

EXPOSITION OF ACTS

Message #35

Acts 15:36-41

Joseph Scriven was a wealthy, educated man who lived in Ireland. He met a girl he wanted to marry and on the night before the wedding, his fiancée drowned. Mr. Scriven was heartbroken. He left Ireland and moved to Port Hope, Canada, and he decided he would devote his life to being a friend and helper to others. In fact, he became known as “the Good Samaritan of Port Hope.” One day he learned that his mother was very ill in Ireland and he wrote her a letter that contained a poem – “What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear. What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer...have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere? We should never be discouraged – take it to the Lord in prayer.” Joseph Scriven learned that the best friend one can have is Jesus Christ. There is no better friend and there is no closer friend and that point was the very experience of two very close friends – Paul and Barnabas.

Paul and Barnabas had been friends for years. In fact, we may remember it was Barnabas who first believed in Paul and took him before the apostles in Jerusalem (Acts 9:27). It was Barnabas who realized the church of Antioch needed a great teacher and he went and got Paul in Tarsus and brought him back to Antioch (Acts 11:22-26). It was Barnabas who was sent out with Paul on his first missionary journey by the church of Antioch (Acts 13:2-3). In fact, it was the Holy Spirit who actually led the church to the selection of Barnabas (Acts 13:2). But that friendship was about to take a new twist and was about to change forever and it all happens right here. What we see is this:

TWO FRIENDS WHO LOVED THE LORD, WHO WORKED TOGETHER IN MINISTRY, HAD SUCH A DISAGREEMENT THAT THEY PART COMPANY AND GO THEIR SEPARATE WAYS, AND GOD GREATLY USES ONE AND THE OTHER DISAPPEARS.

Two friends split up and go different directions. As we will see, God was still sovereign and God continued to use both men, but it is a shame that they could not resolve their differences.

Now some who have studied this text conclude that no one was right or wrong here, but I do not agree with that. I believe Barnabas was wrong and he should have submitted to Paul. The proof is we never hear of Barnabas again after this moment in the book of Acts. Barnabas has been a key player of this book of Acts since Acts chapter 4:36. He was a key man of God especially when he was connected to Paul, but the moment he struck out on his own and the moment he refused to submit to Paul he disappears, and the focal point of God stays with Paul for the rest of the book of Acts. Some have said that this moment right here ruins Barnabas’ life, because he loses his effectiveness from this moment forward.

No one strengthens their usability before God by trying to usurp authority. Submission to proper authority is always the mandate found in the Word of God. Constituents who submit to government, employees who submit to employers, congregations who submit to leadership, men who submit to Jesus Christ, wives who submit to their husbands and children who submit to their parents will discover God will use them in great ways.

If you don't want to submit, you don't have to, but you'll not end up as some spiritual giant used greatly by God; more likely you'll end up in oblivion like Barnabas.

There are seven historical facts we want to observe:

HISTORICAL FACT #1 – Paul and Barnabas stayed a long time in Antioch preaching and teaching God's Word. 15:35

Barnabas was a good man and a great teacher. He was an encourager (Acts 4:36). He was a man full of the Holy Spirit and faith (Acts 11:24). He is a mature, godly man and he had a true grasp of God's grace Gospel.

He had learned the doctrines and he had learned the difference between law and grace. He knew of the doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ apart from any works (Acts 13:38-39). He could make the Scriptures come to life, especially when he was working with Paul.

In the aftermath of their theological war with the Pharisaical legalists, both Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch teaching and preaching the Word of God.

HISTORICAL FACT #2 – Paul suggested to Barnabas that they revisit believers from their first missionary journey. 15:36

The Apostle Paul felt an apostolic responsibility to those churches that they had founded in those Gentile areas. Paul wanted to backtrack to every city where they had proclaimed the Word of the Lord and check up on the believers and see how they were doing and growing.

We may remember that Paul and Barnabas left Antioch of Syria on their first missionary journey and went to the island of Cypress and worked their way through every city preaching and teaching God's Word. From there they sailed to Pamphylia and taught in cities like Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe.

Paul and Barnabas risked their lives to communicate the grace Gospel, and when Paul was in Lystra they stoned him and left him for dead. What Paul wanted to do was to revisit all of these cities to see how the believers were doing.

Again, we certainly see the emphasis of a true Pauline ministry. He went and carefully proclaimed the Word of God. Paul went from place to place and carefully preached and taught God's Word.

HISTORICAL FACT #3 – Barnabas wants to take John Mark along with them. 15:37

We are not told why Barnabas wanted to take John Mark along again. Since Barnabas was a great encourager, he may have wanted to give him another opportunity to be involved in the work of God along with him and Paul.

John Mark was a solid believer. He was not a novice. John Mark was with the group of praying believers the night the angel broke Peter out of prison (Acts 12:12). He was Barnabas' cousin (Col. 4:10). John Mark had started on that first missionary journey with Paul and Barnabas. He had gone along with them to be their helper (Acts 13:5).

Barnabas thought it would be good to take him along with them, but this is ultimately going to create a big problem between Paul and Barnabas.

HISTORICAL FACT #4 – Paul would not permit John Mark to travel with him. **15:38**

When Barnabas mentioned John Mark's name, it disturbed the Apostle Paul to the point where he said "no way." He isn't going with us. Paul kept insisting that he was supposed to be our helper and he bailed out on us. Paul did not hang around with quitters. He was very particular about who he permitted to link their name to his.

Now Paul specifically says that Mark had "deserted" (αφίστημι) them. Paul uses a very strong Greek verb here which would indicate that Paul viewed this as falling away apostasy (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 71).

