

God Is Working

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, let me begin this message by quoting from Scotland's National Bard, Robert Burns, or Rabbie Burns. And this is one of his poems. It's called To a Mouse.
- And it goes like this. We, sleeket, coorin, timorous beastie, O, what a panics in thy briste. But moosey, thou art no thy lane, In proving foresight may be vain, The best laid schemes of mice and men Gang aft aglay, And leas not but grief and pain For promised joy.
- Now, if you're not Scottish, then those words probably don't mean very much. But even if you are Scottish, those words don't mean very much. So don't feel you're excluded because you're not a Scot. Most Scots don't have a clue what Robert Burns is talking about.
- But in this poem called To a Mouse, it's a poem about a mouse whose hard work has been destroyed. And it's about how the best laid plans or the best plans of human beings often go wrong.
- Gang aft aglay, he says. And we know this, don't we? We make plans and what we expected would happen actually just doesn't happen. And what we never expected would happen does so often happen.
- [1 : 2 1] Because things don't always go according to plan. Things go or gang aft aglay. They go wrong. They don't work out.
- And in a sense, that's what seems to be happening in this reading in the book of Acts. Because we might assume that if Jesus has ascended into heaven, he sent his Holy Spirit to his church, then everything would be plain sailing.
- Things would be straightforward and growth would be exponential, which it was. But there would be no problems in this growth, in the progress and the advance of the church.
- And yet things do seem to go wrong. They don't seem to go according to plan. And yet what we see in this reading is that God uses these apparent setbacks to accomplish his purposes.
- And that's really the big idea in all of these verses, that God uses apparent setbacks to accomplish his purposes. In other words, God is always working whatever happens, whatever is going on.
- [2 : 3 2] God is doing his thing. And that is actually what we see when we look closely at this passage. Luke is showing us, Luke the author of Acts, what God's work is like.
- Because while things may not always go according to plan, God is always working. And God always knows exactly what he is doing.
- Which means we can trust him. And so if you're coming at this Bible reading and this passage, and you're a Christian, then you can trust that God knows what he's doing in your life, and in our church, and in this world.
- But even if you're here this afternoon and you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, this God that we're thinking about, this God that we're reading about, can be trusted.

You can trust him. Because he has a plan and a purpose for this world, for his church, and so therefore for your life. So let's see three things as we look at this passage under the three chunks in our reading.

- [3 : 35] First of all, we see that God's work involves different tactics. God's work needs deliberate flexibility. And God's work has definite direction. Just like us to look at those under that heading that God is working.

So first of all, God's work involves different tactics. Now, if you were here last time, we looked at Acts chapter 15 early on, and we saw how the Jerusalem Council, like a general assembly, the apostles came together and they agreed that Gentiles, non-Jews, did not require to be circumcised to belong to the church, to be true followers of Jesus, to be saved.

Because the message of the Bible is essentially salvation is by grace alone through faith in Jesus. And so the church was united on this message.

And yet the next thing we read about is a disagreement between two of the main guys in the church, Paul and Barnabas. What's this disagreement about?

Well, in verse 36 to 39, which we just read, it is a disagreement about who they should take on mission. So Barnabas wants to take John, also called Mark, but Paul doesn't think it's wise to take him because, verse 38, he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work.

- [5 : 03] And so, verse 39, they had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus. And it goes on. So Luke, as he records this, the story of the early church doesn't make any attempt to airbrush out this conflict.

And it is a conflict. It's a sharp disagreement. Now, Barnabas possibly saw John Mark in a better light than Paul did because later on we discover that John Mark was Barnabas's cousin.

And for Paul, Paul's the pioneering missionary who wants to advance the message of Jesus throughout the world. Paul wants people who are committed to the work.

Quite right. And so the question is, well, who is right in this sharp disagreement? Is it Paul or Barnabas? And some side with Paul and others side with Barnabas, either arguing that Paul's right because, well, John Mark is unreliable, so just leave him.

We won't take him. Or Barnabas was right because, well, he wanted to give John Mark another chance. Why not give the guy another chance? Barnabas, we know, was called the son of encouragement.

- [6 : 19] He was Mr. Encouragement. So, of course, he'd want to encourage. But Luke doesn't tell us here who's right because there's no one that he blames as he records it.

