**The Aftermath of a Special Delivery Letter**

(Acts 15:30-41)

By Pastor Ricky Kurth

One morning a lady received a special delivery letter, and after reading it she burst into tears. Just then her friend stopped by and asked why she was crying. She replied, “My nephew is a *freak.”* Her friend asked, “What makes you say that?” She said, “What else would you call a boy *with three feet?”* When her friend exclaimed, “Nobody has three feet!” she explained, “Well, I just got a letter from my sister saying, ‘Your nephew has grown another foot!”

Speaking of *letters,* here in Acts 15 the Jewish kingdom church in Jerusalem has written a letter to all the Gentiles that Paul had led to the Lord, telling them that they didn’t have to keep the law to be saved. And now, all that was left for the church to do was to dismissthe men who’d be delivering that letter, and send them on their way. That brings us to Acts 15:30,31, where we read:

**“So when they were dismissed, they came to Antioch: and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the epistle:**

**“Which when they had read, they rejoiced for the consolation.”**

Now first, you’ll notice that there was a *multitude* of new Gentile believers in Antioch. That means Paul’s gospel of salvation by grace *alone* was really taking off! And those new members of the Body of Christ *rejoiced* in the consolation of knowing that they didn’t have to keep the law. One of the dictionary definitions of the word “consolation” is *to relieve someone of suffering.* That’s also how Paul used it in II Corinthians 7:1, where he wrote:

**“...as ye are partakers of *the* *sufferings,* so shall ye be also of *the consolation”* (II Corinthians 1:7).**

Do you see how that verse agrees that “consolation” means to relieve someone of suffering?

I point that out to remind you of just how *disturbed* those new believers were when some men told them that they had to keep the law to be saved. In our last lesson we saw James say they were *troubled* by it. Here we see they were *suffering.*

Now if you find that hard to believe, it’s probably because you’re like me, and have never once doubted that you are saved by grace *alone.* But I hear from believers all the time who *do* have doubts about their salvation because somebody told *them* that they had to keep the law to be saved. And I can tell from what they tell me that they are suffering an awful lot of anguish and spiritual anxiety.

So I console them (that’s the verb form of the noun *consolation)* with the only thing that *can* console them, the Bible study principle of *“rightly dividing the word of truth”* (II Tim. 2:15). You see, before Paul was made an apostle, Gentiles *did* have to keep the law to be saved. It was Paul who broke the news that God had started a whole new dispensation of salvation by grace *alone.* And once those suffering believers I hear from learn that Paul—the *apostle* of grace—is *their* apostle, they do what these believers did in Antioch and *rejoice in the consolation.*

But now, after you have convinced a believer that he’s not under the law, you have to *exhort* him not to think of grace as a license to sin. And that’s what the men who delivered this letter went on to do as we continue in our text:

**“And Judas and Silas, being prophets also themselves, exhorted the brethren with many words, and confirmed them” (Acts 15:32).**

Now Judas and Silas were the Jewish kingdom saints that the church in Jerusalem sent with Paul to deliver this special delivery letter to the Gentiles. And they did what we saw James do in our last study. They exhorted those Gentiles saying, “You might be under grace and not law, but don’t be running around committing sins like fornication. Grace is *not* a license to sin!” I can’t prove that that’s *how* they exhorted them, but it would surely follow the example of how James just finished doing it.

But when it says they also *confirmed* those Gentiles, we have to ask how kingdom saints *could* confirm members of the Body of Christ if all they knew was the Old Testament Scriptures. But that question points up an important truth, and that is that members of the Body *need* to be established in the Old Testament. Paul *quotes* the Old Testament at least 131 times! Do you think maybe you’d be able to understand what he’s talking about better if you’re already familiar with the verses he’s quoting to make his point? Sure! So don’t be neglecting the Old Testament in your personal Bible study like a lot of grace believers do.

