



ACTS: ENDS OF THE EARTH ACTS 15:36-41

STUDY GUIDE
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ACTS 15:36-41 ESV

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37 Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. 38 But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. 39 And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other.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.

STRUCTURE

- I. Paul suggests to Barnabas that they revisit the churches they planted (36)
- II. Paul and Barnabas disagree about whether to bring Mark (37-39a)
- III. Paul and Barnabas separate and form new teams (39b-40)
- IV. Paul's new team revisits the churches and strengthens them (41)

GENERAL COMMENTARY:

After a glorious victory for the church where a massive rupture was avoided, the gospel upheld, and the voice of the Spirit heeded (Acts 15:1-35), this time, the church did not avoid rupture. The golden duo of Paul and Barnabas split over philosophy: when is it right to give someone a second chance? No doubt, Paul understood second chances as "the chief of sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15). But in Paul's mind, this was different. The grace of our Lord extends to the greatest transgressor, but grace does not obligate us to stake our welfare on those who have proven unfaithful. Just like the United States military requires the completion of a certain training regimen before approving their readiness for mission, Paul felt that Mark had not passed basic training; he "had withdrawn" (15:38)—"deserted" (NLT, NASB). Since mission work was life-endangering, Paul felt he would be entrusting his life to an unproven soldier.

Barnabas felt differently—and characteristically, so. Barnabas's real name was Joseph, but his nickname, Barnabas, meant "son of encouragement" (Acts 4:36)). Barnabas believed the best about people, and God had repeatedly used this trait in his life. When everyone else doubted Paul on account of his past, Barnabas vouched for him and even recruited him. Without Barnabas, there would be no Paul. He saw the best in others, and Mark was no exception. Sure, Mark had proven unfaithful, but Barnabas argued for a second chance.

Sadly, the dispute leads to a separation. Barnabas and Mark form a new team, and they sail off the storyline of Acts. The rest of the tale follows Paul and his team, which includes Luke, the author of this story. Paul's new "Barnabas" is Silas, who had proven faithful in Acts 15. Paul considers him mission-ready.

This story teaches us about the pain of conflict, the importance of faithfulness, and the sovereignty of God. I believe Paul landed on the right side of this conflict for reasons explained below, but that didn't make this breakup any less sad. Still, Luke does not dwell on it. Instead, he highlights the sovereignty of God in forming two new teams and the continued spread of the gospel.

VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY:

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."

—"And after some days": we don't know how long "some days" is, but it must have been sufficient time for Silas to travel from Jerusalem to Antioch (about 350 miles) to deliver the letter (15:27) and then to return from Antioch back to Jerusalem (15:33). This would have required a few months—probably just long enough for Winter to change to Spring.

—"Let us return and visit the brothers... and see how they are":

- Paul's pastoral heart comes out. He doesn't just want to reach new people with the good news; he wants to establish those who've already received it.
- "visit": this same Greek word appears in Luke 7:16: "God has visited his people!" In context, "visit" means more than "see" or "talk to." It means offering pastoral support.

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.

—People commonly interpret the dispute between Paul and Barnabas as unsettled because Luke does not strongly emphasize who was right. I disagree. I believe that Luke wants us to see how Paul was right on this one—yet without rubbing it in, so as to respect Barnabas and not dwell excessively on the past. I believe Paul landed on the right side of this conflict for these reasons:

