



VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH
SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

UNSTOPPABLE: God's Work in the World

The School of Hard Knocks – Acts 15:36–16:10

Tim Badal | October 21, 2018



We're in a series we've called "Unstoppable," looking at the book of Acts. We've been in this book for a long time. Last year we looked at the first half of Acts, under the title "Unfinished," knowing God's work in this world is unfinished. He calls every generation, including ours today, to carry the work forward until Christ returns to take us home.

A few weeks ago, we began the second part of our journey through Acts. We're seeing there that no matter what the world or the devil threw at the mission of Christ and His church, nothing would stand in their way. We'll see that over and over again, as different obstacles came to hinder the Christians who were faithfully serving the Lord. We too can have confidence that our most humble attempts to serve and honor God will yield great results, because the work of the gospel we're carrying forward—both as we live it ourselves and as we share it with the world—is still unstoppable.

Last week we read about a powerful attempt to stop the gospel. The obstacles that arose in Acts 15 seemed to challenge the church's progress. We read about the dissension and disunity that resulted from two different viewpoints on the gospel. Two groups were advancing views that were not compatible regarding how one could experience salvation through Christ Jesus. The church leaders wisely decided to convene a Council in Jerusalem to discuss this problem. They arrived at a great compromise, which resulted in the church being edified and unified, so the gospel could continue to advance. Through the leading of the Spirit, they rose above the challenge they faced. We have benefited today from the unity they reached regarding how we are to serve, honor and know God as our Lord and Savior.

Today we'll find yet more obstacles and will see if once again the church can continue to be unstoppable in their mission. We'll start in Acts 15:26 and go through Acts 16:10. In this text we'll learn about three different situations where God used difficulty to mature His people. We'll see the spotlight now turned on Paul, where it will generally stay until the end of Acts.

I've been a part of what I would describe as two callings, or two careers, in my life. If you've been around here for some time, you know I wear two hats: one of a caterer and one as a pastor. When I was 18, I wasn't thinking of either of these. I thought I was going to college to learn to be a history teacher. But God had different plans for me. In the span of seven years I didn't just find one career, but two. By the time I was 25, ministry was on my plate and the catering was going full steam ahead as well. Yet in neither of those callings do I have any formal education. I've taken different classes at different times relating to both fields, but I've never finished my education like many of you have in your area of expertise.

However, in order to do anything well, a person has to have a working knowledge of that field. Since I didn't go to a university, where did I get my training? I tell people all the time that I went to the School of Hard Knocks. This school is like any other school, if you think about it—it's expensive, it's time-consuming and you have to pull all-nighters. Even though you don't get a diploma, you do get to meet new people and have some fun along the way. But the biggest difference between a normal university and the School of Hard Knocks is there are no tests, no case studies. After a lot of bumps and bruises, you learn to say, "I'm not going to do that the same way next time." Everything is happening in real time and real life—you do a lot of failing before you succeed.

Would you concur with that? Even though the School of Hard Knocks is difficult, it's a great school, because it teaches you lessons you will never forget.

In Acts 15 we see Paul and his friends enrolled in this school—not only from a ministry standpoint, but from a real-life standpoint. One of the great truths about this school is that you can get through it a little more quickly if you audit classes. In other words, we can sometimes watch from the sidelines as other people go through the classes themselves. So rather than having to learn some of these lessons ourselves, let's look at what Paul and the other disciples went through so we can apply their lessons to our own lives. I'm going to look at three specific lessons, three "classes," that were part of the School of Hard Knocks for these early believers. I'll spend the most time on the first lesson, which has to do with conflict. The second lesson has to do with partnering with the right people. Then finally, we'll go quickly through a third lesson as well.

As I begin to read the first part of our text today, we need to be careful not to sanitize or glorify these people beyond what they really were. In fact, Luke makes it clear that these were ordinary people who struggled with dysfunctions and issues much like our own. We sometimes elevate them to a level above us, which means we also separate ourselves from what they do. "Surely because they're so great," we think, "that's why they could accomplish all that the Scripture records." We don't think we're expected to do any of the things they did or to take those steps of faith. But what we see here is a picture of a man who is really wrestling with what it means to be a Christian in the real world. Yes, Paul had seen and done great things for God already, but like us, he still had struggles with people. He also needed others around him to help him, and at times he had no idea what the next steps were that God had for him. That sounds like many of us today. As great as Paul was, he was still a man just like us.