But now, the church in Antioch here knew that Judas and Silas had lives that they needed to get back to, so we’re told,

**“And after they had tarried there a space, they were let go in peace from the brethren unto the apostles.**

**“Notwithstanding it pleased Silas to abide there still” (Acts 15:33,34).**

We’re not told why Silas decided to stay at the church in Antioch. Maybe he *didn’t* have much of a life he needed to get back to in Jerusalem. Or maybe he did, but he just decided to put his own life aside and stay and serve the Lord in Antioch. That’s the same spirit that missionary Joe Watkins showed when he left his good-paying job in the 1950’s to go to the Philippines with Vernon Anderson and start all those grace churches. If he hadn’t put his own life aside to serve the Lord, we wouldn’t have one lady in my church who grew up in one of those churches, nor her daughter and two other members of her family. I point that out to say that Joe’s work half a world away was not only a blessing to Filipinos, it became a blessing to Joe’s nation as well. Putting your life aside to serve the Lord when you have to is costly, but God can bless and use it mightily.

But now Silas had some help in confirming those new Gentile saints. Acts 15:35 says,

**“Paul also and Barnabas continued in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.”**

Now Barnabas was *also* a kingdom saint, so he kept doing what Judas and Silas were doing, confirming those grace believers with Old Testament truth. But Paul confirmed them with his *new* truth of grace.

But as I’m sure I don’t have to tell you, leaders like Paul and Barnabas sometimes have *disagreements.* And as we read on in our text, we’re about to see a disagreement here that was a real doozy. The story begins in verses 36,37:

**“And some days after Paul said unto Barnabas, Let us go again and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they do.**

**“And Barnabas determined to take with them John, whose surname was Mark.”**

It’s easy to understand why Barnabas wanted to take Mark along on this apostolic trip. After all, he’d already gone with them on an *earlier* trip, as we saw when we studied Acts 13:2,5, where we learned,

**“Barnabas and Saul...preached the word of God in the synagogues...*and they had also John to their minister.”***

John Mark traveled with Paul and Barnabas on Paul’s *first* apostolic journey as their manservant, their *gopher* as we’d call it today. Whenever they needed anything, he’d “go for” this and “go for” that. I mean, while Paul and Barnabas were ministering to the *spiritual* needs of the people, *somebody* had to go get it when they ordered takeout.

But if you know the story here, you know that Paul had other ideas when it came to who they should take with them on thistrip.

**“But Paul thought not good to take him with them, who departed from them from Pamphylia, and went not with them to the work” (Acts 15:38).**

Now what he’s talking about there is what happened *later* on that first apostolic journey when John Mark pooped out on them in Acts 13:13. As Luke went on to explain,

**“...when Paul and his company loosed from Paphos, they came to Perga in Pamphylia: *and John departing from them returned to Jerusalem.”***

When we studied that passage, we saw John was a *young* man at that time who seemed to come from a wealthy family. That means he had probably lived a pretty pampered life. So when the going got tough, he decided to go back home, where his daddy’s servants would pick up *his* takeout!

So why would Barnabas want to take him along in *another* trip if he pooped out on them during the first one? Well, look how the Bible *describes* Mark in Colossians 4:10, where it calls him

**“...Marcus, *sister's son to Barnabas...”***

John Mark was Barnabas’s *nephew—*presumably the two-legged variety, not the three-legged kind we read about in our opening story! But that means that while Paul probably had nothing to do with mark after he left them in the lurch, Barnabas doubtless kept in touch with Mark because he was family.

But I doubt Barnabas wanted to take Mark along on this trip just to keep peace with his sister. I think it was rather due to the fact that he was *around* Mark a lot, and was probably seeing signs that the young man was *spiritually maturing.* If Usher’s dates are to be trusted, it was *seven years* since John Mark had run home to momma. That’s plenty of time for a boy to become a man, and Barnabas had no doubt witnessed that transformation.

But no matter what their reasons, Paul and Barnabas didn’t see eye to eye on this matter and, as it says in the next verse in Acts 15,

**“And the contention was so sharp between them, that they departed asunder one from the other: and so Barnabas took Mark, and sailed unto Cyprus” (Acts 15:39).**

Now you would think that after all that these two men had been through together that somehow they’d be able to come to an agreement over something as simple as to who’s going to come along on their trip to make the coffee in the morning. But what we’re seeing here is proof that there had been *a dispensational change* since Pentecost. We read of those saints,

**“These all continued *with one accord....*they were *all* with one accord*....*continuing *daily* with one accord....*they lifted up their voice to God* with one accord....and they were all with one accord *in Solomon's porch”* (Acts 1:14; 2:1,46; 4:24; 5:12).**

Now living in one accord didn’t mean they were all sleeping in their Honda, as the old joke goes. It means they *didn’t have* sharp contentions like this one!

