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God's Sovereign Work in Conflict

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Acts 15:1-2, 36-40 (ESV)

But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.

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." 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 But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work.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.

When I was younger, something happened that marked me deeply and continues to mark my whole life to this day. During my high school years, I was at one point visiting a pastor, and as we chatted, he went to his bookshelf and pulled off a cassette tape series on the life of Joseph and handed it to me as a gift.

Now, during that time, I would often do some cultivating in the field with my father's tractor, and I had a Sony Walkman that played a cassette tape and went into earphones in my ears, and I listened to this series. It was called From Pit to Pinnacle, a story about Joseph from Genesis in the Bible. And somehow, as I listened to that series, God started to shape my worldview around His sovereignty and His ability to work good, even in great tragedy and heartache and pain and suffering.

And that worldview has never left me. The Scriptures—the book of Genesis, the story of Joseph—was impressed on my heart and mind so deeply as a young person that it has helped me process everything that has ever happened to me in life under the sovereign rule of Almighty God.

Joseph was mistreated deeply by his brothers. There was great conflict and tension between them and between him. They sold him into slavery, and he was carted off to a different land. And there he was,

falsely accused and put in prison. And for many years, God worked out a plan that was for great good for many people.

And I've never forgotten God's power and ability to do that and how He is working that in the world for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.

As we study the book of Acts, we find tensions arising—pains and hurts and heartaches, heartache, sufferings, and persecutions. But under all of this, just like in our world today, God is sovereignly working out a plan for your life and for mine. And when we love Him and respond to the call for His purpose in our life, He promises to be working in all things to bring about things for His glory and for our good.

And we see that today in these tensions that arise in Paul and Barnabas' lives as they're traveling and sharing the good news of Jesus, responding to His call in their life. And we read earlier that certain people came down from Judea when they were in Antioch, and they were teaching the believers, "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved."

But in the new covenant, this had changed. And so this brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So after some debate, Paul and Barnabas and some others were appointed, along with other believers, to go down to Jerusalem—there, south of Antioch—to see the apostles and elders about this question.

I want to just encourage you today: if you're facing tensions, disputes with someone, there are some things that God often works in His sovereignty that are good for us in the middle of conflict and debate and tension.

We see very clearly here that God can help us find better wisdom, better answers for the challenges that we face. If we face our tensions in a God-honoring way, He really can.

What happened here with these people was, as they disputed a little, they decided to go seek counsel. And it was King Solomon who said, "There is wisdom in many counselors." So they sent Paul and Barnabas and others from their side to Jerusalem, and they listened to what was talked about in Jerusalem.

And Peter gave some great instruction in Jerusalem, and so did a few others. And so a letter was formulated—a letter of insight and wisdom and conviction about how to handle these things between the Jews and the Gentiles, as God worked in all people's hearts, drawing them to Jesus.

What happened in this tension was greater wisdom, greater confidence, greater insight was given to these people as they sought the Lord. And then they were freed up to focus on other things and not get tripped up by this same conflict.

I can tell you that early on in my wife and I's marriage—I'm married to a lady named Chris, beautiful lady—but we had tensions. We would come to what you might call "pinch points" in our relationship,

and we didn't always know how to work these tensions through. But God, in His grace, helped us seek counsel.

We encountered a marriage retreat weekend that taught us different ways of communicating and handling conflict and hearing each other out and validating what we hear and then also sharing each other's sides of the story back and forth. And as we grew in our ability to do this—in our wisdom in handling conflict—it has helped us over the years.

We've needed that. We're created so differently. Our personalities are so different. But those tensions have helped Chris and I grow wiser in how we talk about hard things and tough things.

And not only that, it has helped us then share these skills with other couples through premarital counseling and crisis counseling. God, in His wisdom, has used the tensions that have existed between Chris and I to give us more wisdom, to grow us, so that we could help others.

And we see that here in this text. Not only do challenges faced in a God-honoring way open up the doorway for more insight and wisdom from God, but they can also then work to expand His will and His ways in the world around us—expand His kingdom.

And that's what happened here with Paul and Barnabas. They came to another tension a little bit later. The text says this in the same chapter, Acts 15, starting with verse 36:

“Sometime later, Paul and Barnabas agreed together: ‘Let us go back and visit the believers 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 in the work with them.”

They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. And here's how it expanded:

“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 through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.”

Not only were there new people recruited to share the news, but they went different directions and covered more ground because of this dispute. They handled it in a God-honoring way. They didn't let bitterness take root. They agreed to disagree. Each picked a different partner and went on their ways—different directions—and the Lord could use them more because of this tension.

This is hard to do, friends, but if we handle conflict in a way that honors God, we can often grow in wisdom and insight, and we can accomplish more.

I want to ask you today, when you look back, have you ever moved on in some area of your life because of a tension that broke out? Or maybe you're feeling that right now—that you're in a disagreement, a misalignment with a place you're working, a place you're serving—and God is either asking you to seek Him for wisdom and insight, or maybe He's asking you to move on.