Conflict at times is unavoidable.

Our first lesson is that conflict is sometimes unavoidable. Let's begin reading with Acts 15:36: *"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.'"* Notice that it starts with *"After some days..."* Well, what days? These were the days when Paul and Barnabas had gone to Antioch, after which they had gone to Jerusalem for the Council as we learned about last week. Now they had come back to the church in Antioch to report on the consensus of the Jerusalem Council.

Sometime after that, Paul decided it would be a good idea to retrace their previous missionary journey to the churches they had been part of earlier, sort of a "reunion tour." He wanted to check on the infant Christians in those churches to be sure they were growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. He asked Barnabas to go with him on this second missionary journey.

What do we know about Paul and Barnabas? They had been friends for a very long time. They had been ministry partners. People spoke of them as a team. They were the dynamic duo sent out by the Antioch church. Their lives had become very interwoven. But remember, Paul was a relatively new Christian. He had been Saul, the persecutor of the church, until he met Jesus face to face on the road to Damascus in Acts 9. Instead of continuing to destroy the church, he came to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. He was blinded by the vision he saw, but his sight was restored shortly after that and he immediately began to preach the gospel. Because Saul of Tarsus was once persecuting them, it was obviously a challenge for the people to accept that he could now be trusted. It would be like having the guy who was beating you up in the parking lot then step into the pulpit to preach to you. A lot of people wondered if Saul had really changed. Some of them had had friends or family members imprisoned or even killed because of him. This transition was even difficult for the apostles Peter, James, and John. Accepting Saul as one of them was more than they could manage.

Enter Barnabas. Barnabas believed in Saul's conversion. He believed God was able to authentically change him. So, Barnabas brought Saul to the church leadership and gave them his personal commendation, vouching that Saul actually loved and honored God. "Yes, Saul had a checkered past—but don't we all, before Christ? Yes, he was a persecutor of the church, but now he's only going to preach and proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ."

In many ways, Barnabas was Paul's mentor. As often happens with mentees, when the student is fully taught, he becomes like his teacher. In many ways, in fact, Paul became even greater than Barnabas because of his unique gifting and calling. A team that started as "Barnabas and Paul" eventually became "Paul and Barnabas." And finally, we read "Paul and his associates," as Barnabas falls back into the shadow of his former student. You might think this would result in conflict or at least some tension. But everything was going well. Barnabas was known as the great encourager. He loved Paul and he loved the Lord. He was willing to play second fiddle to a great man.

As we pick up the story, they were getting ready to head out on this second journey to preach to the communities where they had already been.

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." ³⁷ Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. ³⁸ 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. ³⁹ And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, ⁴⁰ but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. ⁴¹ And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Paul and Barnabas agreed on the mission. They wanted to revisit the church where they had been. The problem wasn't the program; the problem was the participants. It was a people issue—not between Paul and Barnabas, but between Paul and John Mark.

If you remember back in Acts 13, Paul, Barnabas, and John Mark had gone to Cyprus, then planned to go into Asia Minor. But somewhere along the way, John Mark—who was Barnabas' young cousin—decided he didn't want to go along. We talked about the various speculations regarding why he didn't want to go. It could have been the recent episode with the false prophet Bar-Jesus, whom Paul had struck blind. Maybe John Mark didn't want to be around someone who had that kind of power. Or it could have been that he was jealous of Paul's relationship with the cousin whom he was close to. Another theory is that the terrain in Asia Minor was mountainous and very challenging to travel across. Or it could have been anything else. Some even believe he was homesick by that time, or that he had been swayed by the arguments of the Judaizers, who would require him to be circumcised.

What we do know is that John Mark left them and went back to Jerusalem. In fact, that word "withdrawn" in verse 38 is the Greek word from which we get our English word "apostatize." Mark was a turncoat. He left the group and went the other direction. So why would Barnabas now want to bring this man who had been such a failure along on their next journey? I can think of two reasons.

First, John Mark was his cousin. If you're part of a family, you know they're important to you. They say blood is thicker than water. So maybe there was familial pressure for Barnabas to give this young cousin the opportunity to redeem himself. Perhaps John Mark had given his family a "black eye" in the community as being a quitter, even an apostate. He might have been seeking a second chance to prove he was actually a man of character.

The other possible reason is that Barnabas was simply the kind of guy who believed in people. He was an encourager and he saw the potential in John Mark. He was a forgiving person. He was all about "the man"—in this case, John Mark. He was focused on what it would take for this young man to become a true worker for the cause of Christ.

