

THIS COULD BE THE START OF SOMETHING BIG

by Steve Zeisler

On March 26, the San Jose Mercury News printed an eight-page obituary on the passing of David Packard, who had died the day before. Packard, by all accounts, was a remarkable man. He was described as the father of Silicon Valley, a man whose technical engineering will be remembered; whose business sense was revolutionary for its time; whose wealth, which was extraordinary at the time of his death, served him rather than owning him. What captured my interest, however, was the undercurrent of wistfulness, of longing articulated by so many who wrote of him.

It was not just the money or the technical ability that they longed for. It was to live life to the full, to be able to look back on substantial accomplishments and choices in their lives, to have fulfilling relationships with family and friends; to have something lasting about the life they lived.

That is the subject before us. We will be spending some weeks reading and thinking about one of the narrative sections of the Bible, the second missionary journey in Acts. It is important to resist the tendency to look for techniques, how-to manuals, programs, ten easy steps to becoming mature human beings. We will be better served by reading again this story of people whose lives really mattered, and seeing God at work in them, seeing their choices, their mistakes, the way they were restored; by seeing what it's like to live in the plan of God, with the approval of God, adventuring for the Lord.

Acts 15:36:

Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing."

This summary of a conversation between two old friends is unremarkable on the surface. Few have ever memorized this verse to inspire Christian living. Yet this conversation between friends was the beginning of something immense and dramatic. What flowed out of the discussion that took place that day in Antioch would change the Roman world and ultimately the course of human history. The gospel would make advances into places it had never been, and the gates of hell would not prevail against it. Even the enemies of Paul and his companions would say, a few short months hence, "These ones who are overturning the whole world have come here too" (Acts 17:6). This very ordinary conversation led to results that have not reached their end even yet: the penetration of cities for Christ, the establishment of churches, and Paul's writing letters to those churches---letters that have given life in every generation since. From this simple beginning came the second missionary journey, which led to spiritual revolution that is still going on today.

Paul made three suggestions here, and they all were accomplished. He said to Barnabas, (1) "Let's travel," (2) "Let's visit friends where we've been before," and (3) "Let's see how they're doing." But none of these things happened as he thought they would when he spoke those words. And much more occurred than Paul ever intended.

We have something to offer

I want to give you some background before we look at this passage in detail. Paul and Barnabas were in Antioch, one of the three great cities of the book of Acts that served as jumping-off points for ministry elsewhere. Jerusalem and Ephesus were the other two.

In the eighteen years of history in Acts that took place before this conversation in 49 AD, most ministry was responsive rather than proactive. God would act, and believers would describe the actions of God. Opponents would challenge, and believers would explain their allegiance to Christ in the face of their enemies. Persecution would erupt, and believers would be scattered abroad. Most of the time believing people reacted to the

environment in which they found themselves.

At Pentecost, for example, the Spirit came upon the church with a rushing wind and tongues of fire, and Peter preached a sermon explaining to onlookers what was happening. The crippled man at the Beautiful Gate was healed in a dramatic miracle, and fascinated observers asked for an explanation. In chapter 10 there is an account of Peter's being required by the Lord, almost with his arm twisted behind his back, to go speak to Cornelius, a Roman centurion. These dramatic events all led to conversions.

But now, without either the heat of persecution or the miraculous intervention of God, two Christian brothers in ordinary conversation with each other said, "Why don't you and I go on a missionary road trip?" You see the beginning of Christian mission here: the conviction that ministry can be chosen without being forced or impelled forward by events. For that reason I think verse 36, though it is very simple and unremarkable on the face of it, is in fact critical to our understanding. "The Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost" (Luke 19:10). We can learn to be like him.

The context immediately preceding Acts 15:36 includes the Council of Jerusalem. This is one of the great theological conventions in church history. The apostles and elders met in Jerusalem in solemn council, and they decided that the Gentiles were part of the plan of God, and they did not need to become Jews in order to be saved. A letter was drafted and distributed by the apostles.

Paul and Barnabas, two old friends who had taught and traveled together, realized that the apostolic letter which had been sent to Syria also had application in Pamphylia, southern Galatia, and other places that they had been. Let's read on in 15:36-16:10:

Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

He came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was a Jewess and a believer, but whose father was a Greek. The brothers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. 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. As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey. So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.

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. 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.

When friends disagree

The second missionary journey began with an argument. A strong Greek word is used here, translated "sharp disagreement." These two old friends engaged in an angry shouting match---paroxusmos in Greek, from which we get our English word paroxysm. This was an out-of-control venting of real anger that took place between them.

