t do it. I’ve ruined you. I’ve ruined the University of California. I’ve ruined myself. I couldn’t face that crowd in the stadium to save my life.*”

The coach reached out and put his hand on his shoulder and said: “*Roy, get up and get back in there. The game is only half over.* Friend, if you feel sidelined, it’s time to get back in the game because it’s only half over!

3. Reengage in serving. If you’ve been waiting for God to lead you, and you have not been serving, it’s time to reengage. As you serve, the Lord will lead you. This is what God did in my life when I started attending a church in the Chicago suburbs when I was a student at Moody. I asked if I could help teach the college class and then I joined the visitation team. That led to an internship which opened many other ministry opportunities. When a pastor left, I was asked to take his place. When I graduated from seminary, I was ordained and God continued to give me opportunities to serve as a pastor, then a missionary, and then a pastor again.

To quote the title of a book by Kevin DeYoung, *Just do Something!*

4. Respond to the cry of the lost. There are lost people all around you, crying out for you to tell them about Jesus. It might not always seem like it, but if someone doesn’t know Christ, that is the cry of their heart. God loves to use imperfect people like you to accomplish His perfect purposes. Live on mission where he has placed you and be willing to go where He directs you next. Start with your neighbors and be willing to go to the nations.

When God sends a red light, stop. Don’t try to run through it. But when the light is green, hit the gas and take the gospel to those God puts along your path.

Invitation