He makes no judgment at the end. And so these two church leaders separate. Now, both leaders are faithful. Both leaders are key.

Both have clear views on what should be done, and yet they disagree with each other. And so it's important to think, well, what they disagree on.

Because what they disagree on isn't the mission of the church. They were united on that. They had partnered together. They had traveled far and wide together.

They had been through so much together. And so this wasn't a disagreement on the mission of the Lord Jesus Christ. And it's more a disagreement on tactics, you could say, about how best to carry out that mission, about who's going to do it and with who.

- [7 : 27] And so Luke wants us, in a sense, to see the much bigger picture because this is not a disaster for the early church. So verse 39 at the end, we read that Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord.

He went into the churches. So Paul goes one way. Barnabas goes another way. There was one missionary team, and now there are teams.

So Barnabas takes Mark as his ministry apprentice, I guess you could call him, and Paul takes Silas. And not only that, verse 40 tells us they were commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord.

So this wasn't a divisive thing within the church. Nobody here is taking sides as to who's right and who's wrong. No judgment is passed on either of these men or even this action.

But rather, Luke highlights how they go off in different directions to continue on the same mission. I notice that they go with the blessing of the church.

[8 : 38] And so this doesn't hinder God's work at all, because verse 41 tells us God's work continued. Paul goes and the churches in Syria and Cilicia are strengthened.

So God is working. So their disagreement didn't mean that they got distracted from the mission that Jesus had called them into. And I guess the problem is that disagreements in churches today so often do just lead to distraction.

And people forget the work that God has called us to, because disagreements can so often lead to division, because they zap our time, they zap our energy, and they even take away our joy.

And yet they shouldn't. And so there is a practical application for us here. Because if we are united together in the mission of Jesus, if we're focused on seeing believers strengthened in the faith and seeing new people come to believe the faith, to believe in Jesus, then we can accept differences on tactics or how we do things, how we go about things.

So unity in the gospel, unity in gospel ministry, won't always mean full agreement on how you go about that gospel ministry.

[10 : 04] There are different approaches to the one mission of the church. And so we will all have, I'm sure, different ideas about how to do things, about when to do things, about who in particular should be doing these things.

We will have differences. And that is okay, as long as we're pursuing the same mission, the one mission of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Because when we're together for the gospel, then disagreements won't divide us. They shouldn't divide us. And they won't distract us.

They shouldn't distract us. We can't let them. Now, of course, that's not to downplay the sharp disagreement between Paul and Barnabas.

It was obviously serious enough for Luke to feel he needed to highlight it. And I guess that's because it was real. It was probably painful for everybody who was involved.

[11 : 08] And yet it did not detract from the work or divide the people or divide the church. It's interesting because at the end of Paul's life, Paul acknowledged the valuable contribution that John Mark made to his ministry.

In 2 Timothy, which was one of Paul's last letter, if not his final letter, written when he was imprisoned in Rome, Paul said, get Mark and bring him with you because he is helpful to me in my ministry.

And so we shouldn't be afraid of disagreements. People will think different things and approach the mission of Jesus in different ways. And so disagreements are part of church life on earth.

And whilst that's the case, we should never let them distract us or divide us or detract us from the work that God has called us to do together as his people.

So we should trust God, trust that God will continue his work in these ways. So God's work firstly involves different tactics. Second point is that God's work needs deliberate flexibility.

[12 : 19] And we see this in this next story of Paul circumcising Timothy, which might seem strange, especially after Acts 15 was kind of all about this.

Circumcision was not a requirement for salvation. So, well, why did Paul feel the need to circumcise Timothy? It might seem odd. It wasn't necessary, but it happened, it seems, because it would help to advance the mission of Jesus amongst the Jews.

So Paul could see Timothy's potential for future ministry. So chapter 16, verse 3 says, Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.

So Paul realizes a circumcised Timothy would be far better than an uncircumcised Timothy in his mission to Jewish people.

And so this was done in order to reach Jews with the good news of Jesus. Because you remember, all through Acts, whenever Paul goes into a new place, a new city, the first place he goes to to tell people about Jesus is always the synagogue.

[13 : 38] And so Timothy's circumcision would obviously help make not just Paul, but also Timothy acceptable to the Jews who were there. It would avoid any unnecessary offence and would give them both better opportunities to proclaim the good news of Jesus.