Consider Paul and Barnabas and their history, because it will help us understand what was going on here. Barnabas was one of the most senior figures in the church at this stage. He had come to Christ very near the beginning of the history of the church when the Spirit descended upon believing people, on the day of Pentecost. We know that he was part of the first generation of those who believed in Acts 4. Throughout the

years that followed, Barnabas became a key figure. He was known for his obedience and humility of heart. His given name was Joseph; Barnabas, or Son of Encouragement, was his nickname. He was a man of stability. In Acts 11:24 he was called "a good man who was filled with the Holy Spirit." If I were to pick one word to describe Barnabas, it would be "depth." He was a man of deep conviction who had walked long with the Lord, who was unflappable in any circumstance.

Barnabas was one who could see good in other people when they couldn't see it in themselves anymore. Twice he had been used significantly to bring Paul (then known as Saul) into fellowship and service in the church. When Paul first came to Jerusalem in Acts 9, known by everyone there as a persecutor and violent destroyer of Christians, it was on Barnabas' authority that he was given access to fellowship in the church. It was Barnabas who brought Paul to Antioch as a teacher and church leader. Barnabas was patient enough to believe in good results that took a long time to achieve. God was at work, and Barnabas had unflappable confidence in God's sovereignty. He was a man who had depth of faith and overflowing encouragement.

Paul was different. He came late to the party. He started his Christian adventure by jailing Christians and enthusiastically cheering at their execution. Paul lived his whole life on fire. Everything he ever did, he did at a hundred miles an hour. When he hated Christ, he hated him vigorously. When he loved him, no one ever loved him more. He was a genius, perhaps the brightest human being who has ever lived. In his defense before Festus, Festus' response was, "Your enormous learning is driving you crazy!" (Acts 26:24). The word I would use to describe Paul, in contrast to the depth of Barnabas, is "passion." Everything mattered to Paul. There was never a moment to lose. Paul knew what it was like to be saved by grace, and he was determined that, having experienced such grace, he would never stop speaking of it.

With patience and passion, Barnabas and Paul made a marvelous team. They had already been sent out once together by the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:1-3). They went to Cyprus and Pamphylia, did battles with a sorcerer and angry mobs. Paul was stoned and left for dead. They were mistaken for gods. They traveled by sea and by land, and founded believing communities. Their complementary strengths in ministry served them well. Why then, as they contemplated a return trip, did they fall into angry disagreement?

This can be very instructive for us. Most of us have been either in or close to some awful disagreement between Christians, some painful inability to get along. This passage of Scripture can help us try to make sense of why God allows such things. The first question we might ask in trying to understand this is, who was right?

They disagreed over the cowardice of a young man, Barnabas' cousin John Mark. He had gone on the first trip with them. The travel was hard, the antagonism was severe, and John Mark decided he'd had enough of it. He bailed out on his friends, leaving them to continue on in ministry without him. Now they were about to go out again, and Barnabas characteristically said, "This young man can be saved. He has been a coward; but he won't be a coward forever. He has shortcomings and inadequacies, but that's exactly the kind God uses. God cares for this son of his. He's not a reject." We can imagine Barnabas reminding Paul, "Remember, you yourself were once rejected in your immaturity. You didn't get it right the first time."

Paul came back with all his passion and said, "Barnabas, don't you realize where we're going? I almost got killed last time. We're going into dangerous territory. The cause of Christ is at stake, and the gospel is the liberation of the world. This work is too important for us to spend our time baby-sitting a shaky young man, getting him over his personal traumas. The mission is what's important."

Who was right? Was the man important, or was the mission important? The rest of New Testament history declares them both to have been right in their analysis. Barnabas took John Mark and went to Cyprus, his home region. There John Mark could be disciplined into maturity. As events unfold, John Mark was the author of the gospel of Mark. He grew to be a stalwart servant of Christ. He was even someone whom Paul loved and counted on more at the end of his life (2 Timothy 4:11). Barnabas believed in the man, and Barnabas was right.

But Paul was also right. Where they were going, things were going to get very difficult, with jailings, beatings, earthquakes, rejections, threats, and misunderstandings. The team which would travel to Pamphylia

through Galatia, north and on to Macedonia, had to be able to endure hardship and suffering.

We realize that in the plan of God, two teams were supposed to leave Antioch. One accomplished the redemption of a man, the other the evangelization of a region. Silas was offered a chance to serve as Paul's comrade in ministry. Timothy, who would not have been chosen if John Mark had been the intern on the trip, got to join them as well.

The tragedy was the angry exchange. Neither Paul nor Barnabas could believe that the other had good motives or was following the leading of the Lord. Each of them saw the world from the perspective of their own calling, gifts, and outlook on life. Barnabas had a long, steady understanding that God often worked slowly in changing lives. Paul--fiery, passionate, and brilliant--saw that ministry was dangerous work. They were both right in their insights, but they couldn't offer a blessing to their brother. That's the sorrow.

Yet, God redeemed this failure. All three of these men ended up close friends. They re-established belief in one another and love for one another. And the mission went forward without a hitch.

