

Division and the Plan of God

Acts 15:36-41

This morning, we pick up at the story of Acts in chapter 15, starting with verse 36, which you can find at the top of page 870 in the pew Bibles. If you want to open there or look at the screen, I'd like to begin by reading the passage for us all. "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 But Paul thought it best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work.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. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches."

Perhaps it's just me, but is this not just the most disheartening passage we've come across so far in Acts? Every other challenge or trial that has faced the early church has simply been an opportunity for God to display His power, and His people to display their trust in and faithfulness to Him. But this seems to be an undeniable crack in what has otherwise been a flawlessly laid foundation so far. It's also an illustration of one of the things I appreciate most about the Bible, which is its honesty. The Bible does not avoid the tension that is often felt between idyllic faith in God, and the experiences of life and faith that so often seem at odds with that ideal. The New Testament, specifically, does not hide the flaws and failures of the disciples or the Church, but, at times, goes out of its way to draw attention to them. This passage is an example of that honesty of the Bible, and it confronts a messiness that every Christian experiences at some point, in some way: the breaking of fellowship.

I know that as I utter that phrase, I am calling forth a litany of experiences for many of us. Some of those experiences are natural parts of life: leaving a church you love because you moved out of the area, stepping out of ministry because God called you elsewhere, or losing touch with a close, Christian friend because life took you in different directions. Others, of those experiences, are more painful: church splits, broken friendships, Covid controversy, and more. It is easier, at least in the short-term, to ignore these realities that occur regularly in the real-life experience of church and Christianity. But that's not what the Bible does. No, the Bible follows up the passage where Jews and Gentiles are reconciled across one of the greatest racial divides in history to be united as one people of God, with the passage where two heroes of the early church divide over who to take with them on a trip. The Bible does not shy away from tension.

In light of this, we must ask: what are we to do with passages like this? And in asking that, we are really asking: what are we to do about the painful, difficult, confusing, questionable experiences we've all had in the Church? You see, it's good news that the Bible is honest about these things, because it means the Bible also has an answer for these things. Not always the answer we want. Not always an answer that leaves us completely satisfied. But always the answer we need; if we have ears to hear.

Let's begin again with verse 36, which says, "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.'" The passage starts off on a positive note. Remember, this is right on the heels of the Jerusalem council that unified the diverse, Jew-Gentile Church in an unprecedented way, and resulted in a tremendous surge of encouragement and edification, particularly for the Gentile believers. And so, Paul has the great idea to revisit the churches he and Barnabas had planted to take that encouragement and edification to them. And doesn't that sound like a great short-term mission trip? I'd sign up for it. It also seems to me that this is so often the case with hard things: they come out of things that seem so innocuous, that start out as incredibly positive endeavors, and then a seemingly tiny issue derails everything.

Which brings us to verses 37-38. "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." So, here is what we know about this situation. John Mark (as distinct from John the Apostle) was an early companion on

Paul and Barnabas's first missionary journey, as we read in Acts 13:5. But after just two stops on that journey, a short 8 verses later, Acts 13:13 simply says, "And John left them and returned to Jerusalem..."

We do not know why John Mark left them when he did. He could have been ill, or homesick, or tired, or uncommitted. We don't know why he did it, we just know he left and went back to Jerusalem. And now we know that Paul took a bit of issue with that, apparently viewing it as an abandonment. The Greek word translated "withdrawn" can mean a basic physical departure, but it can also carry with it an undertone of deeper, relational separation, like when Paul says in 1 Timothy 4:1 that in the latter times some will depart or "withdraw" from the faith. In other words, it can mean, not just withdrawing physically, but ceasing to identify with someone or some group. It's hard to tell from the grammar alone if it carries that undertone here, but it seems plausible that it does, given the subsequent fallout.