And so there was a willingness here to be as flexible as possible in order to further the mission of Jesus. Paul's attitude and his approach are summed up in one of his other letters.

In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul says this, To the Jews I became like a Jew to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law, though I myself am not under the law, so as to win those under the law.

To those not having the law I became like one not having the law, though I am not free from God's law, but I'm under Christ's law. So as to win those not having the law to the weak, I became weak to win the weak.

I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. And so can you see how it's the same principle here that Paul is acting on?

[14 : 53] Never flexibility with the gospel message, the good news of Jesus. It always stays the same. No flex on that. But flexibility so as to gain a better hearing for that message.

And again, there's an obvious practical application for us in this passage. Because we will need to adopt the same attitude, the same approach as Paul, either as individuals or as a church, where we are deliberately flexible, never on the message, but for the sake of proclaiming the message.

We'll want to be flexible so that as many as possible can come and hear it. Thankfully, this flexibility is not going to involve any kind of surgical procedure like it did for Timothy.

But it is going to involve a willingness to be put out. It is going to involve being inconvenienced. It is going to mean a desire to give of ourselves and give of our resources.

It's going to need motivation to put in extra effort in order to connect with more people. And it's going to require the sacrifice of our own personal preferences that we might not get exactly what we want, but that's okay because we're trying to reach people who don't know Jesus Christ.

[16 : 23] And so it's worth asking, well, how flexible are we prepared to be, whether as an individual, Christian, or as a church? What are we prepared to do to help people clearly hear the good news about Jesus?

Archbishop William Temple famously once said, the church is the only society on earth that exists for the benefit of non-members. And so, of course, when we come to church, we come to worship God, we come to hear God speak through His Word, we come to sing God's praise, we come to enjoy fellowship with God's people, but we're not simply here for ourselves, are we?

And it's not just about having our preferences. It's not just about having what suits us.

And I guess that's why so often we introduce our worship services by saying that we want to be a church, not just for ourselves, but for those who wouldn't normally go to church.

And we say this because, well, we get it from Jesus. In Romans chapter 15, Paul says that we don't want to please ourselves for even Christ did not please himself.

[17 : 42] And that's why we seek to plan our worship services and consider our activities and craft our communications and set our priorities to better connect with people who know little or nothing about Jesus Christ.

And so we need to be so careful that we're not distracted by other things, or we're not satisfied even by the way that things are, whether it's where we meet, when we meet, how many of us meet, what we do when we meet.

We've always got to be thinking about, well, we need to be flexible in what we do because we want more people to come and hear about Jesus. And so that seems to be the principle behind Paul's circumcision of Timothy, was a deliberate action to further the mission of Jesus.

And it played its part in Jesus building his church. So just look at how Luke sums this up. In verse 5, he says, so the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in number.

Churches strengthened, growing, more people being added, Jews and Gentiles together united in the gospel of Jesus Christ. And so let's aim, as Christ Church Glasgow, let's aim to do all that we can to make it as easy as possible for different people to hear about Jesus.

[19 : 09] The people who are in your family, the people who are in your street, the people you work with, the people you socialize with, these are the people who need to hear the good news of Jesus because we all need Jesus Christ.

So let's think of how we can be flexible so as to be able to connect better with them to share the message of Jesus. Okay, that's our second point.

First, God's work involves the different tactics. Second, God's work needs deliberate flexibility. And third, God's work has a definite direction. And we'll close on this one.

So we're now at the beginning of Paul's second great missionary journey. So this is a big thing. And it's clear that Paul is not the one who is setting the direction.

The Lord Jesus is setting the direction for Paul and where he should go because it's the mission of Jesus and Jesus is sovereign. And so Jesus has a definite direction that he wants his mission to take.

[20 : 13] And so he's deploying Paul and directing Paul by his spirit to get him doing what he needs to do and going where he needs to go. So let's read verse 6 to 8, chapter 16.

Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the spirit of Jesus would not allow them to.

So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. So there's a door to Asia and it's closed. So they tried to enter the Bithynia door.

It's closed. Well, why? Because Jesus wanted them to go through a different door, one he was opening. Jesus was directing them towards a new frontier.

Verse 9. During the night, Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, come over to Macedonia and help us. After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

[21 : 23] So Jesus had mapped out where he wanted them to go. And his spirit was directing them to that place by closing doors and by opening doors.

