

When Our Plans Go “Pfft” Acts 15:36-16:10

Introduction

While studying our passage for today I got to thinking about various plans that I have made over the years

You'll notice that I've named today's message "When Our Plans Go Pfft" and that might give you some indication as to how many of those plans turned out

When I graduated high school my plan was to take a year off to work and figure out what I wanted to do with my life before heading to college

Didn't quite happen that way and I didn't make it to college until 31 years later

I remember getting pretty bummed out when I turned 30 because I wasn't where I had planned to be in my career when I reached that milestone age

See, I had my work life all mapped out when I was a young guy at Caterpillar down in central Illinois

They offered full retirement after 30 years of service which meant I could retire at age 50 and follow my parents' example of travelling around the country in an RV

The economy of the early 1980s made those plans moot as I got laid off and wound up going to Texas to find work – and by the time I hit 30 plans of an early retirement – or retirement with a pension at all for that matter had evaporated

Kathy and I planned to buy a piece of rural property and live off the grid raising our food, livestock, and kids – we were avid readers of the Mother Earth News

Those grand plans went by the wayside too

But that's the way it is with plans

The poet Robert Burns wrote in his poem To a Mouse: “The best laid plans of mice and men often go awry”

And Kathy and I have decided these days to hope that Plan B or Plan C or maybe even Plan Z works out in our personal life just so we can have some sort of victory – Nailed it!

Famous Missionaries

Plans don't always work out in ministry either – consider the plans and outcomes of these well-known missionaries:

Adoniram Judson, the very first missionary from the United States set sail for India planning to preach to the Hindus there only to be refused entry by the East India Company and ultimately spending his career in Burma

David Livingstone originally planned to go to China to minister and was even accepted by the London Missionary Society for that mission but when his travel to China was delayed by the opium war he wound up going to Africa

Jim Elliot knew God was calling him to go the Auca tribe in the jungles of Ecuador to tell them about Jesus. So he and four other men responded to God's call and they established a camp on a beach by a river to wait for the Auca to make contact with them.

After a few days some of the Auca arrived but as the men waded out into the river to welcome them to the camp, the Auca killed all five of the missionaries. Not one word of witness was delivered

Things don't always go according to plan – even in ministry

Today's Passage

Our passage today is **Acts 15:36-16:10** and in it we are going to see that things didn't always go according to plan in the early days of the church either

And we are going to see that it's what we do when Plan A fails that counts

Because it's not *our* plans that are important but **God's purposes**

And we will see how the mission of Christ must continue even when our plans go awry

Please join me in **Acts 15** as we look at the plan found in **verse 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.”

Here we see that Paul was more than a “plant ‘em and forget ‘em” kind of evangelist

One of the great weaknesses I have seen in the modern church is that we have the tendency to count decisions for Christ and consider our work to be done when someone prays to accept Christ

Without any doubt whatsoever that is the vital first step but it cannot be the end of the matter as our job is to make disciples

And making disciples requires that we be witnesses for Christ in the world, that we lead people to recognize they are sinners in need of a Savior, and then that we show them how to be saved – and we rejoice with every decision

But we can’t stop there as the work of disciple-making has just begun with that decision

And Paul understood that –

When we considered the end of the first missionary journey in **Chapter 14** we saw how Paul and Barnabas retraced their steps to strengthen and encourage the new churches they had planted and how they established leadership in each church so that they would be properly cared for in their absence

Paul was more than an itinerant evangelist and church planter – he was a pastor and he continued to hold the churches he established close to his heart

So having returned to Antioch in Syria and serving there for a year or so Paul turned to Barnabas one day and revealed his plan to return to those churches in Asia Minor to check up on them

No doubt he also wanted to further strengthen them where they were weak and encourage them where they were strong just as he had done previously

But clearly Paul’s plan was that he and Barnabas would be going to visit existing churches and this would not be an evangelistic, church-planting trip

It was a good plan

But things don’t always go according to plan in ministry as we will see next as we look at **verses 37-41**

I. Disagreements (15:37-41)

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.

