

## **Acts 15:36-16:10: “Ends” In Mind I: Paul & Co-Travelers Past Asia**

### ***Introduction:***

Today’s exciting--well. Okay.

It’s significant, at least. Because with today’s passage we’re moving into what’s really “Part II” of Acts. From here on out, Jesus’ command to bear witness to him to “the ends of the earth” takes the lead.

Jesus himself has declared that Paul is his “chosen instrument to proclaim his name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.” And Luke’s focus will be on how this charge works out for the Church, for Paul, and for those who are caught up in the Gospel’s spread.

As we leave behind, for awhile, Jerusalem, we’re also leaving behind Chapter 15’s Jerusalem Council, and I challenged us last week to consider why we’re so comfortable dissecting apart what the Church and the Spirit charged this new Gentile cohort of God’s People to do, and why we pick and choose between what we condemn and what we don’t.

Today, though, we're going to see how this great expansion of the Church starts with...a fight. Or a disagreement, anyway. Let's pray and see what we see.

***Prayer:***

***Checking In:***

We read this, as Paul and Barnabas are in Antioch:

***Paul said to Barnabas, "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."***

Remember, this is where they "preached the word of the Lord."

***Map Review: Insert First Map!***

Paul wants to check in. This is insightful. It reminds us that Paul does actually care about these people. He's committed to these congregations. It's not an easy thing just to travel all around and hope that people will give you what you need--food, water, shelter, and coin

for whatever, but Paul wants to see how they're doing.

Barnabas is on board. He wants to take along John Mark. John Mark had gone with them when they first went to Cyprus, and acted as a helper, an assistant in whatever they needed. But John didn't go from Cyprus to the mainland. He decided to return to Jerusalem then. It seemed like it was no big deal.

### ***A Big Deal:***

But it was to Paul. We read this:

***37 Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, 38 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.***

What's translated "deserted" here is a strong word. Its root is the same as "apostate," a word for someone who abandons Jesus. Luke's using a word that helps us see how strongly Paul feels about John Mark's leaving.

***39 They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, 40 but Paul chose Silas and***

***left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord. 41 He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.***

### ***Parting Ways:***

Barnabas and Paul part ways. They disagree on taking John Mark so much that there is no way for them to continue in this work together.

That's startling to me. It shouldn't be; I've known this passage for a long time. But it is. It's startling to me that they couldn't resolve this.

I mean, I expect more from them. I expect someone to give. But Paul doesn't want to depend on John Mark, and Barnabas does. Or at least, Barnabas is unwilling to leave him behind. They can't agree; they can't budge, so they part ways.

Barnabas takes Mark and goes to Cyprus to do exactly what Paul wanted to do: Check on the believers there, believers which John Mark helped invite into the Church. So they head West from Antioch out to Cyprus.

Paul takes Silas; "chose Silas," we read, and the

implication is that it made sense to each of these two Evangelists to make sure they both had someone alongside, a mentee, a helper.

### ***On (John) Mark:***

John Mark we already know about: Mary, his mom, hosted a house church in Jerusalem. It has gone in and out of fashion to connect John Mark to the Gospel of Mark. In the earliest Church, they sometimes did. Now the author of the Gospel of Mark is always associated with Peter, not Paul. Peter does mention Mark in his first letter. So it may be the case that this John Mark ends up connected to Peter, so much so that Peter can call him his “son,” and that Mark records what Peter preaches as he goes around.

It’s generally accepted that Mark, here, is the same Mark that Paul mentions at the end of three of his letters: Philemon, Colossians, and 2 Timothy. In Timothy he specifically says that Mark “is helpful to me in my ministry” and in Colossians he says that Mark is “the cousin of Barnabas” and to be welcomed. (cf. Philemon 24; Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11.).

So...maybe Barnabas didn’t want to abandon his

cousin? We have no motive on why John Mark left them. We only have the disagreement. But we want motive! People make things up: Mark bailed without telling them, and Paul can't get over it. But that's made up; We don't know! What we do know is that down the line, Paul will call Mark helpful, will encourage he's welcomed by others, and maybe Mark will go on to pen one of the most important books in history.