Closed doors

Verse 10 of chapter 16 ends with a team of believers ready to cross the Aegean Sea from Troas to Macedonia, about to go where a vision of God called them. If God had wanted Paul to go to Macedonia from the first, why didn't this vision occur in Antioch? Why couldn't Paul have fallen asleep the night before the painful argument, had the vision, and hopped on a boat to Macedonia? That would have been much easier. Instead, he and Silas took a long journey, delivering the apostolic letter. Then they traveled three hundred miles from Iconium to Troas, getting doors slammed in their face. All of that was to get them to the point where the call could be finally confirmed in the miraculous night vision: "Come to Macedonia."

Why does God let us experience hard relationships, lack of success and closed doors? Why isn't it easier and more obvious to get where the Lord wants us to go? Why aren't relationships simple? Because God wants us mature in our faith. Faith grows when the Lord proves himself trustworthy amidst our failure and disappointment.

Dynamic relationships

I'd like to make a couple of points that grow out of this story. One of them is that relationships in the body of Christ are dynamic. I've wanted to control every relationship I've ever been in--does that sound familiar? If a relationship is bad, I want to fix it so it serves me. If the relationship is good, I want it to stay just the way it is and never change. But God doesn't intend relationships in the body of Christ to be static, predictable, or controlled by anyone. Paul and Barnabas were the greatest of friends, and yet the Lord intended them to split up.

On May 5 we're going to have a good-bye ceremony for Dorman Followwill. A lot of us wish that weren't happening. He is a gifted, talented, growing young pastor and Bible teacher who would have had a great future here at PBC. But God is taking him to South Carolina.

Recently I received a phone call from an old friend of mine, Jack Crabtree. After college he served on the staff of this church. Jack left here under difficult circumstances. The parting was painful; there were hard words expressed at a couple of points. The hard feelings were everybody's fault, but the division was God's responsibility. Jack was a servant of the Lord who was being sent to Oregon to do important work there. And the hard feelings were not the end of the story. Our phone conversation resulted in an invitation for Jack to meet with supporters and present a paper here at PBC in May. Hard feelings are in the past.

Christian relationships don't stay under anyone's control. There are times when we move apart, when our gifts call us to go to a certain place or think something or do something that others can't agree with. But by the grace of God, at the end of the story--I'm beginning to see this more and more--friendships are re-established. People who journey apart return with stories to tell that bring encouragement and glory to God. Anger, defensiveness, and inability to give fellow believers credit for good motives need to be repented of. But it is

good that relationships are dynamic. There's no avoiding it, God wants them that way.

The creative will of God

We can also observe that ministry strategies change. Paul said to Barnabas, "Let's retrace our steps, visit our friends, and take them the letter from Jerusalem." Paul's plan was to return to familiar people and places. God's plan was both different and greater in scope.

The will of God is not static. The plans of God are not repeated over and over again. He is always doing something new, creative, and different. And yet missionary adventures (including closed doors) can start with something as ordinary as two friends saying, "Hey, do you want to take a road trip? Should we go visit our friends?"

I'm in Christian ministry because a man named David Roper, who also once ministered here, invited me to meet with him for breakfast Wednesday mornings for six months during my junior year in college. I didn't know where I was going, what I wanted to do, or which end was up. It changed my life. A simple conversation, an ordinary offer. Neither he nor I, nor anybody else outside of heaven, had any idea where that was going to lead.

A lot of you know Verne and Mildred Crosby. They were faithful members of this church, who are now at PBC Cupertino. They used to open their home in Ladera to high school kids and Young Life leadership teams. That ministry began with a simple conversation, "What if we made our home available for people to use?" They weren't Bible teachers themselves, nor did they have an elaborate strategy for evangelism. What they had was a home, and they made it available. The result was that people were trained, lives were changed, and kids came to Christ.

I was thinking back last month when my wife and I celebrated our anniversary, how we decided to marry. We ended up married to each other because Verne and Mildred Crosby opened their home. In addition to youth ministry, the Crosby's hospitality provided a place for our friendship to develop into something deeper. So many developments of great significance start with a simple choice, made with a sense of what our gifts are, to take some kind of risk.

Brandon Griselle died a number of weeks before David Packard did. Brandon had a form of muscular dystrophy, and he lived to be just twenty-two years of age. He lived most of his life at Green Pastures, the home for handicapped children in Mountain View. He couldn't talk intelligibly, and he spent all of his life in a wheelchair. Like David Packard, Brandon's life and death created a longing for significance among those who knew him. People came from hundreds of miles away to be at Brandon's memorial service. They spoke of him: "There was something about Brandon---he understood life, he caught on to what is valuable. I wish I could be more like him." There were able-bodied people of every age leaving the room wishing that their life could amount to something as his had.

You don't have to be a billionaire who is immortalized around the world for your high-profile accomplishments. You can be a twenty-two-year-old poor person in a wheel chair, and somehow catch on to the same thing: that following the Lord, living the adventure is what makes us worthwhile, what makes a life have impact, what stirs hope in other people. Only life with God at the center is worth living.

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