Paul's response was, "No way, Barnabas. I'm not going to take him. Last time we took him, he left us. When the going got tough, he took off." Paul knew they were headed to some towns where they had been dragged out and even stoned. They really didn't know what would happen on this next trip. The last thing he needed to worry about was Barnabas' young cousin abandoning them again in the middle of the trip. "The first time was shame on you; the second time, it's shame on me. If he leaves again, I'll be the fool, and I don't want any part of that." What do we know about Paul? He is a task-oriented guy. Paul viewed the mission as being number one. Barnabas focused on the man; Paul focused on the mission.

In our congregation, we have both Pauls and Barnabases. We have people who are all about other people. I love those types; they are the people you want to hang out with. Then there are task-oriented people, and I love them as well. If we didn't have you, the world as we know it would collapse. Which are you? Identifying that is important, because while both are strengths—a focus on mission or a focus on people—they come with inherent weaknesses as well. People-focused people are mainly concerned with relationships and can neglect needed tasks. Program-focused people think mainly about the ministry or the mission or even the details of life, at times walking over or stepping on people in the process.

This is what made Paul and Barnabas such an awesome team. We need to remember that none of us should go through life alone, but we need to partner with people who can bring out the best in us rather than stirring up the worst, especially when there are disagreements.

Conflict begins with a disagreement.

Like every conflict, this conflict between Paul and Barnabas began with a disagreement. "I want to take John Mark." "I don't want to take John Mark." Was there anything sinful about either position? No, there were simply preferences. They both had reasons for viewing things the way they did.

It's very likely that people here today could list at least a dozen things about our service they disagree with. One person loves something that the other person hates. Maybe when you drove into the parking lot you saw someone wearing a vest. "Isn't that great that they're out there in the parking lot helping us park? I'm so thankful for that." But the next person driving in might think, "What's that idiot doing out there? I know how to park. I don't need someone telling me what to do."

Then you walk in and you might think, "It's so nice that people are gathering around talking. Everyone seems to feel welcome." But other people might be thinking, "Don't they know it's only 8:30 in the morning? I don't need to shake 55 hands before I get into this place." Some people might run to the coffee center—and by the way, I'm with you. They fill up their cup, sloshing it all over the place. The next person might only see the coffee going all over the carpet. One person is loving every minute of it; the other person is angry.

Then the service starts and the music is too loud. No, it's not loud enough. We stood too long. No, we sat too long. Pastor Jon prayed too long. No, he should have prayed longer. Who's that guy on the video screen? Can't we have a guy do the announcements in person? We go back and forth. Round and round we go, and we haven't even gotten to me yet! We can have disagreements and it's okay. In fact, I've come to learn that's what makes Sunday night in the pastor's house so much fun. I just review all the different things people disagree about—but it's okay. We wouldn't be human beings if we didn't disagree.

But there's an important truth in our disagreements, so write this down and don't ever, ever, ever forget it. The way you deal with an issue is just as important as the issue itself. The way you deal with that disagreement is just as important—and sometimes more important—than the actual issue you're disagreeing about.

Conflict at times is divisive.

This is where we fail and, in a sense, this is where Paul and Barnabas also began to fail. How can I say that about two pillars of the church like Paul and Barnabas? I believe Luke is telling us this to remind us that these were real flesh-and-blood men. What follows after a disagreement can be division. But not every disagreement becomes divisive.

If you think about all the disagreements I just mentioned regarding how we do church, I don't think our church has ended up divided. I imagine that if we took a poll, we would certainly find divided opinions, but that doesn't mean any real division. People who are humble and willing to bend can deal with their disagreements. In fact, disagreements can sometimes draw out the best in all of us.

But in the case of Paul and Barnabas, their disagreement resulted in actual division, in the sense that they ended up going in two different directions. Barnabas may have thought that doing ministry with Paul after their disagreement might have been quite challenging. In any event, he believed that John Mark was too important for him to abandon him at that point. So Barnabas chose to take John Mark back with him to Cyprus to continue ministry there. We'll visit those churches where John Mark had taken part in the first missionary journey. Paul then found another faithful minister in the Antioch church, a man named Silas, to go with him back to the churches in Asia Minor. We might be tempted to think, "Well, the story ends well, so this wasn't that bad." But in reality, conflict that moves to being divisive can ultimately become very unhealthy.