Another possible complicating factor in the disagreement is that John Mark may well have been Barnabas's cousin. Colossians 4:10 mentions "Mark" who was the cousin of Barnabas. However, we now come to a slight difficulty in dealing with the biblical character John Mark: there's debate around how many of the New Testament references to "Mark" (and there are a number of them) refer to this John Mark. Both of the names John and Mark were very common at this time, and so there were certainly multiple men bearing each of those names in the early church.

However, I tend to think the references to Mark throughout the New Testament *are* referring to this John Mark for one reason primarily, which is the reason most scholars cite for this view. This reason being that the New Testament authors never attempt to distinguish exactly which "Mark" they are referring to when they mention him. This likely indicates it would have been obvious to the original readers which "Mark" was being referenced, otherwise they would have done more to differentiate. There's precedence for this type of differentiation even in how John Mark is identified in our passage. We know there was at least one other prominent "John" in the early church, the Apostle I already mentioned, which is why when this other "John" is mentioned, Luke differentiates him by adding that his other name was "Mark". And so, because the New Testament does *not* differentiate which "Mark" they mean when they mention him, it seems likely that there was one "Mark" who was uniquely prominent in the early church, and the only one the New Testament distinguishes like that is this John who also went by Mark. That digression might seem trivial, but I promise it will be important for our purposes later on this morning.

Suffice it to say for now, I believe the "Mark" referenced as Barnabas's cousin in Colossians 4:10 is John Mark. And, of course, that would make a lot of sense given the disagreement that happens here. Not only is Barnabas a naturally encouraging guy (his name literally means "son of encouragement"), but this second chance relates to his cousin as well, which would naturally strengthen his feelings around the issue. So, that's what we know about the context of what comes next in verse 39.

"And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other." Paul and Barnabas argue about whether to take John Mark or not and end up separating. While the Bible, as I mentioned, is often brutally honest, Bible translators, in my opinion, are often overly polite. "Sharp disagreement" is an okay translation, but I don't think it quite captures this argument. Because the Greek word translated "sharp disagreement" here is where we get our English word "paroxysm" from. As in, "...a paroxysm of joy..." or "...a paroxysm of anger..." "Paroxysm" describes violent emotional reactions. So, Luke is describing an emotionally charged disagreement between Paul and Barnabas here. And this disagreement led them to part company.

Now, this doesn't mean they hated each other, or were even necessarily hurt or angry, and I'm sure they handled it with grace, but I think we also need to be careful that we don't elevate our saints to the point they cease to be human. I expect Paul and Barnabas ultimately agreed to disagree, or something along those lines, and departed without any ill will toward one another, but that doesn't mean this was an easy or painless experience. At the very least, I am sure there was great sadness on both their parts that they would not be continuing in ministry together. How could there not be?

This is Paul and Barnabas. Barnabas, who welcomed and vouched for Paul (then Saul) the former persecutor when no one else would, leading to a dynamic missionary partnership that changed the Gentile world forever. And now,

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with shocking abruptness, it comes to an end, because they can't agree on who to bring with them on their next journey. It's a tragic half-verse, and yet, the work goes on, as we see in the rest of verse 39-41. "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. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches."

Paul and Barnabas go their separate ways, with their chosen companions. Barnabas seems to be following the plan Paul outlined, going back to Cyprus where their first missionary journey began. But Paul takes a different route, heading north on a journey that will involve relatively little revisiting of the churches he planted. In these verses we begin to see a bit of the bigger picture. The rest of Acts will continue the story of where Paul goes, and all that he does. But even next week we're going to look at the passage where he receives the Macedonian Call, which results in him more than doubling the boundaries of Gospel-exposed territory.

And so, it's at this point that it's important for us to remember that Acts is not about Paul and Barnabas traveling to the ends of the earth together; it's about the Gospel traveling to the ends of the earth by any means necessary. Which means, as painful and difficult as I'm sure Paul and Barnabas's split was, it's important we see that God used it for a greater purpose. A purpose to which Paul, Barnabas, and John Mark were all committed. Paul was clearly not meant to return to the same places repeatedly (a fact he alludes to in Romans), he was meant to take the Gospel to Rome, the center of the known world at the time, and this unfortunate disagreement is one of the primary events in Paul's story that guided him toward that purpose. But there's a larger, and I'm guessing less familiar story involving John Mark, as well.

