

Sermon for ABC July 19, 2026

Scripture: Acts 15: 36 through 16:10 (read in service), Romans 8:28(TOTD)

Introduction

Good morning, I am glad to be with you today as we continue this study of Acts. Would you please stand and pray with me?

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We begin today in Acts chapter 15 verse 36: Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.”

“Some time later” could mean a lot of different things. Some time later than what? It is the kind of phrase that asks of us, the reader, to do a little research in order to figure out the context. So, as we look at the context for this week, we need to remember that Paul takes 4 missionary journeys. If you have a hard copy of your bible (hint hint) you may find a map like this one in the back that shows each of these journeys and all the stops along the way. Perhaps you also have a timeline. For this section of scripture, I found that looking at maps and timelines has been very helpful.

Let’s also remember that dates during this era of world history are a little tricky, and you will sometimes see conflicting timelines, but what we are looking for here is a sense of the passing of time, not exact dates.

For our purpose today let’s start with Jesus’ death and resurrection around AD 30. Just 5 years later, Saul meets Jesus on the road to Damascus. But the converted Saul doesn’t immediately start a missionary journey, instead he spends about 10 years off the radar as far as the story of Acts is concerned. It is likely that he was teaching as well as learning from the apostles and growing in maturity as a Christian. Paul’s first journey starts around the year AD 46 and it concluded with the council in Jerusalem that we learned about last week.

Now after the council of Jerusalem, it says in Acts 15:35 that Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch – which was essentially their home church – and strengthened their brothers and sisters there. The consensus seems to be that this lasted for about a year, during which time Paul wrote the epistle to the Galatians. Then around the year AD 49 Paul says to Barnabas – “Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.”

This is just good practice for missionaries – it is exactly the kind of ministry that Jay and Heather do as they travel the world to check in on the missionaries they mentor.

So, Paul wants to go check up on everyone and we pick up the story in Verse 37:

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.

Perhaps you remember a few weeks ago when John Mark left the group. It was in Acts 13:13 and scripture does not say why he left. Pastor Keith mentioned one common theory that John was upset by Paul starting to upstage Barnabas. Another theory is simply that he was young, immature, and home sick. All we know is that he bailed before the trip really even began and for this reason Paul is reluctant to bring him along. Paul knows that the journey is going to be hard, that they are going to face persecution in many cities, that the travel itself will be difficult, and Paul doesn't want to risk losing a helper again.

Barnabas sees it differently. A key point here is that John Mark is a relative of Barnabas – probably a younger cousin – and Barnabas has known John Mark for a very long time, perhaps for his whole life. Barnabas has been described as an encourager, and it seems he was the kind of person who was quick to see the best in other people. I think Barnabas was sure that John Mark was ready now – even if he hadn't been a few years earlier, but it may also be the case the Barnabas was blinded by his family ties and could not see the immaturity that was so clear to Paul.

Let us not forget that it was Barnabas who brought the newly converted Saul, now Paul, to the apostles when everyone else was afraid of him. Barnabas was quick to trust Paul and to vouch for him. Barnabas may have been around the same age as Paul – with some early sources suggesting they both studied under Gamaliel, but spiritually Barnabas was the elder having been a disciple of Jesus. It is Barnabas who seeks out Saul and asks him to join him in ministry. At the church in Antioch, Barnabas was what we would call the senior pastor and Paul the associate, but Barnabas saw the giftedness and passion of Paul and supported his vision for mission work.

Paul knows all of this, and yet Paul so strongly disagrees with Barnabas about John Mark that they have to part company and each go their separate ways.

It is interesting to contrast this conflict with the one that was resolved last week at the council of Jerusalem – there, we find a great example of how conflict in the church should be dealt with – this seems to be an example of what NOT to do.

The text does not say if Paul or Barnabas prayed about this issue, or asked anyone for advice. It was a short, heated argument followed by two hurt people going their separate ways. Scripture does not say who was right and who was wrong – probably both men share some portion of the fault.

Although it seems like they separate on bad terms, there is some evidence that they reconciled later. Paul seems to speak favorably toward Barnabas in 1st Corinthians 9:6. That would be about 10 years after this conflict and at that time it seems Barnabas was still doing ministry of some kind.

Then later in 2 Timothy 4:11 (about 18 years after their split) Paul asks that John Mark be sent to visit him in prison and Paul describes him as very helpful. So, either Paul has come to forgive and trust John Mark, or John Mark has grown to be more trustworthy over the course of 20 years. Probably a combination of both.

Picking up in the Verse 39: Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord. He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

A key point for us today is that God doesn't let this conflict derail the mission. God raises up a new partner for Paul, and Barnabas continues to mentor John Mark. Both will grow to be important leaders in the Church. And as we flip over into chapter 16, we see that Paul also adds Timothy to the group.

Paul came to Derbe and then to Lystra, (these were both places he visited a few years prior) where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was Jewish and a believer but whose father was a Greek. The believers 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.