Imagine you're an outsider watching Keith and me, who in our church might represent Paul and Barnabas. I will tell you that behind the scenes, Keith and I have had some doozies of disagreements along the way. He usually wins. Yet, how would you as a church feel if he and I had gotten to a place of such disagreement that I said, "I don't want to serve with him anymore"—or he said the same about me? So Keith then declares, "I'll take Mario," and I say, "I'll take Jeremy and we're out of here." How would you feel?

We are tempted to sanitize the story of Paul and Barnabas, thinking, "They all lived happily ever after." No, they didn't. In fact, we don't hear Paul and Barnabas named together for the rest of Acts. A team that was so close was never reunited, at least as far as the book of Acts records. Think of the grieving and the choosing of sides that probably took place. "I'm with Paul." "Well, I'm with Barnabas." Think of the debates around the table, where people would judge one man or the other. "Paul is being a jerk." "Barnabas is being an enabler." Think how it must have looked to those outside the church. "These Christians can't even get along."

We need to grieve when conflict becomes divisive. The job of the church is to do all it can to keep that from taking place.

Conflict can be destructive.

Things can become even worse—conflict can become destructive. Now, we don't see that in this story, but how many of you are part of relational conflicts right now, or have been in the past, where that previously beautiful relationship is now nothing more than an ash heap? You don't interact with that person. You don't care about that person? When you're not with your Christian

friends, you're speaking doom and gloom over that person. You gossip about and think ill of him or her. You're filled with bitterness and rage. Over and over again you replay what that person did or said. You're filled with anger and the relationship is totally destroyed.

Paul and Barnabas, two very faithful friends, had now gone in different directions. But we should also understand that God took what appeared to be a human mess-up between these two men and eventually worked it for good. Yet it took a long time.

Let's look at four things we need to do when relational conflict arises. This is what makes up the School of Hard Knocks. We all have relational issues—in our marriages, between parents and children, in the workplace, with our friends, even with total strangers. There are relational issues everywhere. What are we to do when our relationships fall apart because of conflict?

We must follow God's prescription.

Conflict is an illness caused by sin. In the Garden of Eden, there wasn't a fight until sin entered the world, so sin is to blame for this. Sin is the core problem. Sin has us looking at ourselves, thinking too highly of ourselves and too little of others. Sin says, "The world is all about me. I should be able to do what I want, when I want, and how I want, no matter how it makes you feel or impacts your life."

God's first prescription is stay humble. That means realize the world doesn't revolve around you. Let me shoot straight with you this morning. If I were just humble, the majority of the conflicts I have in my life would be gone. That way, if someone does something I wasn't happy with or wrongs me, I would not respond, "How dare you offend me? Don't you realize who I am?" If I were humble, I'd realize I offend and hurt all kinds of people. When others hurt me, I'm no better than they are. We're all broken sinners who do stupid things and need forgiveness. I need to be filled with humility and love. God's Word says love covers a multitude of sins. I need to be a man of love. I need to extend love, which is the root of forgiveness. You cannot forgive someone until you love them.

Romans 5:8 says, "*God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*" He forgave us while we were still sinners. He would never have forgiven us if it weren't true that He is and always will be love.

Why can't you forgive? It's not because the grievance is so great. It's because your love is too small. If you're struggling with forgiveness today, it's not the grievance that's the problem—it's that you have a small heart. Your heart is unwilling to love, unwilling to forgive the wrong that has been done.

We must remove the plank.

In Matthew 18, where Jesus deals with relational issues, He tells us we are so quick to point out another's wrongs or deficiencies, which is often the source of conflict. He says, "Stop pointing out the little specks in other people's eyes; instead, pull out the great log in your eye." That means when we find ourselves in a relational conflict, we need to ask ourselves, "What have I done to perpetuate or escalate this? What am I doing to stoke the fires of conflict? What wrong have I done that might have hurt that person, that would cause them to recoil against me?" We should also ask ourselves, "In what areas am I relationally deficient that might have been reflected in this particular conflict?"

Of course, not all wrongs that are done to you are the result of something you yourself have done. We live in an evil world and there are innocent victims who have contributed nothing to their pain. Rather, they have experienced abuse at the hands of harsh and angry people. I realize this happens and it can be the source of great sorrow. But for most of us, relational conflict is a two-way street. I am of the belief that you have a part in most of the relational conflicts you're experiencing, and this is true for me as well.

