

***Words and Deeds: Tragic Argument or New Beginning?***  
***By Jason Huff***  
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***Ecclesiastes 4:9-12; 2 Timothy 4:1-11; Acts 15:35-16:5***

Our final Scripture reading is Acts 15:35-16:5. May God add His blessing to the reading of His holy and sacred Word. “Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord. Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.” Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches. He came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was a Jewess and a believer, but whose father was a Greek. The brothers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. 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. As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey. So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.”

What happens to you when you disagree with someone? Historically, you start a war. It might sound silly, but wars have been triggered by a shot pig, a stolen oaken bucket, a chopped down flagpole, a stray dog, a golden chair, a soccer match, and fishing rights. In all but one of those situations, people lost their lives over a ridiculous argument – sometimes, thousands.

Of course we all argue. We’re never going to agree with everyone. We rarely agree within our own family about everything. What do you want for dinner? “Mexican.” “Chinese.” “Chicken.” “Hamburger.” “Fast Food.” “Sit down.” “Eat at home.” I made a dinner the other night that everyone ate without complaining and I was like, “It’s a Christmas miracle a month late!” We tend towards arguing naturally.

But arguments destroy relationships. Arguments about money are the #1 one reason couples split up. Have you held onto a cause that wasn’t important, even when it would cost you a friendship? I’ve been there. Maybe a need to argue has made Thanksgiving dinners and celebrations with the extended family a burden. Sound familiar? We all know it.

Christians aren’t immune. In fact, Christians are experts at arguing amongst each other. There are three major branches of Christianity – Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant – and each branch has many limbs. There are thousands of denominations with Protestantism, most of which came about when one group disagreed with another over a particular point of theology or practice. Churches split over major issues like the authority of Jesus, but they’ve also been known to split over the color of carpet in the lounge. And that’s against the teaching of Jesus, who prayed for us on the night He was betrayed that we might be brought “to complete unity.” That unity, He said, would “let the world know that you [the Father] sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” Unity amongst believers shows the Father’s love for us.

Today's passage shows that the leaders of the early church could be just as argumentative as we are. They could find themselves in significant disagreement. What we have is a situation so volatile that two good friends who had gone through a lot together – trials and persecutions, stoning, dangerous travel conditions – decide to part ways. It's a big deal. Barnabas doesn't show up again in the book of Acts; as far as we know, he was never again Paul's traveling companion. It was a sad day. So what happened, and what was God doing in the middle of it?

Remember back with me to Acts 13:13. We talked about this all the way back on November 11, almost three months ago. Barnabas' cousin John Mark was with them on their missionary journey. He made it to the island of Cyprus, helped them minister there. They get to what is modern-day Turkey and the group decides to take a rather dangerous mountain passage through to their next stop. We can't be certain that John Mark is afraid of the danger, though from a human perspective we can understand. It might have been homesickness, frustration that his cousin Barnabas really wasn't calling the shots but was playing second fiddle to Paul...we don't know. What we do know is that John Mark left them before they went into the mountains and headed back to Jerusalem.

Move the timeline forward, probably about two to three years, maybe a little more. Paul wants Barnabas to go with him to visit the churches that they had started on their first missionary journey. Barnabas is like, "Oh, great, let me get packed...and by the way, John Mark's back in town, and I really want him to go with us. He's really matured since the last trip." And Paul is like, "No way! He deserted us. You can't count on him. We're better off without him." And they get into this big disagreement about it, so much so that they part company.

Barnabas and John Mark set sail for the island of Cyprus, basically taking the same route of their first journey. But Paul heads north up the coast, hitting the last churches that they started first, taking Silas with him. (You might remember that Silas was one of the men we first met last week. He came from Jerusalem with Paul to spread word to the north that the Gentiles weren't bound to the Jewish law.) They are going the opposite way from each other.

It's hard to know anything about who's right and who's wrong here. Paul and Silas are commended by the fellowship, and we don't hear that about Barnabas and John Mark. But Luke is writing down Paul's memories, and Luke joins Paul on this journey. We can't say for a fact that one position was better than the other. What are we to make of this?