Wow! Talk about things not going according to plan!

We see here that the plan went awry before it even got started because of a difference of opinion

And the lesson that we learn from this account is that the mission of Christ must continue in spite of **disagreements**

Conflict in the church recap

Last week, when we looked at the first 35 verses of Acts 15, we looked at how the early church handled conflict

And we saw that we should be strong in our defense of clear doctrinal issues while making sure our motivations are pure, how we should seek to understand the other person's point of view and make sure of our facts, and how we should consider seeking outside help in determining what is right and godly

But in our passage today we see a situation that doesn't concern a clear biblical teaching and on which there really is no room for compromise

Barnabas wanted to take John Mark along on this trip in spite of the fact that he had deserted them in the middle of the first trip and Paul said absolutely not

There really was no middle ground to be had – either Mark would go with them or he wouldn't

Paul and Barnabas, both godly men, were diametrically opposed and equally firm in their resolve

And this resulted in a "sharp disagreement" – they got hot under the collar and they had it out over the issue

Looking at what we know about the two men we can see how this disagreement came about

Barnabas was actually a nickname meaning "son of encouragement" and every time we have seen Barnabas he has been just that

He was the type of man who would come along side anyone who needed to be built up, or defended and we know how he did that for the needy in the church at Jerusalem, for the church in Antioch, and even for Paul himself

It's no wonder he wanted to come alongside Mark to support and encourage him in spite of – actually more probably *because of* – his prior failure

Our image of Paul is that he was more pragmatic in his approach and that his primary concern would have been more focused on the success of the mission than Mark's feelings

While we don't know why Mark had left the first missionary journey, it seems Paul saw it as a desertion of sorts that rendered Mark unfit to go on this trip and so the two co-laborers were at an impasse

Who was right?

Over the centuries scholars have continued to engage in "sharp disagreement" over who was right and who was wrong in this dispute

Luke, though, is careful not to tip his hand in either direction as he reports on the incident in a most neutral manner

This is one of those arguments that can go on forever with no clear resolution because each person's conviction typically correlates to their own personality and worldview and we could make a solid biblical case for both ways

It might be best to say that our heads go with Paul but our hearts go with Barnabas and just leave it at that

The work goes on

What is most important is that the mission went on in spite of the disagreement and ultimate separation

The plan was a good one and the work was necessary so Barnabas went one way with Mark and Paul took Silas and went another to carry out the plan to visit the churches

They didn't stop and say that because their plan to go together fell apart that they would just do nothing

They made the necessary adjustments to the plan and continued on because they were confident of the marching orders they had received from the Lord and they were determined to see them through

It would be presumptuous to say that God orchestrated the disagreement over Mark but it would be equally presumptuous to say that he did not

Because, in the events that follow we can clearly see how God used the disagreement to multiply the ministry

In one fell swoop the number of teams and areas of ministry doubled and the workers went from two to four and eventually, as we see in the next section, to five godly men all laboring for the Lord

Sometimes subtraction is addition and division is multiplication in the Lord's economy

Parting is often painful

The disagreement between Paul and Barnabas is a difficult thing to read

Especially when we consider their history together

Barnabas was the first to befriend Saul before he became known as Paul and commend him to the other apostles

They had travelled and labored together experiencing the highs and lows of ministry side-by-side

They likely thought they would continue as a ministry team for the remainder of their earthly lives

They weren't just co-workers or even friends – they were Christian brothers

And their parting – especially considering that they parted with sharp words – had to be a painful tearing apart

Today

Despite our best intentions and use of the conflict resolution techniques we saw last week believers still occasionally reach a point of impasse where they simply can't find a resolution to a disagreement

And sometimes those disagreements lead to a parting of the ways

What is important is that we maintain our godliness in the parting and that we continue the work before us separately even though we can't continue together

We have no reason to think that the parting of Paul and Barnabas was full of anger or strife – their argument that led to the parting was heated but we aren't told that their parting was anything but pragmatic and even amicable

We know that Mark matures and eventually is considered by Paul to be valuable in ministry (**2 Timothy 4:11**)