We must remove the planks from our own eyes. We must realize we, too, are sinners and very possibly are as much to blame in a given issue as the other person.

We must stick to God's plan.

Paul and Barnabas were in Splitsville. What can happen, especially in the lives of Christians, is that in relational conflicts we actually blame and even punish God Himself. We might love our church or our small group or the ministry we're part of, but when that person comes or that issue arises that we can't tolerate, we simply quit. Well, you're not just "out" with that person—you're out of that church or group or ministry.

I can't tell you how many people I've seen who, when conflict comes, not only leave the church, but never get involved with a church again. That's just plain dumb. They're not really hurting the person they're angry with. They're hurting themselves—and they're hurting their relationship with God.

In the case of Paul and Barnabas, while they were definitely at odds with each other, one thing remained constant: they were both devoted to God. Their relationship with Him did not change. They both continued in the missionary work to which they had been called.

In the same way, we can continue to attend the church or small group and be engaged in the ministries we're called to. God didn't change our calling. Yes, the relational issues are real and need to be dealt with, but that should not impact our obedience to stay on the road where God has placed us. Over the 15 years I've been in ministry, I've encountered tons of relational conflicts—but I still believe I have a healthy ministry. I've spoken with other pastors who have many more conflicts than I've experienced. But even in healthy ministries, relational conflicts are normal in the life of the church. I'm grateful that in my first years of encountering relational conflicts, I didn't decide, "I'm done. I'm out of here." If I had, I would have missed out on the many, many blessings and joys that have come when I chose to stick with God's plan, even in the midst of relational conflicts.

We must remember we are all in process.

Barnabas separated from Paul, taking John Mark, and Paul went another direction with Silas. History tells us that both missionary journeys were complete successes. While it seems that the church sided with Paul, both men were committed to honoring God.

How do we know this? Bible scholars tell us that the work of Barnabas and John Mark made a strong impact on Cyprus. We also know from Acts that Paul's second missionary journey was phenomenal. Some of the stories we learned as children in Sunday School took place during this journey. We'll look at one of them next week: the story of Paul and Silas in the jail in Philippi, where they were singing and praising God.

We also know this from their own words. We know that Paul and Barnabas were reconciled and also that Paul and John Mark became great friends and ministry partners. I don't have time to look at these passages, but you can read them later. In 1 Corinthians 9:6, Paul speaks of Barnabas not only as an apostle, but as an equal in ministry. This was years after the conflict we read about today. He doesn't call Barnabas a scoundrel or an enabler. Rather, he says Barnabas, an apostle and his equal, is worthy of great esteem.

When Paul is near the end of his life, we're given a couple significant comments. First, in Colossians 4:10, he commends John Mark to the Colossian church and encourages them to welcome him. "Wait a minute! Wasn't he a deserter who left when the going got tough? Why welcome someone like that?" It must have been because John Mark had proven his worth over time. That meant Barnabas was right in his belief in John Mark, thinking he would thrive if given a second opportunity.

Then as an old man waiting to die, Paul writes this to Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:11: "*Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry.*" John Mark did grow up to be a great man. In fact, he made his mark in history by writing the first Gospel the church had. He served and honored God for the rest of his life. And Paul, who had seen him as a hindrance years earlier, now says, "I want him to be part of my ministry. He's of great use to me."

What does this remind us of? When we're in relational conflict, time does have a way of healing wounds. Just as we want grace extended to us when we fail, so also most others desire a second chance to redeem themselves. That means we should never be quick to write someone off. When we're in the middle of a relational conflict, we can sometimes write them off in blood. "I'll never be with them again. They've lost my trust and it will never ever be restored." But God has a way of changing people. It's not wise for us to speak in absolute terms about what we'll never ever do. God may yet bring that person back into your life.

I live in a small town. Two of the people I most hated in high school still live in my community and today I think the world of both of them. But it drives me nuts, because they were not very nice people when we were in school. But then I realize, as I look at the speck in their eye, that I was a pretty lousy teenager myself. They're probably struggling with the same thing. People change. So, give them time and be humble enough to say, "God, would You somehow change my heart, over time and through a course of events, so I can be reconciled to this person." Conflict is inevitable, but you can deal with it in a better way than we often do.

Choose partners whose faith is undeniable.

Our second lesson in this School of Hard Knocks is that we should choose partners whose faith is undeniable. Going back to our text in Acts 16:1, we read, “Paul came also to Derbe and Lystra.” He’s moved on from the conflict with Barnabas and he’s now ministering with Silas.