I can look back at major career pathway changes in my life's journey, and I can say without exception that as some sort of tensions grew, or a little disharmony grew, and I sought the Lord—by His grace—He eventually used tensions and a little disagreement to move me on to the next stage of my journey with Him. And I can say, without exception, looking back, God has used all of that for the expansion of His work—for good, for me and my family and others, and most importantly, for His glory and the expansion of His kingdom.

I can just give Him praise right now for the way He works in tensions, in conflict and disagreement and disunity and disharmony. This is the miracle of the sovereign, good God that we serve. Not only does He pour out wisdom to those who ask Him in the midst of tension and conflict, but He can use all of these things for our good and for His glory.

And that leads us to the third point—the expansion of His kingdom that God can, in His sovereignty, use. And this is a deeper part of this work: not only to give us wisdom and insight and to expand His kingdom, but to bring about the glorious image of His Son into our hearts—to shape us and mold us into His image.

That is the context of God's sovereign work for good and His promise to do that. In Romans 8:28, it says this: Around that verse, “The Spirit helps us in our weakness, and when we do not know what we ought to pray, the Spirit Himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.”

Have you ever been at this point, friends, where you're just at that tension and you're unsure what to do next in life, and you're just crying out to God, and you don't know exactly what to say, but you sense the Spirit drawing you to Him to pray? And it's like wordless groans. And He searches our hearts, and He knows the mind of the Spirit, and He wants to bring it to us.

And it says this: “Then we know that in all these things, God is working for the good of those who love Him and have been called according to His purpose.” There's no pain, there's no hurt, there's no tension, there's no heartache that God cannot use for good if we'll be moldable before and be pliable before Him.

And then it says this: “For those God foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son.” The promise of God working for good is just that. He will use tensions, disagreements, heartaches—if we'll walk with Him—to shape and mold us into the image of His Son, so that Jesus Himself might be the firstborn among many of us as brothers and sisters of Him in the world.

You see this now in the sovereignty of God. God can work and is working, striving to bring about good for all who are responding to His call—called according to His good purpose. And in doing this, He can expand His kingdom through the tensions of this world. He can pour out His wisdom to us. We can grow in maturity, and we can even have our whole being—our whole soul—be shaped more into the glorious image of His Son, so we can join Him in His likeness as a part of His family, more fully in harmony and fellowship with Him and His Spirit for all eternity.

O friends, when you study the life of Joseph, you see that God has the power to do this in any situation.

And He—quite frankly, I can just say this very clearly—wants to do it in your life and in my life.

So I just ask you today: what kinds of tensions are you facing? Kinds of disharmony in your own heart and spirit? What kinds of disunity with the people around you? Are you laying them before God? Are you inviting Him to give you wisdom and insight on how to navigate those circumstances?

Are you looking for opportunities—with appropriate boundaries in your life—to respond to God in different ways and different callings? Because maybe He's using that tension to move you on. And are you letting Him shape and mold you? Or are you getting bitter and hardhearted, looking outward instead of inward?

Jesus said this in Matthew chapter 7: when we're in tensions, we have a propensity to blame others, to point fingers. But when we point a finger somewhere else, there's always a few pointing back at us.

And Jesus said, pay attention to those fingers. He said it this way: “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s or sister’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own? How can you say to your brother or sister, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ and the tension or disagreement that you're having, when all the time there's a plank in your own eye?”

And He said this in a harsh way. He said, “You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.”

If we're having great disagreements with people, friends, God wants us to be very self-reflective and say, “Hey, in what ways am I being selfish? What wisdom is God wanting to share with me? Is He wanting to redirect my life in some way, or does He want me to grow in my maturity in how I handle this?”

And in all these things, friends, God Himself can work for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.

Are you mindful of God's sovereignty today? God rules the entire earth, friends, and He puts the stars in place, and He knows everything that's happening everywhere. But He can also be involved in the intricate details—tales—of our lives.

And I want you to hear this today: He knows your tensions. He knows your hurts. He knows your heartaches. And if you will bring them to Him—cast all of this, Peter wrote, upon Him—because He cares for you.

And if you are facing trouble and hardship, if you seek God and ask Him for wisdom, He will give you wisdom. And He may just be bringing you into a whole new chapter in your life through this time.

Friends, I just want to remind you today that God specializes in taking the hurts and the heartaches and the pains and the sufferings of this world and bringing about good—bringing beauty out of ashes.

This is His specialty. And friend, if we draw near to Him and let Him carry us along over time, He can work out His miraculous ways in our lives.

Let's pray together.

Father, today we thank You for Your Word, which we believe teaches us without error what to believe and how to live. And clearly, as we read Your Word, we see that You sovereignly rule in the world and that You can use every circumstance, every tension, every pain to shape us and mold us and bring us more into the image of Your Son.

And as we walk with You, You can expand Your kingdom through tensions that come, and You can use it miraculously to bring about more glory for Yourself and grow us in wisdom and understanding and insight. And as all of this happens, we can start to walk more freely and more fully with You by the strength of Your Spirit.

So God, give us insight to do these things. Minister to us in this reality. Help us understand this worldview of what You've taught us about in Your Word.

We give You praise. We give You thanks. We honor You. We love You, Lord.

We pray this in Jesus' name.

Amen.