And so Paul and his team had to go with it. And here it's significant because the references to Macedonia signal a major shift in the mission direction.

We're moving here from east to west, into Europe towards the ends of the earth. And again, this has practical application for us.

John Stott in his commentary on Acts says this. He says, Some important principles of divine guidance are in fact exemplified in the experience of Paul and his companions.

From this we may learn that usually God's guidance is not negative only, but also positive. Some doors close, others open. Not circumstantial only, but also rational, thinking about our situation.

[22 : 30] Not personal only, but also corporate, sharing of the data with others so that we can mull over them together and reach a common mind. And so the point is, God's work here, the work of the Lord Jesus Christ and having more people come to believe in him has a definite direction, which should be a comfort and an encouragement to us.

Because we can trust that God will guide us in the right direction, the way that we should go, which means that there's never anything that catches God out when it comes to what goes on in his church or in this world.

And that's why it's so dangerous to have blinkers on, if you like, and just view things narrowly from only our limited human perspective.

Because when we look at things from just a human perspective, it is so easy to see problems. It is so easy to be full of fears, easy to scramble for human solution.

Because to us, things may sometimes seem unclear to progress his work in a particular place at a particular time.

[23 : 51] And so this should be an assurance for us here at Christ Church Glasgow, as we seek to serve the mission of Jesus here in northwest Glasgow. Because there's a work that Jesus has given us to do as his people.

And so we need to do it. And whilst it may not be clear what doors will be closed and what doors will open up, we can be certain that the spirit of Jesus that guided his people here in his word will also guide us.

And while there will be challenges, because there are always challenges in the mission of Jesus, we can be sure that God will lead us in the direction that he wants us to go. Okay, so God's work involves different tactics.

It needs deliberate flexibility and it has definite direction. So we see in these three episodes from Acts how God uses what seem to be setbacks to accomplish his purposes.

So Paul and Barnabas had a disagreement. They did part company. But what was the result? Well, look at verse 41. The churches were strengthened.

[25 : 11] Timothy was circumcised. And what was the result? See verse 5. The churches were strengthened in the faith and they grew daily in numbers. Then doors were closed for Paul.

Well, what was the result? See verse 10, chapter 16. A door was opened to preach the gospel into Europe. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Because we sit here today because of what happened back then. Paul went with the message of Jesus towards Europe. And so we should be in no doubt that God is always working to further his salvation plan.

God is at work. God knows exactly what he's doing in history, in the church, and so obviously in our lives.

He overrules. He intervenes to direct his purposes in his way because he knows what's best. So there are no setbacks to the work God is doing, even if it seems like it.

[26 : 21] And so whatever the circumstances, we've got to trust God every day and every step of the way. But how can we keep trusting God when it does seem as if there are setbacks and we can't really move forward?

How do we keep going? Whether it's living for Jesus as a Christian or just living life as a non-Christian or serving in Christ's church. How do we keep going?

Especially when we're faced with challenges on every single side. Well, we've got to remember the cross where Jesus died.

Because there's no better place that illustrates the reality that God uses apparent setbacks to accomplish his purposes. Because Jesus was at the very center of God's purposes when he died on the cross.

And yet for those who looked on at the time, the death of Jesus seemed like a tragic accident. It was defeat. Jesus is a poor victim of circumstance and his mission has ended in his death.

[27 : 31] But of course, it didn't. Because God was working in a way that defied human logic and human understanding. God was achieving the greatest good for humanity as Jesus hung, nailed to the cross.

Through the suffering and death of Jesus, God was doing his work, his greatest work. He was working out his purposes to save people like you and me from our sin and rebellion against him.

And his purposes were achieved. They were accomplished. And they were accomplished for all the world to see when Jesus was resurrected from death.

And so it's only when we see God's great work for us in the death and in the resurrection of Jesus that we know for sure God is always working.

Even if it doesn't seem like it. And as we grasp God's great love for us in Jesus, who faced the very worst for us, that we can trust, that whatever we face and whatever is happening, God is working.

[28 : 52] He's declared his love for us already through the death of his son. He's faced the worst so that we need never have to.

And that's good news for us to get up tomorrow morning to live our lives trusting that God knows what he's doing. When we're his, he is our loving Heavenly Father.

and he's working his purposes out in his church and in our lives. Thank you.