¹ A disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. ² He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. ³ 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. ⁴ 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. ⁵ So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.

Here we learn that their second missionary journey was a hit, partly because Paul chose his next partner well. We’ll learn more about Silas in the coming weeks. But now Paul has met another young man, perhaps even a teenager, named Timothy. That eliminates the idea that Paul didn’t like John Mark simply because he was young and dumb. He now chooses another young and dumb kid to join him in ministry.

I want to expand the application of this point beyond who we might choose to be on our church staff. Yes, you can be praying, as we look for a new staff member to oversee our worship ministry, that we find the right person, someone who is wise and able to lead us well. But I want to go beyond just partners in a church or missionary setting.

Rather, I think this applies to choosing partners in life. It might be a spouse, a friend, a business partner— anyone we’re going to invest time and life in needs to be the right person. I think Timothy is a model of what that person should be like: someone who is FAST.

Surround yourself with people who are faithful.

Now by FAST, I don’t just mean someone who can run. Timothy could have been 400 pounds. He could have been the slowest guy in the world. But Timothy was faithful. The text tells us he was well spoken of, not just by Paul, but by all the believers in Lystra and Iconium. He was a man of good reputation. He was well respected. As a young man, that speaks even greater volumes. He was a valuable asset.

When you are in a position to choose a partner—especially a marriage partner—stop looking at their skin-deep qualities. Look deeper than that. As Amanda has learned, beauty fades—okay? You may have a beautiful person standing next to you in your 20s, but like most of us, we’re ugly by our 40s. It’s way more important to do life with a faithful person than a beautiful one. Let’s be honest. As you mature in your relationship with your spouse, you will find out that faithfulness is really attractive, because you can depend on them and be transparent with them.

Paul found a faithful man he could trust and whom people respected.

Surround yourself with people who are available.

Paul said to Timothy, “Hey, let’s go on a journey,” and this teenager said, “Okay! Let’s do it.” “But what about your commitments?” Paul probably asked. “That’s all right—they can wait. I’ll leave what I’m doing. I’ll come back to see Mom and Dad later. It will be okay—let’s go!” By God’s grace, Timothy believed that Paul’s calling was of such great importance that everything else was less important to him than going with Paul. “Whatever you need me to do, Paul, I’m ready.”

This kind of quality applies to all partnerships, but again, I think it applies most to your spouse. You need to find someone who will always be available to you. You don’t want someone who has higher priorities. “I’m sorry honey, I can’t talk with you right now—my boss is more important, or the game is more important, or the kids are more important, or my hobbies are more important.” Our partners and friends in life need to be people who are willing to drop everything to be with us when we need them.

It is important that when you desire availability from someone else, that means you need to make yourself available in the same way.

Surround yourself with people who are spiritual.

Timothy was faithful and well-liked, he was available, and he was also spiritual. He wasn’t a light-weight; rather, he was willing to do anything needed to advance the ministry of the gospel. He was willing to be circumcised as a teenager—I’ll leave it at that. He

was willing to face a difficult journey. Never do we hear him utter a word of complaint in the entire New Testament. He no doubt endured all kinds of trials and tribulations.

We also know Paul chose well when he picked Timothy, because Timothy eventually became the pastor of the church in Ephesus, one of the most well-known churches in all of Christendom, where he faithfully served. We also read Paul's commendation in his letters to an older Timothy, calling him "my spiritual son." This is saying a lot for a kid whose mom was a believer but whose dad was not (Acts 16:1; 2 Timothy 1:2–5).

Perhaps some of you also have a mixed spiritual heritage—or maybe no parents who honor God. That does not mean that you're consigned to some back seat of ministry. Some of our best spiritual leaders are men and women who come from difficult pasts.

Surround yourself with people who are tenacious.

Timothy was one of the only men who would stay with Paul right up to the end of Paul's life. At one point in his ministry, Paul wrote, "So and so left me. He left me. She left me. They left me." He then names some of those who stayed with him. But the one who had stayed with him from early in his ministry was Timothy. Timothy stood by him through all the struggles and imprisonments Paul went through. He stuck with Paul when the going got tough.

What friend or partner in life are you looking for? What kind of spouse are you looking for? Can I tell you that I am a blessed man? I hit the ball out of the park, but not because of me. I'm a big dumb fool. It was because God in His infinite wisdom and even greater grace has put around this buffoon FAST people.

