

Acts 15:36-16:5: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Acts chapter 15 verse 36 to chapter 16 verse 5. 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.

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.

At the end of Acts chapter 15, Paul's second missionary journey begins. Paul and Barnabas had returned to Antioch after their Jerusalem visit. Having ministered for a while in Antioch, they determined to go back to the churches that they had visited on their first missionary journey, and to see how they are progressing in the faith.

They were very young in their faith, and one can imagine that Paul and Barnabas would be anxious to hear that they were progressing. The fact that these churches would be facing persecution, and there were potentially false teachers going around, might also have increased their concern to engage in such a mission.

[1 : 5 5] Barnabas wanted to take John Mark with them. John Mark was the son of Mary, in whose house Jerusalem Christians had met for prayer in chapter 12. John Mark was Barnabas' cousin, as we discover in Colossians chapter 4 verse 10.

John Mark has traditionally been identified with the author of the second gospel. Barnabas and Saul had a major falling out over the inclusion of John Mark. He had originally accompanied them on the first missionary journey, but he had abandoned the mission in chapter 13 verse 13.

The disagreement that they have is a very serious one. We are given the impression that it was very heated. It is so sharp a disagreement that they have to part ways at this point. Reading through the book of Acts, in many respects we are seeing the highlights of a period stretched out over almost three decades in several different locations.

We have just had a high point in the events of the Jerusalem council, which had followed a very troubling period, as there had been a serious dispute between Peter and Paul themselves and Antioch, and teachers from Jerusalem had threatened the entire mission to the uncircumcised.

Now there is another setback, with a falling out between two key people whose shared mission had been so pivotal in the last few chapters. One can imagine that with such a young movement, and with so much riding upon particular key relationships, relationships that would have constituted bonds between churches, we should remember that Barnabas is originally from Jerusalem, and likely the strongest personal tie between the two most important churches.

[3 : 26] This would certainly have been a very serious discouragement and setback, potentially throwing much into uncertainty. As readers of the book of Acts in the 21st century, we know how the story turns out, but we should try to enter into something of the feelings of the early Christians, and to recognise just how vulnerable they might have felt at some of these junctures, knowing of the incredible success that the church has experienced from the days of the apostles onwards, we don't feel the full blows of the discouragements in the text.

For those living through such history, however, it might have felt like riding a rollercoaster at times. Barnabas took along John Mark with him to Cyprus. As we should recall from chapter 4, Barnabas was a Levite from Cyprus, while Paul chose Silas to accompany him and goes throughout Syria and Cilicia to encourage and strengthen the churches.

These missions were incredibly important in forging a robust church. Much of the formation of the church at this stage was not merely about the development of lots of local churches, but about the development of a lively network between many otherwise isolated churches across Judea, Syria, and at this point Asia Minor.

Forging bonds of mutual love and trust would enable the movement to grow in ways that it could not if every church was isolated from the others. Many of the new churches may not yet have had mature Christian ministers, but would have depended heavily upon visiting teachers, prophets and missionaries.

Paul returns to Derbe and to Lystra. While at Lystra he encounters a disciple called Timothy, who is held in high esteem by the Christians in the region. Timothy's mother was a Jew and his father was a Greek, which would certainly have provoked severe disapproval in some more observant Jewish quarters, although some diaspora Jews may have been more relaxed about it.

[5 : 17] The problem was not chiefly an ethnic one, but a religious one. Inter-marriage with people outside of the covenant was seen as a very serious matter, in many parts of the Old Testament.

From 2 Timothy chapter 1 verse 5, we learn that both Timothy's mother and grandmother were faithful persons, and that he was taught the scriptures from a young age. So we should not suppose that Timothy's mother was indifferent towards her Jewish faith.

We can speculate over whether or not Timothy's father was a God-fearer associated with the synagogue. However, the fact that Timothy had not been circumcised raises the possibility that his mother's marriage was less than ideal, perhaps arranged by an unbelieving father.

Timothy's religious status would have seemed rather ambiguous then, and might perhaps have been a cause of scandal to some. Timothy himself, though, is a living example of a Jew and Gentile union.

He straddles these two worlds in his very person. Considering the obstacle that Timothy's ambiguous status might provide for the mission, though, Paul determines that it would be best to circumcise him, a course of action that might seem surprising, given how strongly Paul has recently opposed the circumcision of Gentiles.

[6 : 27] Timothy, however, is not a Gentile, but a Jew of ambiguous origins. Paul's concern is not circumcision, but the cause of the mission. Circumcising Timothy will help them to accomplish this.

The principle that Paul is following here is that which he describes in 1 Corinthians 9, verses 19-23. 1 Corinthians 10, verses 19-23.

In circumcising Timothy, Paul plays the part of a father to him.

Timothy would come to be immensely important in Paul's later ministry, serving as Paul's personal representative. Timothy is Paul's sheliach, the one who personally represents Paul, where Paul himself cannot be.

As such, Timothy would come to participate in the exercise of Paul's apostolic ministry. He is the co-author of epistles, 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Philemon.

[7 : 55] He acts as Paul's personal emissary in places like Acts 19, verse 22, and 1 Timothy, chapter 1, verse 3. He is the one who served Paul, so that Paul could give himself to the primary task of preaching without any distraction, something that we maybe see in Acts chapter 18, verses 1-5.

Timothy could participate directly in Paul's exercise of his apostolic power. Paul and Timothy are a pair. They are bound together in a single apostolic mission. On occasions, the distinction between them is made very plain.

Only Paul is the apostle proper, while on other occasions their alignment is stressed. Timothy is a co-worker. He is a helper and sharer in Paul's calling. Relative to the churches to which they were ministering, Timothy was to be treated as a bearer of Paul's own authority.

However, relative to Paul, Timothy was a subordinate, without an independent commission of his own, but rather a share in Paul's. The relationship between Paul and Timothy is exceptionally close, and Paul speaks of Timothy as his own son.

The language here is not merely that of emotional closeness, but of representation. The son represents the father, his authority, his presence, and his interests. It also points to a relationship similar to that which pertained between Old Testament leaders and prophets and their shaliacs.

[9 : 15] In Numbers chapter 13, verse 16, we see that Joshua's name was given to him by Moses, who also lays his hands on Joshua in Deuteronomy chapter 34, verse 9. A similar relationship exists between Elijah and Elisha.

Elisha receives a double portion of Elijah's spirit, the inheritance appropriate to the firstborn. And as Elijah is taken into heaven, Elisha addresses him as his father.

Matthew Colvin observes, That Timothy as a virtual copy of Paul is underlined by 1 Corinthians chapter 4, verses 16-17. I urge you, imitate me.

For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church.

The charge to imitate Paul then is accompanied by the sending of Timothy toward the fulfillment of this end, as the son is the preeminent imitator and representation of his father.

[10 : 13] As a participant in his father's ministry, and as Paul's right-hand man, Timothy would come to have immense authority to wield, even being given the commission to choose and appoint church officers as Paul's representative.

As the apostolic ministry was temporary, upon Paul's death, Timothy would cease to be the apostle's apostle, and would presumably have become a bishop. Timothy might not usually be in the foreground of the story in the book of Acts, but his importance for Paul's missionary work should not be understated.

As Timothy accompanies Paul and Silas, they pass through the cities, giving them word of the judgment of the Jerusalem council, encouraging them and strengthening them in the faith, knitting them in with the wider body of the church that is being formed in various parts of the world.

A question to consider. Considering what we know of Paul and Barnabas' different characters, what might have been some of the factors influencing their falling out concerning John Mark?