And you know why! Acts 2:4 says,

**“...they were all *filled with the Holy Ghost,* and began to speak with other tongues...”**

They didn’t have sharp contentions because they were filled with the Spirit in a way that we’re *not* filled with Him. That’s why we can’t get along like they did. It’s also why we can’t speak in tongues like they could, despite a lot of very sincere brethren who think they can.

The bottom line is, good men of God are going to disagree in the dispensation of grace, even *titans of the faith* like Paul and Barnabas. If you haven’t noticed that in the leadership in the grace movement, you just haven’t been around long enough!

So, who was right? The Bible doesn’t tell us. And the *reason* it doesn’t tell us is that *there was no right answer.* Both men had Scriptures they could have cited to back up their positions. Paul was no doubt thinking of Proverbs 25:19, where Solomon wrote,

**“Confidence in an unfaithful man in time of trouble *is like a broken tooth, and a foot out of joint”***

You can’t depend on a broken *tooth* to do any *chewing,* and you can’t depend on a broken *foot* to do any *walking.* And Paul thought they couldn’t depend on Mark to do any gophering, because he’d been an unfaithful gopher in the past.

Now here I should point out that it’s not like Paul thought he was *above* getting his own coffee in the morning, and gathering his own wood for the campfire at night. But if he and Barnabas had to run all the errands, it would take them away from the ministry, and they had to avoid that at all costs.

I personally think Paul was *also* thinking of something that the Lord said in Luke 16:10, a New Testament book that had already been written at that time:

**“He that is faithful in that which is least *is faithful also in much:* and he that is unjust in the least *is unjust also in much.”***

I think Paul may have been thinking of that verse as well, or at least of the principle it presents. You see, another reason he wanted a gopher was that he gave men responsibilities to see if they could be trusted with *more* responsibilities. And since Mark had already proved himself unfaithful in little, Paul wanted to give some *other* manservant a chance to serve him in little, to see if *he* could be trusted with more responsibility.

But Paul wasn’t the only one with Scripture to back up his position. Barnabas was thinking of all the verses that describe God as a God *of second chances.* If you don’t believe that He is, just ask Jonah! When God asked him to go preach to a city of Gentiles, he put God on the pay-no-mind list and boarded a ship going in the opposite direction. So God gave him a little attitude adjustment by having a whale swallow him for three days, then burphim up on shore—*and gave him a second chance!*

Then there’s the Apostle Peter, who denied the Lord *three times,* and God gave him a second chance too. And I don’t know about you, but sometimes when *I’ve* been unfaithful, He’s given me a *third, fourth and fifth* chance.

So Barnabas had Scripture on his side as well. But good men sometimes disagree about the Scriptures, as I’ve seen over and over in the 52 years of my Christian life, and you’ve probably seen it as well.

And when they do, sometimes even titans of the faith *today* do what Paul and Barnabas did, and part company and go their separate ways. That explains why there are *splits* in the grace movement.

And I know that everyone thinks that that’s a bad thing, but I personally believe God works better with a lot of *little* ministries than He does with *one great big one.* You know, Dr. Scofield has a note on this verse saying that after Barnabas left Paul, he was heard of no more in the Bible story, and that’s true. But that doesn’t mean God stopped using Barnabas and blessing his ministry. The Book of Acts focuses on Paul and his ministry for the duration of the book for dispensational reasons, but I’m sure God kept using Barnabas—just as God continues to use the various factions who have departed from one another in the grace movement.

But now, you’ll notice in verse 39 there that Barnabas took Mark to the island of Cyprus—and I bet I know why! You see, Cyprus is where Barnabas was born and raised, as we saw when we considered Acts 4:36 earlier in our studies, where it speaks of him as

**“Joses, who by the apostles was surnamed Barnabas...*of the country of Cyprus...”***

Now that means that Barnabas didn’t go out on a *preaching* tour with Mark. He knew that was Paul’s job, as per the terms of the covenant he saw Paul make with the leadership of the kingdom church in Galatians 2:9. Instead, I think Barnabas took Mark home *to teach him how to be faithful.* How do you teach faithfulness? By teaching *the Word of God,* and pointing out all the great examples of faithful men like Abraham found in the Scriptures. And I bet it was Uncle Barney’s faith in Mark that turned the boy around—as we’ll see he *did* do later in this study.