- Paul and Silas were “commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord” (15:40), but Barnabas and Mark were not. This is a glaring omission.
- Barnabas disappears after this scene, which amplifies the significance of the omission.
- Luke went with Paul, not Barnabas, suggesting that Luke sided with Paul in this conflict.
- Luke uses the word “withdrawn” to depict Mark’s defection. It shares the same root as “apostasy.” Other translations: “departed” (NKJV); “deserted” (NLT, NIV, NASB), “left” (NET). The strength of the word implies that Paul’s strong view was the right one.
- Luke does not say why Barnabas “wanted to take” Mark, but he provides two reasons why Paul “thought best not to take” him: he had “withdrawn... and had not gone with them to the work” (v. 38). The absence of logical reasoning suggests a lack of logic altogether. In contrast, Paul’s reasoning is spelled out because it is sound.
- Luke strongly emphasizes themes of faithfulness and promotion throughout Acts:
 - Faithful Mathias replaces unfaithful Judas as the twelfth apostle (Acts 1).
 - Faithful Barnabas sells a field and donated the proceeds, unlike faithless Ananias and Sapphira who lie about their generosity. As a result, the Jerusalem church trusts Barnabas as a pastor, teacher, and emissary to Antioch (Acts 4-5, 11).
 - Stephen is faithful as a table server, and Jesus stands to honor Him as the first Christian martyr (Acts 6-7).
 - Philip is faithful as a table server, and God promotes him to evangelist and miracle-worker, opening the door through him to both Samaritans and Gentiles (Acts 6, 8).
 - Saul preaches faithfully in Damascus after his conversion, which opens the Jerusalem church up to trust him, despite his former way of life (Acts 9).
 - Saul and Barnabas faithfully carry an offering from Antioch to Jerusalem, which leads to their promotion as missionaries (Acts 11-13).
 - Silas faithfully serves the Jerusalem Council by delivering their letter and encouraging the church in Antioch; as a result, God promotes him to Paul’s missionary partner (Acts 15).
- Given Luke’s theme of faithfulness preceding promotion, it seems like he is subtly showing how Mark was not ready for promotion. Sure, he would be helpful to Paul at a later time (2 Tim. 4:11). True, Mark was still a “good guy” with shortcomings. But when it comes to ministry leadership roles, these must be earned through faithfulness. We do not just “trust our gut.” We trust our eyes. Have we seen this person be faithful? It is a misunderstanding of grace to suggest that we hand out leadership roles like candy.
- It might be relevant that Mark was Barnabas’s cousin (Col. 4:10). It is very hard not to let bias infiltrate our perspective. On that note, David’s betrayer—Ahithophel—was the grandfather of Bathsheba. Mark’s desertion did not reach that level, though, and Luke is gentle in pointing out Mark’s deficit. So gentle, in fact, that we barely (if at all) discern it.
- In summary, I believe Barnabas was wrong to choose Mark over Saul because: (1) Paul and Silas were commended to God’s grace, but Barnabas and Mark were not, (2) Barnabas disappears and Paul rises up, (3) Luke sides with Paul, (4) Luke uses a strong word to depict Mark’s failure—“withdrawn” or “deserted”, (5) Luke explains Paul’s reasoning but not Barnabas’s, and (6) this interpretation aligns with the theme of faithfulness and promotion prevalent throughout Acts.

39 And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other.

—“sharp disagreement”:

- This word is used one other time, in Hebrews 10:24, to say, “stimulate” them toward love and good deeds. The idea is that there is a sharp stimulus, a spurring, a jarring.

- This is a different word than the one in 15:2 for “great dissension,” and “debate” (15:7).
- Schnabel: “the Greek term implies strong emotional involvement of both parties.” His footnote adds, “a state of irritation expressed in argument, sharp disagreement (‘irritation, exasperation’).”
- Whether Paul and Barnabas treated each other with dignity and respect, it is difficult to say. It’s possible that “sharp disagreement” implies an inappropriate response. However, it’s also possible to feel exasperated and irritated by people we love and honor. It seems to me that the church in Antioch would not have “commended” Paul and Silas “to the grace of the Lord” if Paul was being irrational and improper.

—“they separated from each other”:

- This was a mutual decision.
- What a sad moment. They couldn’t be separated on the core of what the Gospel is (15:1-35), but they were separated by a different philosophy of leadership (15:36-41). The team that had accomplished so much is suddenly dismantled.

—What are we to make of these parallel stories? In 15:1-35, the church employs the wisdom of the Spirit to avoid a massive split; in 15:36-41, the church (team) splits. Holy Spirit, what are you teaching us about division in the church?

- Some would argue that neither Barnabas nor Paul was “right,” and splits like this are inevitable aspects of ministering together. That may be true on some level, but I believe this split was avoidable. Luke has repeatedly emphasized how the Spirit’s wisdom helps us avoid breakups. The church wisely avoids splits in Acts 6 (Hebraic vs. Hellenistic Jews), Acts 8 (Jews vs. Samaritans), and Acts 15 (Jews vs. Gentiles). In each case, the Spirit provided wisdom for overcoming the conflict, and I would argue that Barnabas did not apply that wisdom here. Threatened splits are inevitable, but the Spirit grants wisdom to maintain unity—if both sides will listen. (Elsewhere, Paul acknowledges that both sides will not always listen to the wisdom of the Spirit or each other—“If it is possible, as far as it relies on you, be at peace with all men...”, Rom. 12:18)
- Some would argue that God was sovereignly orchestrating this split to multiply gospel ministry—now you had two missionary teams, not just one. It is true that God used this to further the gospel, but that doesn’t mean it was good. God used persecution to further the gospel in Acts 8 and 11, yet persecution is bad.
- I believe that the Holy Spirit is teaching us through these back-to-back stories that:
 - Like the church in Jerusalem (15:28), we need constant reliance on the wisdom of the Spirit to avoid worst-case scenarios.
 - Even with the wisdom of the Spirit, not every split can be avoided. It would have been wrong for Paul—in the name of unity—to compromise his biblical view of faithfulness and promote Mark anyway. Notably, even the church in Jerusalem had to “split” from the gospel-compromising Judaizers (cf. 15:24).
 - I also believe the Holy Spirit is teaching us about the proper understanding of grace. In 15:1-35, Paul and Barnabas boldly defended the freeness of the gospel of grace to all who believe, but in 15:36-41, Paul refuses to freely offer Mark a leadership role on his core team. Grace is free; leadership is earned. Both principles are worth “dying on the hill” for.
 - I’m reminded of the time Jack Deere separated from Rick Joyner when they had both been part of Todd Bentley’s restoration team (following Todd’s adultery). When Jack saw Todd’s unwillingness to fully repent and Rick’s willingness to quickly reinsert Todd to the pulpit, Jack withdrew from the restoration team. Despite the painful parting of ways, it was right for Jack to die on that hill. God freely lavishes us with the grace of salvation, but it is wrong to freely lavish people with leadership roles they do not deserve (Note: Mark’s unfaithfulness was nowhere near even the ballpark of Todd’s).