And even though this is the last time Luke mentions Barnabas in Acts Paul later mentions him in his epistles to the churches at Corinth and Colossae with no hint of anything less than full respect and friendship

I have to believe that Paul and Barnabas remained each other's biggest cheerleaders as long as they both lived

Theirs may have been the first recorded dispute that led to a parting in the church but we know it wasn't the last

And there may be times when parting is the best thing that can happen to further the mission of Christ by multiplying ministry – this is another one of those cases where we simply don't have enough information in the moment to know

What we do know is that once we have worked through the steps of conflict resolution that we remember:

Our Lord has given us a mission and we must carry on with our labors in spite of disagreements

II. Distractions (16:1-5)

Then in **Acts 16:1-5** Luke continues with his description of Paul's trip as he returned with Silas to Lystra and Derbe

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 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.

So we see Paul and Silas going about the plan as Paul had laid it out in Antioch as they visit the cities in Asia Minor where Paul and Barnabas had planted churches on their first missionary journey – only in reverse order this time

Timothy

When they got to Lystra they met Timothy who was a young man of good repute among the believers there so they asked him to accompany them on the remainder of their trip

And just as Silas proved to be a worthy replacement for Barnabas' role on Paul's team so did Timothy prove to be a worthy replacement for John Mark and both of them became lifelong friends and fellow laborers of Paul

But Timothy came with some baggage that had the potential to be a **distraction** as they ministered

He was of mixed parentage – his mother was Jewish but his father was a Gentile

What that meant was that the Jews considered him to be Jewish because they trace a person's heritage through the mother

But they also knew that his father was a Gentile and the question of whether to circumcise a male child was the responsibility of the father so Timothy was uncircumcised

And since he hadn't undergone ritual circumcision at 8-days of age this made him an apostate Jew in the eyes of the Jews

Remember what we saw last week in **Genesis 17:14** –

Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.

So Paul took him and circumcised him and we might rightly ask why he would do such a thing in light of the fact that a council had just been convened in Jerusalem to rule on the matter of circumcision and the decision was that a man doesn't need to be circumcised in order to be saved

In fact, that decision of the apostles and elders in Jerusalem was one of the things that Paul and Silas were sharing with the churches on this trip

But as an apostate Jew Timothy would not have been welcome in the synagogues and we know that Paul's practice was to go into the synagogues to preach in each city before going to the Gentiles

So to promote harmony and to avoid giving unnecessary offense Paul had Timothy, a Jew, circumcised

In Paul's mind the matter of circumcision in order to be saved had been settled so there was no point in standing firm on the matter any longer –

Paul's goal was to witness to his unbelieving countrymen – he wasn't trying to appease the Jews who were now believers

So he could safely yield on the point in Timothy's case because circumcision meant nothing doctrinally

That question had been answered and Paul knew he could be flexible in order to avoid giving unnecessary offense

The matter of Timothy's foreskin was a potential distraction that could easily be removed

Look with me at Paul's philosophy on such matters as he clearly spells it out in **1 Corinthians 9:19-23** –

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 (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law 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. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

For Paul there was nothing more important than the gospel and he would do whatever it took to remove distractions as long as he didn't have to compromise doctrinal truth

And the result of this action is found in verse 5 of Acts 16 (**Acts 16:5**) –

So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.

The churches grew first in the faith – or qualitative growth – and they also grew in numbers – quantitative growth

As a quick side note –

You will often hear people in the church saying that we're not about numbers but we see that the early church was very concerned about numbers of people reached and disciplined

Growth in quality must always be our primary goal and when we begin to achieve it growth in quantity is sure to follow

So we are about numbers – just numbers in the right way

Paul knew that the mission had to go on in spite of distractions so he did everything he could to remove the distractions

Today

While we no longer quibble about circumcision today there are plenty of distractions that try to get in the way of our mission

We mentioned a few of them last week – things like music styles, Bible versions, dress, political ideology, and the like a have the potential to be distractions that keep us from presenting the gospel to those who need to hear it