You know, if *you* know someone who has been unfaithful to the Lord, why not have a little faith in him and give him a second chance? It just might make an eternal difference in his life, and in the lives of all the people his life touches over the many years to come.

Do you know what *else* helped turn Mark around? I think it helped when Paul *shunned* him! I can’t prove that he did, but I know that *he* knew that shunning a man is one of the things God can use to bring him back to the Lord, for Paul told the Corinthians:

**“...there is fornication among you....*put away from among yourselves that wicked person”* (I Corinthians 5:1,13).**

Paul told them to put that fornicator out of the assembly until he turned *his* life around and stopped living in open sin. And we know that shunning him worked, because Paul had to write them again and say,

**“Sufficient to such a man is this punishment... So that contrariwise ye ought rather to *forgive* him, and *comfort* him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with over-much sorrow....*confirm your love toward him”* (II Corinthians 2:6-8).**

After they put that man out of the assembly, he repented, and they wouldn’t let him back in! That’s human nature for you!

But that proves that shunning him *worked.* And I believe it worked with Mark as well. If I’m right, that would mean that God was able to use the convictions of both Paul *and* Barnabas to bring Mark around, even though their positions were diametrically opposed. That’s how great a God we serve!

But for awhile, the word on the street was to not invite Paul and Barnabas to the same party—especially if Mark was on the guest list as well! But that didn’t mean Paul ever lost his respect for Barnabas. Look what he said about Barnabas in I Corinthians 9:6,7,11,12:

***“I...and Barnabas,* have not we power to forbear working? Who goeth a warfare any time at his own charges? ....If we have sown unto you *spiritual* things,is it a great thing if we shall reap your *carnal* things? If others be partakers of this power over you, are not *we* rather?”**

Paul was giving the Corinthians grief in that passage for not paying their ministers. He argued that soldiers don’t have to pay their own expenses when they go off to war, and ministers shouldn’t be made to pay their own expenses when they engaged in *spiritual* warfare. But you can see from what Paul wrote there that he still thought Barnabas was a man of God who was worthy of support from the people of God.

So Paul may have disagreed with Barnabas, but he never lost his respect for him. That’s something that a lot of grace believers and pastors should keep in mind when they find it necessary to part ways from one another in our own day. If we claim to be Pauline, we need to learn to be Pauline in every area of our lives and ministry.

We know that eventually Mark got it together, for Paul told the Colossians,

***“Marcus,* sister's son to Barnabas...if he come unto you, *receive him...”* (Colossians 4:10).**

That tells you that Mark must have proved himself to Paul sometime down the road. And we know that Paul not only advised *others* to receive Mark, he himself received the young man as well. That explains why Paul closed his epistle to Philemon by saying,

**“...salute...*Marcus*...Lucas...*my fellowlabourers”* (Philemon 1:23,24).**

Look who finally gave Mark a second chance to work with him in the ministry—the apostle Paul! That didn’t make him wrong to not want to work with the young man earlier. It just means he was not too pig-headed to *keep on* excluding the man once he proved himself faithful.

We know that Mark must have made the most of his second chance, for Paul told Timothy:

**“Take Mark, and bring him with thee: *for he is profitable to me for the ministry”* (II Timothy 4:11).**

Mark went from being *a broken tooth* in Paul’s eyes to being *a fellow worker.* He went from Paul thinking he was good for nothing to thinking he was *good for the ministry.*

And we know it wasn’t just *Paul* who gave Mark a second chance, and accepted him back into the ministry, it was also *God Himself.* I mean, think about it. God let Mark write *a book of the Bible—*as in Matthew, *Mark,* Luke and John.

Do you know what that means? It means no matter how unfaithful to the Lord you’ve been in the past, God is waiting for you to return to Him with open arms—and we should be as well, if we want to be like God. And we certainly should, for that’s the very definition of the word “godly.” It means *God-like!*

By the way, what do we know about the Book of Mark? That is, how is it different from Matthew, Luke and John? Well, Matthew presents Christ as the perfect *king,* while Luke presents Him as the perfect *man.* John presents the Lord as the perfect *God,* as opposed to all the *false* gods in the Bible. But Mark presents Christ as the perfect *servant.*

That’s right. God picked the man who had been an *unfaithful* servant to write a book about a *faithful* servant, the *perfect* servant, the Lord Jesus Christ. That means God is not only waiting to take you back if you’ve been unfaithful, He’s *also* able to use what you *learned* while you were unfaithful to Him—if you’ll just come back to Him like Mark did.