—Despite my interpretation that Paul was right, I can’t help but notice Luke’s gentleness in addressing Mark’s unfaithfulness. Mark was young and had room to grow. He didn’t deserve to be body-slammed in God’s eternal Word. Luke doesn’t treat Mark like he does Judas or Ananias or Elymas the sorcerer because there is a difference between being evil and being immature.

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.

—As I mentioned earlier, this seems to be decisive in showing the church's blessing over Paul's approach to situation. Why didn't Luke end the verse with, "Paul chose Silas and departed," to parallel "Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away"? Because Barnabas sailed away without the church's blessing.

—"chose": they didn't draw straws. Paul elected Silas whom he deemed more qualified than Mark. Silas was a leader at Antioch along with Saul, so they had experience together (15:22). Silas was also an experienced prophet (15:32), who had proved faithful (15:27-33).

—Barnabas had a tremendous strength—seeing the best in people. When people doubted Saul, Barnabas saw the best in him, vouching for him in Jerusalem (Acts 9) and then recruiting him in Antioch (Acts 11). With that said, this strength (like all strengths) can also be a big weakness. Barnabas saw the best in Mark—a good thing—but he promoted him prematurely. It is right to see the best in people, but it is wrong to overlook their unfaithfulness.

—"commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord":

- "the believers entrusted him to the Lord's gracious care" (NLT); "committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord" (NASB95).
- "commended" can be translated as "betrayed" (because it means "to be handed over"), "to deliver up", "to give over", etc.
- The same word appears in 15:26: Paul and Barnabas are labeled "men who have risked their lives (Lit. "given over" their lives) for the name of Jesus Christ."
- Since the church remains home, it must literally "hand over" missionaries to the "grace" of the "Lord" Jesus—that is, His gracious care. They would not be able to stay in touch via Facetime. To send someone off was to risk never seeing them again in this life.
- It seems interesting to me that Paul and Barnabas had been "given over" to "the name of Jesus Christ" in 15:26, and now the church gives Paul over to the grace of Jesus Christ in 15:40. What should I make of this connection, Lord? Between the two stories, Paul is consistent. He gave himself over to the Lord Jesus in 15:26, and now the church is giving him over to the Lord Jesus in 15:40. Paul's life was handed over to Jesus. We should do the same with our lives, continually handing them over to the Lordship of Christ alone.

—Other examples that resemble this story about being commended to God's grace:

- Acts 13:3: When the church in Antioch was sending out Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey, they fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them before sending them off. This act symbolized entrusting them to God's guidance and mission.
- Acts 14:23: After Paul and Barnabas established churches in various cities, they appointed elders and prayed for them. The verse states, "They appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust."
- Acts 20:32: In Paul's farewell to the elders of the church in Ephesus, he says, "Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified." Here, Paul entrusts the elders to God's care and guidance.

—A church that is on mission should continually be handing people over to the grace of the Lord and being handed over to the grace of the Lord. We hand people over to the grace of the Lord when we send them on mission or plant churches and leave them behind. We are handed over to the grace of the Lord when we go on mission or remain behind to establish healthy churches.

—No matter how you slice it, we all rely entirely on the grace of the Lord.

41 And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

—"he" refers to Paul, and Paul brought Silas. The next chapter will show how the team expands.

—"strengthening the churches": this was not a church planting mission but a church establishing mission. Both types of mission work are needed.

—Stott (quoting Bengel): "God certainly overruled 'this melancholy disagreement,' since as a result of it 'out of one pair two were made.'"