And we need to be quick to remove those distractions whenever we can do so without compromising the core truth of Scripture

Again, we need to be inflexible in defending what we simply must defend but that list, if we're honest about it, is dreadfully short and we often choose to allow what really are trivial matters that could easily be let go become unnecessary barriers to winning souls

We must work to eliminate distractions so that the mission can go forth unhindered

III. Diversions (16:6-10)

Then, having eliminated the distraction of Timothy's circumcision, Paul, Silas, and Timothy completed their original mission of strengthening the churches in Asia Minor

So they set out to evangelize further and once again things didn't go quite as planned as we see in **Acts 16:6-10**

And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. And when they had come up 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 we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Paul typically went to larger cities throughout his ministry so it would appear that the team first tried to go to Ephesus which lay to the west southwest of the region of Phrygia and Galatia in the area they would have called "Asia"

It would appear that Paul was once again combining human logic with the divine call in determining which direction to travel

But as we see in **verse 6** the Holy Spirit stopped them from going in that direction

We aren't told either why or how the Holy Spirit "forbid" them from speaking the word in Asia only that it happened. So the team recalibrated and began to head north intending to go to the region of Bithynia but again they were not allowed to do so and again we are not told why or how this happened

And since they knew quite well that God had commissioned them to go and evangelize the Gentiles they headed the only direction left and that was due west and so they reached the port city of Troas on the coast of the Aegean Sea. Twice the missionaries had planned their direction and twice they had experienced diversions –

But they didn't let those diversions stop them and they simply rolled with the punches and kept moving in a new direction

And still God had not told them why

That is until they ran out of land – they were faithful in going until they could go no further

Only then did God send Paul a vision in the night of a "man of Macedonia" calling out for help

They say that **Colonel Sanders** personally pitched his fried chicken recipe and was turned down 1,009 times before the first restaurant accepted it – 1,009 people said "no" before he got a "yes"

The same is true with **Thomas Edison** who endured 10,000 unsuccessful attempts at finding a suitable filament for his electric light bulb before he found one that would work

Success seldom comes easily and it rarely happens exactly as we envision it

But when the goal is worthy it's worth a revised plan, or two, or 10,000

And because Paul and his team kept moving in a new direction each time they were rebuffed, the gospel made the leap into Europe

The mission of Christ was more important than the diversions and so they persevered

Today

We also need to be difficult to dissuade because we will have our plans run into the proverbial brick wall from time to time

And God often uses diversions to build our character before he lets us succeed

We can't allow diversions to derail us as we go forward with carrying out the mission that the Lord has given us

Conclusion

“The best laid plans of mice and men often go awry”

I don't know about mouse plans but I know that many plans for ministry go awry

There likely aren't too many of us who perfectly planned every step that got us to where we are today

I know my life has been a series of readjustments over the years and I suspect yours has too

Based on our past track record how then can we be so confident of our current plans that we would abandon them at the first sign of disagreement, distraction, or diversion

Our mission is the same as it was for Paul and the rest of the believers in the early church

Oh, the details may be different but the goal of the mission remains the same

And we need to never lose sight of the prize and persevere and adapt just as Paul and the others did

More often than not our plans are likely to go “Pfft”

People are going to **disagree** in the church and painful partings will occur from time to time

And when they do we need to part amicably and continue to minister

Distractions abound in our world today so we need to focus on the things that are important and show patience and tolerance for those that are not

While there are certainly points on which we must stand firm, we need to bend over backwards to compromise whenever we can so as to remove unnecessary obstacles to the gospel and continue to minister

And we need to expect **diversions**

Doors are going to close in ministry – sometimes by God's hand and sometimes by God's permission but we must keep moving and trust that, in his perfect timing, God will show us where he wants us to go

Had the early church given up when their plans went awry the spread of the gospel would have been severely hindered

And the same is true with Adoniram Judson, David Livingstone, and Jim Elliot...and the same is true with us

We need to keep going when our plans go “Pfft” because the mission of Christ, our mission, is more important than our plans

Let's pray