Ya know, things *also* worked out pretty well for Silas, as we see in the last two verses of our text:

**“And Paul chose Silas, and departed, being recommended by the brethren unto the grace of God.**

**“And he went through Syria and Cilicia, confirming the churches” (Acts 15:40,41).**

Back in Acts 13, the brethren in the church at Antioch recommended Paul to go forth preaching the gospel of the grace of God, and now Silas was going with him instead of Barnabas.

But don’t forget, Paul picked Silas to go with him instead of *Gopher Mark.* Doesn’t that suggest that Silas was going with Paul as his *new* gopher? Now, having said that, Silas *might* have done *some* teaching of the Old Testament while traveling with Paul, to help in the much-needed work of establishing grace believers in kingdom truth. But if he did, the Bible never says so, and that omission is significant when it comes to understanding how the kingdom saints helped Paul in his ministry.

Now if it bothers you that Paul had a man who verse 32 called a *prophet* as his gopher, *it shouldn’t.* Remember, Paul also had an apostle named Luke as his personal physician! Luke’s another guy who wrote a book of the Bible, but was willing to take a lesser position in the work of the Lord after God shut down the kingdom program in which he was an apostle. These men are good examples of that old saying that says, “You can’t be too *small* for God to use you, *but you can be too big—*too big in your own eyes, that is.

But now, think about where Paul took Silas! He took him to visit the churches *that he and Barnabas founded!* Can you say *“awkward”?* Sure, I knew you could, as Mr. Rogers used to say.

If you’re not sure what I mean by that, do you remember the folk singing duo of Simon and Garfunkel? When Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel split up, Paul Simon began touring alone. And I remember reading way back then that wherever he went, he heard calls of “Where’s Arty?” Their fans just couldn’t understand how these two men who had brought them so much joy and entertainment over the years couldn’t reconcile whatever differences they had to continue to produce their music.

Do you think maybe when *the Apostle Paul* started touring alone that he heard cries of, “Where’s Barney?” Sure! But when he did, it gave him the chance to explain how things had changed since Pentecost, and now even spiritual leaders were sometimes going to disagree.

You know, if you were thankful when I talked about how God is waiting with open arms to give you a second chance to serve Him, may I ask if you are thankful enough to give a second chance to someone who has wronged *you?* I ask because, if you are, that will put you in a position to give good advice to others who have been wronged—like the advice Paul gave Philemon.

If you remember the story, Philemon’s slave Onesimus had run away, and bumped into Paul and got saved. By law, Paul had to send him *back* to his master. Not *Hebrew* law. Hebrew law said *not* to send a slave back to his master. But Paul was not under law, he was under grace. It was *Roman* law that said slaves must be returned to their masters, and Paul obeyed the laws of the government under which he lived, as all Christians should.

But in this case, he knew that masters had the right to *punish* their servants for running away, so Paul sent him back with a letter that said,

***“I beseech thee for my son Onesimus,* whom I have begotten in my bonds: Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now *profitable* to thee...” (Philemon 1:10,11).**

Hey, wasn’t *Mark* once unprofitable *to Paul,* when he left him holding the bag on that first apostolic journey? But didn’t we just read Paul say that Mark was now *profitable* to him for the ministry? So now, due to his own personal spiritual experience, he was able to tell *Philemon* to give Onesimus a second chance as well.

Don’t miss the point here. The point is, the only way Paul was able to *give* him that sound advice was that *he himself* had learned to give an unprofitable servant a second chance! So if you want to become one of the Lord’s counselors, if you want to be someone God can use to give good advice like that, you first have to be willing to *take it.* That’s the only way you’re ever going to be effective as a spiritual counselor.

Finally, look what Paul said *later* about Onesimus in verses 15 and 16 of Paul’s epistle to Philemon:

**“...perhaps he therefore departed for a season, *that thou shouldest receive him for ever;* Not now as a servant, but *above* a servant, *a brother beloved...”***

Paul said, as it were, “Maybe the reason he ran away in the first place was so that he could get saved and return to you forever.”

And I’ll tell you what. If you’ll start looking at every bad thing that happens to you in life that way—as something God can make into something *better* than what you had before—that will make your life a whole lot more enjoyable.