The first thing that stuck out to me like a sore thumb in this passage is something that's absent. *Where's the Holy Spirit?* The Holy Spirit has been a lead figure throughout the book of Acts. The Holy Spirit inspired the apostles and disciples to speak, lead some of them to prophecy, and confirmed that the Gentiles had a place in the Kingdom. The Spirit speaks to the believers in Syrian Antioch, telling them to set aside Paul and Barnabas for their mission. They are sent on the path they take by the Holy Spirit. The early church stands out by the power and filling of the Holy Spirit. In the weeks to come, the Holy Spirit will stop our missionaries from traveling where they want to go because of His plans for them.

So where is the Holy Spirit in all of this? All of sudden, the text is suddenly quiet about His involvement. His absence is just as telling as His involvement at other times. It isn't where Paul says, "The Holy Spirit is telling me not to take John Mark," and Barnabas says, "Oh yes He is!" For believers who are so engaged with the Holy Spirit, who are listening to His leading carefully, this is a surprise and a warning.

That warning is actually my first point today: *we are least likely to hear the Spirit's voice when we have our own agenda*. Both Paul and Barnabas are men with egos and agendas. As great a leaders as they were for the early church, they were still flawed; they were sinners in need of redemption just as we are. And here, what they each wanted overrules what the Spirit might have wanted.

Paul was a driven man, fiercely intelligent, not impressive physically and not a public speaker by Roman standards but an amazingly good debater and teacher. He was determined to shepherd the churches under his care, and from the tone of his letters, I'm pretty sure he would not have been pleased to be distracted from his job having to deal with a young man who'd abandoned them at the riskiest point of their last journey and whether or not he'd do it again. He is so driven to see his churches that he misses the potential for reconciliation.

Then there's Barnabas, loyal, devoted, the man nicknamed the Son of Encouragement. He has been by Paul's side for the better part of 15 years. He was called by the Holy Spirit to start the churches on this missionary journey too, and he's obviously excited about seeing them all again. But his heart is so big that his chief concern is restoring his cousin John Mark.

He so wants to bring John Mark along that instead of bringing about true reconciliation, he damages his relationship with Paul. Barnabas was the one who saw God working in Paul when everybody else was still terribly afraid of him as their former persecutor. Did Barnabas throw that in his face when it came to John Mark? We simply don't know. But what we do know is that the Holy Spirit didn't seem to enter into the conversation.

As I read this passage in this light, I was convicted of my own sin in this area. How seldom do we ever talk about the Holy Spirit's leading in what we do! Why is that? Why do we assume that He is working as our conscience but so seldom hear personal direction from Him? I have become convinced it's because I so often approach things with my own agenda in mind.

I know what's best for the church! I know what's best to sing and preach and teach! I know what's best for the pregnancy center, best for my family, best for me! I know; I know; I know! It is so easy for us to want to sit behind the steering wheel with the pedal to the floor and not to pay attention to the Spirit when He should be the one doing the driving, not giving advice from the passenger seat.

And my agenda is often self-driven, self-pleasing, self-ish. My agenda is sometimes sinful, pleasing my own desires rather than God's. And sometimes, my agenda is loaded with things that are good and godly and wholesome, but not actually what God wants for me in that moment. The only way I'm going to know is to listen, to not let my own agenda get in the way of what God wants to do in that moment.

This week, I ask us all, slow down. Look at what you're doing with your life. Read your Bible and make time to listen to the Holy Spirit. See what He would have you do. Instead of praying for God's blessings on what you do, take time to pray that you might do what God would bless. It's a tiny difference, but it makes all the difference. Because here we see that even the most holy people among us get into trouble when they have their agenda instead of God's.

Now, with that said, I also wanted to look at the flip side of this. We could think, "Boy, I've really blown it. I've not listened to the Holy Spirit very well, I've done things I shouldn't have done, the path of my life is not what God really wanted." But here's the thing, the second major point for us today: *do not be discouraged, because even in our weakness and sin, God works to accomplish His purposes.*

What is the end result of this disagreement between Paul and Barnabas? Something pretty great, actually. Instead of one set of missionaries, there are now two. Both of them are completely dedicated to the gospel, to discipling the believers and helping them grow in Christ. One, the group with Barnabas and John Mark, probably does reach many of the churches planted on the first journey. Paul and Silas' trip is diverted by the Holy Spirit into new territories that have yet to hear the gospel. Both missions were good; both accomplished God's plan.