I am blessed to have a FAST lady next to me. Ah, this is where the illustration falls apart. She's been faithful, she's been available, she's been spiritual, and she's been tenacious. I do ministry with FAST people, people who in most ways are far better than I will ever be. If you want to find success in this world, pick good people to be around you. If you don't, the Bible makes it clear that bad company corrupts good character. Some of us are failing in our lives, not because we don't have it in us, but because we have a bunch of bad people around us. Listen, we're called to be salt and light in the world (Matthew 5:13), so our evangelism needs to be to people who are broken and lost. We need to befriend sinners and minister to them just as Jesus did.

But those around us from whom we seek counsel, who we live life with on an everyday basis need to be chosen well. We cannot yoke ourselves with unbelieving people. Find others who speak well of the person before you jump into a relationship with them. The School of Hard Knocks has taught me to choose partners whose faith is undeniable.

Confusion about your next steps is understandable.

Okay, buckle your seatbelts. Our third lesson is that confusion about your next steps is understandable. Look back at our text, beginning in Acts 16:6: "*And they (Paul, Silas, and Timothy) went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia.*" Forbidden? That makes no sense! The Spirit of almighty God stopped them from doing evangelism. Some of you are thinking, "I wish the Lord would tell me that." But that's exactly what He did.

⁷ And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. ⁸ So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. ⁹ 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." ¹⁰ 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.

Here was the apostle Paul, who had been face to face with Jesus, and he did not know what tomorrow was going to bring for him. He didn't know the next leg of his journey. They took a step in one direction and God said, "No." They took a step another direction and again God said, "No."

How many of you have been doing something you thought was right, only to hear God say, "No"? It happens. You're saying, "God, I don't know what to do. I don't know where to go. I don't know what the next decision should be." Let me give you a few passing points for you to think and pray about whenever you don't know your next step, when you can't figure out what God's will is for you.

Remember, when you don't know what tomorrow will bring, it's okay to be there. It's understandable. We're human beings. We often don't know where to go. Only a fool will tell you he always knows. In fact, the people who most often think they know their next steps are young people—when they rarely have a clue. I don't say that in a bad way. I'm just remembering that I had my life

all figured out before I was 20. Ha! God had different plans. As I'm now entering my fifth decade of life, I'm beginning to realize I still don't have it all figured out. Right when I think life is going well, some random Tuesday hits me like a two-by-four.

What should we do when we are unsure?

Tune in to God.

It's okay to not know what you're going to do tomorrow. If you're really concerned about it, tune in to God. Walk by the Spirit, not by the flesh. Seek the Lord each and every day. Read His Word. Pray. James 1:5 says, *"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach."* Tune in to God.

Give Him time to work.

When you don't know which way to go, give God time. You don't need to make the decision today. Give Him time. God works all things out for the good of those He loves and calls according to His purpose. It just takes some time. We want God to be a microwave, but brothers and sisters, He works more like a crockpot. We want it now, but God says, "Wait." A lot of the time, waiting is the best tutor for living. Give God time. It doesn't have to happen today.

Talk to others.

We're told that wisdom is found in the multiplicity of counselors (Proverbs 11:14). Find a group of people you can trust and throw things their way. I've got a word for you, young teenagers: talk to your parents. Whatever you're concocting in your mind is all messed up. Your parents love you, they've been there, and they dream of those days when you come to them and say, "Hey, Mom, Dad—I've got a question." We just melt when we hear that, don't we, parents? We'll help you. We'll work with you.

Parents, you need to seek help as well. Maybe you don't know what to do with your child. Seek help. Don't be so proud that you don't ask. Talk with others.

Take a step of faith.

When you've tuned in to God, when you've given Him time to work, when you've talked with others and you seem to have found a good direction, then take that step of faith. Does that bring a guarantee? No. Paul and Silas had no idea what would happen in Macedonia. They got a vision. God closed some doors—and that was okay. He works using closed doors. But they took the step of faith.

You too can believe, along with Paul and Silas and Timothy, that no matter where you go, no matter what you do—as long as you are faithful and seek to honor the Lord—He will take care of the rest. It's okay to be confused about your next steps. It's okay, because God is with you.

These are three lessons from the School of Hard Knocks. If we learn them well, we'll be able to serve the Lord. We'll be able to serve others and we'll be able to enjoy the life God has given us as His gift.