We do not actually know why John Mark left Paul and Barnabas on the island of Cypress and returned to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13), but what we do know is that Paul considered it to be a major defection. Some say he was scared; some say he was homesick; some say too young; some say he did not like Paul's teaching on grace; but whatever the reason, Paul viewed it as desertion. He would not go with them to Pamphylia and Paul was emphatic that this was a critical desertion and defection.

Some people hold to the idea that if you are in ministry you cannot ever be fired because ministry is a place of grace, not merit. Many missionaries and pastors think you should always support them even if they aren't doing anything. But here is the way Paul saw it. If you are not producing what you are supposed to be producing in ministry, you are done. Paul viewed ministry as serious, sacred business and he did not surround himself with defectors.

Churches were supporting him and he was not about to let some slacker share that support.

HISTORICAL FACT #5 – Paul and Barnabas split up . **15:39a**

This issue caused a "sharp disagreement" (παροξυσμος) between Paul and Barnabas. The Greek word suggests that this issue was so irritating that it stimulated and provoked anger (Ibid., pp. 346-347). This was a very heated disagreement.

This truly is a sad split because Paul really was more indebted to Barnabas than any other man on earth. It was Barnabas who really gave Paul opportunities to be accepted in Jerusalem and be a key teacher in Antioch. Sometimes good Christians disagree and the disagreement may be intense. Some have suggested that no one is right here and no one is wrong here. But I am not so sure about that.

Barnabas should have submitted to Paul here. Paul outranked Barnabas. This will turn out to be a bad move for Barnabas. He should have submitted to Paul. In all reality, Barnabas is breaking away from the greatest believer and apostle in the history of the Church. To this day, we carefully study the great books God inspired that were written by Paul.

Years ago when I was in school, I had to take a pastoral theology course and one of the books we had to study was a book called “Sharpening the Focus of the Church.” My brother, at the time, was in Dallas Seminary and we traveled to visit with him, and the man who wrote the book was co-pastoring a church with another good Bible teacher. So we decided to visit that church and the author of the book was speaking that particular Sunday.

Several months later we learned that the church had split. Apparently there was some disagreement, which is none of my business, between the two men who were pastoring the church so they split. I always thought that was sad.

That is what happens to Paul and Barnabas here. It is very, very sad. This was all due to the fact that neither would bend in their position concerning Mark. But as we have already said, Barnabas should have been the one to back off here.

HISTORICAL FACT #6 – Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus to the southwest.
15:39b

It is right at this point that Barnabas disappears into oblivion. This point should cause each of us to carefully consider an important biblical principle; submission to authority is always God’s way to greatness. Rebellion against authority will lead you to oblivion.

Sometimes you can tell who was right and who was wrong in an argument. God continues to greatly use and bless the one right and the one wrong just seems to disappear out of the picture. According to tradition, Barnabas stayed on the island of Cypress and died there as an old man.

I heard Dr. Swindoll say that he pastored a church one time out east that was miserable. His ministry didn’t work and he wasn’t treated very well. So he ended up leaving that ministry. Now I don’t need to know all the details of that situation, but what I can tell you is that Dr. Chuck Swindoll has been used greatly by God all over the world, and we don’t even know the name of the church that mistreated him. You don’t have to be some brilliant historical analyst to observe; it would appear that God’s hand of blessing has been on Dr. Swindoll and not on the church that made things difficult for him.

That is what we observe here. Barnabas disappears, but God’s hand is on Paul. The fact that Barnabas would choose Mark over Paul was a bad move. It didn’t lead him to greatness; it led him off the pages of biblical history.

HISTORICAL FACT #7 – Paul chose Silas and traveled northwest . 15:40-41

Now Silas had come from Jerusalem to defend grace (15:22). He had been a leading man in the church of Jerusalem and he was a powerful teacher of God's Word (15:32). Apparently, he had traveled back to Jerusalem (15:33) and then decided he wanted to go back to Antioch and be part of the Pauline ministry. This is a key moment in the life of Silas. God had him there to join Paul and Paul chose him. By the way, the text is clear that Paul chose him. In other words, the determining person in this calling was Paul, not Silas. It is the same in our salvation. God chooses us. The same is true in our service; God chooses us.

It is interesting that God did use this split to form two different missionary teams that went two different directions. But the truth is we will see the powerful ways that God used Paul, and we lose track of what God did with Barnabas.

Paul and Silas will have an incredible and impacting ministry. I am sure that when the split occurred, Paul felt bad. But sometimes through splits and problems and setbacks God can take his servants to new levels of usability and to the greatest blessings of their lives.

One of the greatest preachers in American history was Phillip Brooks in the 1800's, actually "Phillips Brooks." There is a statue of him in front of a church in Boston. One thing that really stands out to me is that he was a full manuscript preacher and a powerful communicator of God's Word. He is the man who wrote "O Little Town of Bethlehem." Before he became a preacher he was a school teacher, and he failed as a school teacher. He didn't like his students and his students didn't like him. He actually was fired from his job and he said "I do not know what will become of me and I do not care much..." It was a split from teaching that led to God working in his life and ultimately leading him to his greatest impact.

That is what happened to Paul. It is a major set back. He split with his dear friend Barnabas, but that split would lead to his greatest impact throughout the whole world. At the time the split happened, you would not think that anything good could come out of it. But the fact is God uses all things for His good and for His glory.

Perhaps you have gone through a nasty break in some relationship and you feel very low. You turn your life over to the Lord and watch what He will do. We all need to realize that the best friend we will ever have in our life is Jesus Christ. He will never fail you.