### ***On Silas:***

Silas was someone who had "risked his life for the name of the Lord," who was a prophet, and had been sent by Jerusalem to Antioch to "encourage and strengthen" the Christians there and confirm the news Barnabas and Paul had to share with them about just how Jewish they had to become.

Silas will be with Paul for a long time. After Timothy joins them, Paul, Silas, and Timothy will go from town to town, sharing the good news about how God's kept his promises through Jesus. The three of them will author three of the letters in the New Testament, including 2 Corinthians, an important one. Just as he does with Mark, Peter will mention him, but more so. In 1 Peter, we discover that Silas helped write the letter.

And Scholars will draw on that as they look at the radical differences in style between the two letters that the New Testament claims were written by Peter. Silas, frankly, was a much better writer than Peter was. And you wonder if Paul, who himself wasn't shabby with his Greek, was impressed with not just Silas' substance, but also his style.

### ***Parting Ways, Again:***

So they part ways. Barnabas and Mark, headed West to Cyprus, tracing the path they formerly took. Paul and Silas follow the coast, heading north, starting at the end of Paul's previous journey.

Luke will leave Barnabas and Mark behind as Acts moves forward. Paul and Silas, as they backtrack through the previous journey will come to Derbe first, the last city they visited, then to Lystra again.

Remember, if you've forgotten: Last time they were in Lystra, Paul was almost stoned to death because he wouldn't let the city worship him as Hermes, wouldn't let them sacrifice a bull to he and Barnabas. Lystra is not, like, a safe place to visit again. Paul don't care! He's on mission, you know? He's going to see how the believers are doing.

We read this:

### ***Picking Up Timothy:***

***16 Paul came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was Jewish and a believer but whose father was a Greek. 2 The believers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. 3 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. 4 As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey. 5 So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.***

Timothy becomes one of the most important character in the New Testament. Paul's great co-leader, he's treated like a son by Paul. Two letters in the New Testament are written to him. Paul mentions him most of the times he writes a letter. Timothy is super important.

But there's this line, here--and notice the "because" if you can:

***Paul wanted to take [Timothy] 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.***

The "because" here is pretty weighty. What's it mean, you know? Why does Paul circumcise Timothy? This causes enormous problems for people who take a certain legalistic position on Paul, because, you know. It seems like Paul is caving or something. Why circumcise Timothy when circumcision, as Paul will say in his letter to the Corinthians, is--just like uncircumcision--"nothing?"

And it seems like Paul does this, and Timothy allows it, because ultimately...they're pragmatic. They're simply pragmatic.

If Timothy is going to be someone who a Hellenistic Jew can interact with in any meaningful way, then he's just got to be circumcised. If Paul wants to be able to sit down with the Jewish people, or take Timothy into the synagogue to preach, or eat and drink with his

own ethnic group, and have Timothy alongside him, he can't do it unless Timothy is circumcised. This is what's required for Timothy to share the good news about Jesus the Messiah with the Messiah's people. And whatever we think of that, Paul and Timothy seem to recognize it, and move forward with it. What's remarkable is that Timothy does this even though he doesn't have to, right? I mean, the message they're telling the newly-minted, Jewish and Greek Church, is that the Gentiles don't have to do this. But if Timothy is going to help get this message to the Jews who don't yet believe, this has to happen. For those Hellenistic Jews who are not yet Christians, Timothy needs to be circumcised to share with them. They're roaming around, touching base with congregations. They're trying to share the "word," as Luke puts it, the message and reason behind the message, of God making good on His promises. They seem to be moving Northwest, and then head down--down because they're in the highlands--head down the coast toward Troas, which is across a huge bay from the Roman Province of Macedonia. Here's a map

### ***Insert Map***

And we read this:

## ***Come Over!***

***9 During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." 10 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.***

I love this for two reasons.

