

The Mission and Glory of God Above All Else

Acts: The Spirit Moving / Acts 15:36-16:5 / February 1, 2026

Introduction:

Acts 15:36-16:5 shows the ripple effects of the Jerusalem Council's decisions through two powerful vignettes that prepare us for the next section of Luke's narrative. These stories connect to the response in Antioch we covered last week through a common theme. Note that theme before we dive in. In Acts 15:32, we saw how Judas and Silas strengthened the disciples in Antioch. The story in Acts 15:36-41 ends with Paul and Silas "strengthening the churches" in verse 41. And Luke concludes the second story, in Acts 16:1-5, saying, "So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily." The theme of strengthening leading to growth highlights the priorities the early church and their effect on the Christian mission. To see those priorities, we'll consider each story and its application, before drawing out the main point from both. Start with the first vignette, at the end of chapter 15, where we see,

Paul & Barnabas Separating on Mission

Pay attention to how verse 36 opens. Look there with me, "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.'" "After some days" connects Paul's plan to revisit the churches with the events of the preceding verses. Notice his desire to return with Barnabas to check on the faith of believer where they proclaimed the gospel. These observations show two things. First, Paul was never satisfied with sharing the gospel and moving on. Rather, he desired to ensure faith was strong enough to weather the promised tribulations, and we should do the same. Second, it sets the stage for the problem of this story. Look at 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 But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work." Note the quick progression marked by the word "Now," and contrast introduced by the word "but." This draws attention immediately to the problem while encouraging us slow down to consider it. When we see a contrast in narrative, we should consider everything being contrasted. Notice how Barnabas' desire is contrasted with Paul's wisdom. Remember, language matters. Verse 37 tells us "Barnabas wanted" to take John Mark with them. Verse 38 tells us "Paul thought it best" not to. Notice, also, how the emphasis falls on Paul's reason being John Mark's withdrawal from their previous mission. This clarifies the problem. Barnabas, known as the Son of Encouragement, wants to give John Mark a second chance. Paul, on the other hand, thinks it is unwise because it would put the mission at risk. So, what we are considering is a wisdom decision, meaning there can be different reasonable outcomes. Notice what happens next in verses 39-41, "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." Luke doesn't mince words as the term for disagreement carries the idea of a heated action or emotion. This doesn't necessarily mean anger but, as Kent Hughes puts it, "This was not a mild gentlemen's disagreement but an intense and passionate conflict!" (Kent Hughes, Acts—The Church Afire, p. 203). And we discover this passionate disagreement was significant enough to cause these close and faithful servants of God to separate. Yet, note what follows. There is no condemnation by Luke, but both continue on mission. Barnabas and John Mark sail to Cyprus while Paul chooses Silas and went on to Syria and Cilicia. While it's unclear, I am persuaded the commendation in verse 40 speaks of the church commissioning both groups on mission. Either way, consider what this is showing us. The relationship of two godly men fractured over a wisdom decision they couldn't come to agreement in, leading them in different directions. Though Luke doesn't seem to be sharing this as a fully positive moment, we should recognize the providence of God behind it. Because, as they separated on mission, their strengthening efforts are doubled. Before we move to the next story, consider an application from this story,

1) Don't Let Disagreement Harm the Mission and Taint the Glory of God

Church, disagreement in wisdom decisions may cause believers to separate from close fellowship. These kinds of differences are part of why there are different expressions of the local church. Sometimes separation is unavoidable, and people have to move on according to their conscience. But the testimony of Scripture shows these disagreements should never sever brotherly love. In 1 Corinthians 9, written while Paul was in Ephesus later, Paul speaks of Barnabas as a fellow worker, showing admiration for him. Further, twice Paul will speak of John Mark with love. In Colossians 4:10, he mentions John Mark's instructions and encourages the church to welcome him, which is a phrase for receiving someone in love. Then, in 2 Timothy 4:11, Paul asks Timothy to bring John Mark to him, saying, "he is very useful to me for ministry." Family, do you see how their separation didn't harm their love for each other? We don't know who erred in this moment, and perhaps neither did as John Mark becomes a useful partner in ministry. We can learn a lot from this story. While we rightfully long to remain together on mission, there are times when our desires and wisdom decisions inhibit the fulfillment of that longing. Disagreements may mean we separate on mission, but they should never harm our love for each other. As Paul exhorts us in Romans 12:9-10, "Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor." This story and the testimony of Scripture encourage us not to let desires and wisdom decisions harm the mission and taint the glory of God. Consider the next vignette with me, in chapter 16, where we see,