Assuming, as I mentioned earlier, that when "Mark" is mentioned in the New Testament it's generally referring to John Mark, then here is what the Bible and the early church fathers tell us about him. Of course, he accompanies Barnabas on his mission of encouragement to the churches. But beyond that, he wrote this kind of important book called *The Gospel of Mark*, based on Peter's account of the life and ministry of Jesus. Also, according to tradition, John Mark was the founder of the church in Alexandria, which was the first church in Africa, and a prominent church in early Christianity. And finally, and most closely related to our passage this morning, if there was anything between him and Paul, it was most certainly resolved.

At the end of his life, imprisoned in Rome awaiting execution, Paul wrote a second letter to his protégé Timothy, the letter that is thought to be his last. And who is one of two people he specifically requests to come see him before he dies? Mark. In 2 Timothy 4:11 Paul tells Timothy, "Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry." So, you see, our passage in Acts changes quite a bit when it gets viewed in the context of the greater story that was unfolding. Of course, the problem for us is that when we experience something difficult, we don't get the benefit of knowing the end of the greater story, and how that experience fits in. But the lesson of our passage is this, and it's our main idea this morning: if we are faithful to seek and trust the Lord, He will work all things for good, even painful experiences.

And by the way, brothers and sisters, redemption and reconciliation are not just theological terms, they are Gospel realities that we are called to live out with one another. Paul and Barnabas and John Mark were not perfect men. They were, however, men committed to preaching and living out the Gospel, which I'm sure was a significant factor in how Paul and John Mark ended up on such good terms. But it is shocking how often those two commitments, preaching and living out the Gospel, seem to conflict with one another.

Our church context, both immediate and more broadly, is full of examples of partings of ways between two groups, both claiming to be seeking the Lord. Broadly speaking, there is the Protestant-Catholic divide. Even within Protestantism there are innumerable denominational divisions, and the many broken fellowships that trend has left in its wake. At EBC, just in recent years, there are those who departed due to convictions around our handling of Covid, and others who have left for other reasons. Some of you have come to EBC having left other churches for various reasons. We are no strangers to partings borne of disagreement.

Understand, I'm not making a judgement on any of those situations. I'm not trying to say that there aren't legitimate reasons for these divisions, or that we should stop caring about those reasons. However, I also don't want to give license to breaking fellowship for any reason; I believe there are relatively few reasons to break Christian fellowship. But I'm not trying to make any judgements here; I am simply pointing out the reality of our experience and church context. Which may lead some of you to wonder, "Why are you bringing all this up? Why stir up all these painful memories and points of disagreement?"

My answer begins very simply with, "Because the Bible does." Not only that, but the Bible gives us a way to view and cope with these difficult experiences. It reminds us that there is a greater story being told, and while we may not understand how our painful experiences fit into that story right now, the Bible helps us see that if we remain faithful, God will work all things for good. Brothers and sisters, we will disagree with, and even hurt and sin against each other at times, but because of the Gospel those wounds can be healed, and transformed into stories of God's grace. If we are faithful to seek and trust the Lord, even through those challenging experiences, He *will* work all things for good. So, how do we apply this? I have a few thoughts, but first, let me preface them with a couple notes.

First, not every disagreement or parting is the same; some are more contentious, some involve sin and deep hurt, while others are amicable. So, just know that not every point I make will necessarily apply to every unique situation specifically, but hopefully these thoughts will be generally helpful.