First of all, Luke just sort of slides into Paul's DM's, you know? He's all of a sudden there: "God had called us to preach the gospel to them." Along the way, trying to share about Jesus, Paul, Timothy, and Silas picked up Luke. And he's a part of the team, now. It's great. I love it.

Also: We realize that Paul's intention of visiting all the congregations he helped begin didn't really work out. He didn't make it down to the coast where he and Barnabas first landed, where Mark had left them. In fact, something new has happened: God's been guiding them to share the good news about Jesus to new people, in new places. And although I skipped it, during this meandering trip to Troas, they're often

blocked from talking about Jesus as much as they are free to share. Luke attributes that inability to go places, and share things, to God, which we could consider if we wanted to.

Instead, we're going to do this. We're going to circle back around to that "sharp disagreement" as the NIV fairly puts it.

***Conclusion:***

Barnabas and Paul can't agree. And they part ways. They can't agree, and they part ways.

But they still have impact.

Silas will go on to pen Peter's first letter. Mark will write a gospel. They shape countless believers. Paul will pick up Timothy, then Luke, and without Luke, we have no Acts, we have no Gospel of Luke--my favorite.

And all these subsequent events, these effects, they aren't just in spite of their parting, they are actually because of it.

This passage is important because it is a counter-balance to the great consensus that we see in Chapter

15. Here there is no consensus. Barnabas and Paul simply cannot agree on this matter before them. There is no great guidance from God, there is nothing but the different positions that they take, which both feel are the right position.

And yet, God makes good out of this disagreement. Radical good, enormous, ongoing, eternal good. What this passage can do for us is remind us that even our disagreements with others, if they are honest, and open to God, and matters of conviction--even our disagreements with others can be things that God can make good things come from.

To deeply disagree with others, to not agree with someone I care about, feels terrible. It feels broken, fallen, and causes anxiety. Barnabas saved Paul's life, sought him out, vouched for him, and allowed him to become more significant than he was. They were best friends, and yet: they couldn't agree on this.

What this passage does is remind me of the truth of what Paul himself will write long after this moment: "We know that God works all things together for good for the ones who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose."

All the good that came of this disagreement wasn't by accident, it was through the savvy outworking of God's incredible wisdom. Through God's godly power to improvise, and respond, and connect, and provide in any situation, God is able to work out good from all things, even if those things are sharp disagreement and a parting of ways.

To trust that God can work out good for us is subtly different than to trust that God has some divine plan for us. It's to say that God is savvy enough to respond to our choices, react to our situation, move on our behalf in response to whatever comes our way. It's to say that God is more moved than we are, more merciful, and has more wisdom, capacity, and knowledge than we can imagine. God is wise and committed to us. God was wise and committed to Mark, wise and committed to Silas, wise and committed to Barnabas and Paul. God was committed to seeing the Church through this bitter difference of opinion. And committed to making good out of it.

I always come back to this question, for myself: Do I believe that God works all things together for good for the ones who love Him, for those who are called

according to his purpose?

***Conclusion:***

We can feel like Paul and Barnabas should have figured out a way to agree. We can wish that John Mark would have said, “Don’t worry about me, guys. Do your thing.” We can wish Silas would have said, “Let’s all go together, and make this work, you know? For Christ’s sake!” We can wish that the first newsworthy moment, moment to be recorded, after the Church had a grand moment of unity wasn’t division. But it was.

Luke presents us consensus, and then presents us with divisive conviction. And it simply is what it is. They had their reasons, ones we can only guess, no matter how good we think our guess is.

Here’s the heartache. Sometimes division happens. Sometimes, for any number of reasons, we can’t agree. And to not agree brings a parting of ways with it. Disagreement demands, we believe, disassociation. I tend to think this is less necessary than it often feels, but that’s neither here nor there. What we see today is as real, and tragically more chosen, than the consensus and unity we see in Acts 15. And yet; God

can make good for the ones who love him, even the ones who love him and who disagree about what shape such love should take. We should take heart in all the good God made from the choices we read about today, even as we consider how we can choose unity over disassociation whenever possible.