Paul & Timothy Prioritizing the Mission

This story has caused some to stumble but it doesn't have to if we follow the details and narrative flow. Look at verses 1-3, "Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. 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." Some falsely assume Paul contradicts himself by fighting against the need for circumcision only to circumcise Timothy. Yet, follow these verses closely with me. Luke directly links this story to the desire to strengthen believers with the council's decision by the term "also," keeping the goal of maintaining the truth of salvation by grace through faith alone in view. Note, also, how Timothy is described. His mother is mentioned first, as a Jewish believer, before contrasting her with his Greek father. Then, Timothy is marked as being well spoken of by believers at Lystra and Iconium, before Paul takes him to be circumcised, "because of the Jews who were in those places, for they knew that his father was a Greek." Timothy's reputation and mother's salvation show there was no question of his salvation. However, the repetition of his Greek father in relationship to his Jewish mother points to a concern from the historic context. David Peterson sums it up well, saying, "As an uncircumcised son of a mixed marriage, Timothy would have been regarded by Jews in the region as 'technically an apostate Jew'" (David Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 450). Think about this with me. In every city, Paul would enter the synagogues first to proclaim the gospel to his fellow Jews, never giving up on desiring his Jewish kinsmen to be saved. If they thought he supported an apostate Jew, he couldn't enter the synagogues. So, Paul made a concession here to ensure their witness wasn't hindered. Now, we need to understand Paul's limits to this concession. Look at Galatians 2:2-5, "I went up because of a revelation and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain. But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery—to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you." When encouraging the Galatians to hold firm to the gospel of grace, Paul speaks of his refusal to circumcise Titus, who was also a Greek.

Why did he refuse to circumcise Titus, but take Timothy to be circumcised? Consider the purpose statement in Galatians 2:5, “so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved.” Paul would not swerve when the truth of the gospel was at stake. He refused to circumcise Titus because the purity of the gospel would be harmed, since Titus was fully Greek. He circumcised Timothy because it wouldn’t harm the purity of the gospel, since Timothy was of Jewish heritage. Look at how Acts 16:4-5 focuses on the fruit of this, “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. So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.” Note the immediate connection with the council’s decision not to require circumcision. This confirms Luke doesn’t view Timothy’s circumcision as a contradiction. Then, Luke emphasizes the effect of these events with a powerful summary statement that brings this section of his narrative to a close. The term “so” indicates the strengthening and increase of the church came from the council’s decision and Timothy’s circumcision. Luke is saying, because of the way these things prioritized the mission, God’s new covenant people grew in faith and numbers. Before we bring this all to a close, consider an application from this story,

2) Don’t Let Freedoms Hinder the Mission and Taint the Glory of God

To be clear, Timothy did not have to be circumcised. What we see here is a powerful testimony of how to view our freedoms in light of our mission and the glory of God, fleshed out by Paul in 1 Corinthians 9. Turn there with me. Look at verses 19-23, where Paul says, “For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.” Paul becoming as one under the law and as one outside of the law means he chose to flex his freedoms in Christ around Jews and Gentiles.

When around Jews, he assumed Jewish customs as they related to the law, like circumcising Timothy and fulfilling a nazirite vow. While never budging on salvation issues, he happily gave up his right not to be bound by those customs. When around the Gentiles, he laid aside Jewish customs. One example is how he freely ate in fellowship with Gentiles, though he was mindful of weak consciences, choosing not to eat meat sold in the market for idol sacrifice if it would harm the conscience of others. Paul chose to accommodate the consciences of others, when it didn’t harm gospel purity, for the purpose of winning people to Christ. Family, what rights or freedoms will we willingly lay down to bring someone to Christ? When we lived in Abu Dhabi, Muslims would not expose their shoulders and knees for modesty. Other expatriates could dress as they desired, except in governmental buildings. Yet, many Christians chose to honor Muslims by wearing pants and longer shirts. Mind you, the summer temperatures were around 120 degrees with 90 percent humidity. We were miserable, but it was better to honor and keep from offense, for the sake of the gospel, than enjoy a slightly cooler experience. To this day, I still wear mostly pants and longer shirts to ensure I bring no hinderance to any interaction with a Muslim. Church, this is small in comparison to what Paul and Timothy did but think of how the gospel of Christ may be magnified if we lived like them, choosing to give up our freedoms for the sake of gospel blessings.

Conclusion:

As the worship team comes to lead us in reflection and response, I want to bring this to a close with the main point I see from these stories. The mission and glory of God should come above all else. Whether it was separating on mission while maintaining love or having Timothy circumcised to prioritize the mission, each story shows how the Christian mission and glory of God came above all else for them. This is the call of all who follow Jesus.

As 1 Peter 2:9 tells us, “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” And 2 Corinthians 5:14-20, “we have concluded this: that one [Christ] has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised...Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.” Family, God has lavished his grace on us in Jesus Christ so we would share His glory in the world. Live for the mission of Christ and the glory of God above all else and you will not be disappointed. Let’s pray as look to respond to God’s Word together.

Encouragement for Response:

To help us respond to God’s Word each week, we provide an extended time of worship in song for reflection and response to close our gatherings. During this time, we encourage physical expressions to help engage our hearts. Whether it is standing to sing, raising hands, or coming to kneel before the Lord as a physical posture of humility, these expressions help us respond. We also invite you to come forward to receive prayer from our prayer team worshipping with lanyards on in the front rows or take communion as a physical expression of remembering Christ’s sacrifice for you. The communion elements are at tables up front and near the Mezzanine in the back with gluten free bread to serve those concerns. Anyone who trusts in Christ’s death as the payment for their sin is welcome to partake. Also, to help our giving be a joyful act of worship, baskets are at each table if you desire to bring your giving as a physical expression of worship. 2 Corinthians 9:7 says, “Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver,” so this is not to coerce you to give. Everyone is encouraged to give as and how you would like, whether here, online, by mail, or not at all. Understand these physical expressions are not required but they can help our hearts respond to God’s Word, so, ask the Spirit to guide you and come at any time as you are led.