Second, I would also like to remind us that we are not ultimately responsible for how someone else walks through conflict; we are responsible for how *we* walk through conflict. In some disagreements one party is willing to seek reconciliation and the other is not, or one party is submitted to the Lord and the other is not. So, it's important to understand that you are not responsible for making the other person do what Jesus asks, although there may be a place to remind them of what He calls believers to; you are responsible for *your* faithfulness to the way of Christ, regardless of what the other person does.

With that, here are a few thoughts on following Jesus through disagreement. First, pray: seek the Lord as earnestly, honestly, and humbly as possible. In any given situation the person who would be faithful to Jesus must seek *His* will above everything else, and that requires fervent prayer. After all, this is how we were taught to pray, is it not? "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be *Your* name. *Your* kingdom come. *Your* will be done." This is key, because Jesus also said, it is those who seek who *will* find. So, if we seek Him truly, it's just a question of time until we find Him, but we have to seek Him first.

The second thing to do is trust: after you have sought the Lord and made a decision, trust the Lord no matter what the outcome looks like. Not in prideful stubbornness as though you could never be mistaken, but in humble restfulness that you have honestly sought the Lord and made the decision you believe He called you to make. Not every decision, in fact, very few we make will be free of *all* doubt and question. We are limited in our wisdom and abilities, and therefore, will often be forced to make the best decision we can without full, absolute assurance it's the perfect one. And so, learning to trust God, even when we don't trust ourselves and lack full confidence in a decision (which can be healthy) is essential. And remember, we serve the God of the Resurrection. There is no mistake we can make that He cannot turn to good. So, learn to rest in trust of God after making a decision.

And third, pray some more: especially with difficult, painful decisions, continue to pray afterwards for God to lead and reveal the greater context to that decision and how He wants to use it for good. Clearly, Paul did not simply cut John Mark out of his life, but remained open to restoration and partnership in the future. Similarly, we should walk in a prayerful posture of grace and hope toward one another, even if we part ways, offering forgiveness, as needed, in the hope of reconciliation.

Earlier, I mentioned a number of divisions that hit close to home for us, and we can and should have a corresponding Gospel hope. For the Catholic-Protestant divide, which I know is significant and has valid reasons, I still hope and pray for a day when we are reunited as a single faith family. I have a similar dream for the many Protestant

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denominations, but I also hope that we will grow in seeing that many of the differences we divide over are actually differing strengths. And those strengths are at their best, not when one particular strength is stacked on top of itself, but when those strengths are paired with different, complementary strengths. For those who have left churches over various convictions, I am hopeful and trust they have followed the Lord's leading and He is moving them to where He wants them, even while I am hopeful and pray that some will display Christ by returning to the church they left to do the hard work of strengthening the weaknesses and lacks they see there.

For each of these partings of ways, I see reason to hope and trust in God, because I know He has a greater plan that will one day be revealed and make sense of all those partings to His glory. If we are faithful to seek and trust the Lord, He will work all things for good, even painful experiences. So, whatever partings you've had in the past, amicable or contentious, due to the natural course of life or deep hurt, there is reason to hope if we continue seeking and trusting the Lord. Also, as we turn to communion, I would remind us that Jesus paid the price to make that hope possible.

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Main Idea: If we are faithful to seek and trust the Lord, He will work all things for good, even painful experiences.

Introduction – The Honesty of the Bible

Acts 15:36 – An Innocent Idea

Acts 15:37-38 – A Disagreement Arises

Acts 15:39a – A Parting of Ways

Acts 15:39b-41 – A Bit of the Bigger Picture

Application: Thoughts on Seeking God Through Disagreements and Difficulty

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Main Idea: If we are faithful to seek and trust the Lord, He will work all things for good, even painful experiences.

- 1) What are some of the reasons behind divisions in the Church today?

- 2) Are those reasons biblical? Why or why not? Passages for consideration (not an exhaustive list): Matt. 18:15-17; 1 Cor. 5:1-5 (contrast with 1 Cor. 6:1-8); Titus 3:10 (cf. Rom. 16:17).

- 3) How should we pray about the divisions we see in the Church today?