In a perfect world, would Paul and Barnabas have been reconciled and traveled the world together again? Maybe. We don't know. In fact, we don't know if much greater harm would have occurred if Paul did go against his conscience and travel with Barnabas and John Mark. What we do know is that Paul speaks favorably of Barnabas in his first letter to the Corinthians, suggesting that only he and Barnabas keep working to support themselves while they are preaching the gospel.

And what's more, John Mark does grow up, and Paul does recognize it. At some point in his journeys, Paul meets up again with John Mark, because he's with Paul when Paul writes to the church in Colossi. Near the end of his life, Paul writes to Timothy, asking him to come and see him as soon as he can. He tells Timothy, "Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry." For this huge breach that John Mark causes between Paul and Barnabas, John Mark becomes invaluable to Paul later on.

And let's talk about Timothy. Had Paul never split from Barnabas, he would have never met Timothy. Timothy was a constant friend and companion to Paul. Paul writes to him, calling him "my beloved son," essentially the son he never had. It's in his work and letters to Timothy that we see a softer side of Paul. His letters to Timothy also teach us about how pastors and teachers should take care of God's people, how elders and deacons should act – what he tells Timothy lays the groundwork for the structure of the church as we know it.

Great things happened in spite of this fierce argument between Paul and Barnabas. You might say they happened because of it. Does that excuse everything? Does it mean Paul and Barnabas have no responsibility for their bickering and inability to come to terms? No. No matter whatever happens as a result of our actions, we always have responsibility for them. Our attitude as Christians should never be, "I can do whatever I want because God will work it all out." We are God's people; we want to please Him; we want to do whatever we can to do that.

But at the same time, we don't need to beat ourselves up endless about our sins or the choices we've made that weren't God's best for us. We cannot mess up so badly that God can no longer fix us. We cannot make such a catastrophe of things that somehow God will say, "I can't deal with that." There will be consequences for our actions, and we have to live with those consequences. But it doesn't mean that God will forsake us. God promises us in Deuteronomy 4:31 that He will not abandon or destroy or forget His people. Your poor choices in the past do not dictate God's attitude towards you in the future.

C. S. Lewis demonstrates this in a great book in his Narnia series called *The Silver Chair*. Jill and Eustice are children called out of our world by the great lion Aslan, who symbolizes Jesus, to rescue Prince Rilian, who has been lost for many years. On a mountaintop, Aslan gives them four signs to follow along their journey – signs that will lead to great help and a much easier adventure. He warns Jill to repeat the signs over and over again, because the air in Narnia is thick, and the signs she learns won't look like what she expects when she reaches Narnia.

When Jill and Eustice arrive, they immediately bungle one sign, and they wind up bungling two more along the way. Through ignorance, through being obstinate, through fear and misunderstanding, through Jill giving up repeating the signs as she was told, they miss the signs that Aslan has laid out before them. Because they don't follow through on the first three signs, they run into real danger – giants that want to eat them, for example. And the fourth sign will put them into even greater danger, so while they understand it clearly, they don't want to do it.

Their companion Puddleglum reminds them that Aslan didn't tell them what would happen exactly if they followed the signs, only that they needed to do so. Even if it means their deaths, Puddleglum says, "that doesn't let us off following the sign." They do follow through and the prince is saved. Near the end of the book, when Jill meets Aslan again, all she can think of is her disobedience and how she got everything wrong. But Aslan draws Jill and Eustice to himself and licks their faces and says, "Think of that no more. I will not always be scolding. You have done the work for which I sent you into Narnia."

C.S. Lewis really understood the truth we find in this passage that we need for our own lives. God has given us His word that tells us everything we need to know about living as His children, about loving Him and loving our neighbors as ourselves. He has given us His Holy Spirit so that we might be constantly reminded of His signs. Yet we stumble along the way often; we fail to see what God is up to; we miss the signs because of our agendas and our human nature getting in the way. And yet God still works through us, in spite of us, to accomplish His purposes. Like Jill, you'll be reminded of how you've failed. But also like Jill, those failures and sins will be cast away by our Lord, and you'll remember them no more.

So go into the world this week listening for the Spirit's voice. Pay attention to what God is saying to you through His Word and through prayer. Check your heart to see if you are living out God's agenda or living by your own. And then remember, God has shown you grace. Live as God would have you live, and live in the grace to know that you are never beyond His reach, no matter how far from His path you've gotten. He loves you enough to always bring you back. Even if the road ahead is unclear, follow Him, and you will find joy.