Here is another interesting contrast to Chapter 15. If you were paying attention at all last week, you heard that circumcision – a Jewish ritual – was a point of conflict in the early church and that Paul was strongly of the position that it was NOT necessary for gentiles. So why does he go to the trouble to have Timothy circumcised here?

Well, as we read of Paul in his epistles, the gospel is central, and Paul argues that that Christians should choose to live in such a way so as not to hinder their brothers and sisters from hearing the gospel.

Paul would have continued to argue that Timothy was already saved, and that circumcision had no effect on that point, but Paul knew that in order to teach and encourage the Jewish Christian in that area, and in order to bring the gospel to Jews who were not followers of Jesus yet, that he would need to take Timothy into the synagogues. Timothy was known in the area, everyone knew his father was Greek (not Jewish). So, Paul chooses a course of action that doesn't put a stumbling block in front of his Jewish brothers and sisters. This plan works and as we pick up in verse 4 we read that:

As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem (that's the letter that they wrote) So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.

At this point we need to return to the **map** in order to make sense of the list of towns and places. They are traveling west through what is now Turkey.

Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. So, they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas.

So here on the **map** we can see how God guided Paul and his companions down to Troas. Down probably refers to elevation since it was by the coast. But this was not their original plan. Their first inclination was to go south west through the province or region of Asia towards the major city of Ephesus. But they were somehow blocked from going that way, so they tried to turn north into Bithynia.

They tried turning to the left, they tried turning to the right. Their motives were good – to preach the gospel in new places. But for whatever reason the Holy Spirit did not permit them to go there. It was the wrong place and the wrong time, and so they came instead to Troas.

Why Troas? It wasn't Paul's first or even second choice. But the other doors were closed, so that's where they ended up. For us, this is a good reminder of how God sometimes works. Sometimes God leads us where he wants us to be, not by telling us directly "Go to Troas", but by blocking other options until it's the only one that makes sense. Sometimes God's direction in our life is seen more clearly through the doors that close than the doors that open.

Concluding our reading for today in verses 9 and 10

During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

It is only once they get to Troas that God’s purposes are clear. 1st, it is in Troas – right on the coast – where Paul is given the dream – a vision – of a man across the sea in Macedonia and a clear calling to go and preach. This is where God was guiding them, not letting the group get sidetracked to the left or right, but straight down to the coast where they can find a ship. That’s where Paul needs to preach next.

2nd – it is here in Troas where God has placed another helper, another person who is called to join the party and contribute to the spreading of the Gospel. Look again at verse 10: “After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave” – This is the first time in Acts that the narrator switches to the pronoun “we”. The indication is that it’s here – in Troas – not Ephesus, not Bithynia, but Troas where Paul meets the doctor named Luke, who will join him as a companion and helper, who will care for Paul and who will one day write down the gospel of Luke and Acts.

Isn’t it odd how this string of events led to Paul connecting with Luke? Perhaps as you look back on your own life you can think of similar experiences. In our family we often recount the string of events that led to my parents meeting as counselors at a church camp in northern Pennsylvania. My Dad had grown up in the area, but Mom was from Kansas, she only ended up there for the summer because her sister had a baby and she wanted to come and help out. And then it just so happened that the camp was short a female counselor, and it just so happened that her sister’s father-in-law was the camp director. And it goes on and on. All the way back to a flood in 1972 in Corning, NY which was so bad that people from all over the country came to help clean up for years afterward, including my Mom’s sister, who would, on that service trip, meet *her* future husband and the rest, as they say, is history.

Paul connects with Luke because he didn’t go to Bithynia, he didn’t go to Ephesus, he didn’t follow Barnabas to Cyprus. As we look back on this part of Paul’s life, we can clearly see God at work guiding his servant through the good and the bad. It probably wasn’t God’s plan for Barnabas and Paul to have their dispute and part company, but God used their parting to give them each new helpers who would grow into leaders of the church.

It may even be the case that Paul remembered this period of his life about 7 years later when he penned his letter to the Romans in which he wrote the well-known line that's printed on the front of your worship folder: "And we know that in *all things* God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

This is such a well-known verse that I wonder if we sometimes don't stop to think about it. God doesn't work through some things, or most things, but all things. The good and the bad. Our successes and our failures. God has a purpose for each of you. He made you and designed you just for that purpose. You may not know what it is yet, it may be many long years before God reveals it to you, but we can be sure that if we love and follow Him wherever he leads that He will pull everything together for good.

There may be trouble along the way, in fact we should expect trouble and hardship, but God is good and will be with us at every step. And in the end, we will be able to look back and see the long string of events where God moved in subtle and sometimes not so subtle ways, opening doors and closing them, speaking through friends and mentors or a well-timed book, speaking to us through dreams or visions, or whispering in the silence of a sleepless night. As we look back, we will one day see how God worked ALL things out for good.

Would you stand and pray with me?

Lord Jesus, thank you for the witness of your word, and the gift of your presence with us each and every day. As we go from this place, may we practice living humbly, ready to lean on the wisdom of each other. May we learn the patience to wait for Your direction even when it seems like all we find are closed doors. And I pray you would give us the confidence to live boldly, knowing that our Father is working all things out for good. Amen.