

Key:

Purple – Introduction, Conclusion, Main Points, and Sermon Thread

Blue – Explanation/Exposition

Red – Application

Green – Illustration

Brown – Quotation

Yellow – Sermon Notes

Messiness on the Way to Macedonia

Acts 15:36–16:10

Take your Bibles and turn with me to **Acts 15:36**. Previously we saw God use good leaders to protect the gospel from corruption and perversion. Today we're going to see once again the catapulting of the gospel throughout the world even as far away as the region of Macedonia. More on that in a minute!

But before we get into that, let me just make an obvious observation to set up the text. This statement is not twitter-worthy or anything like that. It's just a fact of life that I've come to embrace. Here it is—"life is messy." Amen? Everybody agree with me on that?

And as much as you try to de-messify your life... as much as you try to sanitize and organize and systematize your life, sometimes things come along and blow that all to pieces. Is that true? Now for someone like myself who is OCD, life creates messes that are hard to deal with. Sometimes I'm responsible for those messes myself. Sometimes it's caused by others. Life is messy.

But here's a comfort. I believe in a God who replaces beauty for ashes. And sometimes God does his best work in spite of our messiness. Sometimes... here's the thesis for today's message, "God uses the not-so-great circumstances of life to bring about his greater purposes."

Our passage today is **Acts 15:36–16:10**. And the title of our message is "Messiness on the Way to Macedonia." At the end of our passage... by the time we reach **Acts 16:10**... Paul and his cohort are going to enter a whole new continent for the first time, namely Europe. And this is a continent that before **Acts 15** had never heard the gospel of Jesus Christ.¹ But that's about to change.

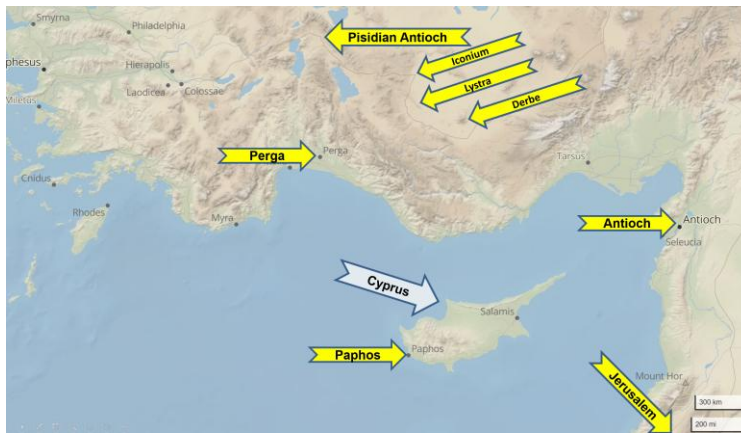
One author referred to this as one of the greatest turning points in history. This is as significant or even more significant than when Columbus set sail from Spain or when Vasco da Gama discovered the sea route to the West Indies.²

Yet before we get to that momentous occasion when Paul went to Europe to evangelize for the first time, let's deal with the messiness. Let's deal with the messiness that transpired on the way to Macedonia.

Now remember, Paul and Barnabas had just recently completed their first missionary journey. In **Acts 14**, they went to the island of Cyprus and to other cities north of that island to preach the gospel and plant churches. And despite opposition, they were phenomenally successful.

¹ This statement is debatable. The church in Rome had heard the gospel and been established before Paul ever visited Rome. But the timing of this and its correlation with Paul's second missionary journey is difficult to ascertain.

² Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 24.



Paul's First Missionary Journey³

And in **Acts 15** they traveled down to Jerusalem to protect the gospel from “Pharisaical Judaizers.” These were the guys who said, “Unless you are circumcised... you cannot be saved” (**15:1**). Paul and Barnabas won a rousing victory over the Judaizers. Peter and James backed them not the Judaizers! And then, they returned to Antioch and look at **verse 31**, “[the church at Antioch] rejoiced.” And **verse 35** says, “Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.”⁴

So now what? What’s Paul going to do now? Is he going to stay and keep preaching in Antioch?⁵ **No, he gets itchy feet. Look at verse 36.**

³⁶ And after some days [maybe a few weeks,⁶ maybe a few months]⁷ 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.”

“The cities in Cyprus and the cities in Galatia! Those cities and those churches where God did such an amazing work!”

“It’s time for another adventure, Barnabas! It’s time to check in on the brothers.”⁸ And by the way, this is significant, because Christ’s mission wasn’t just a call for raw evangelism (as important as that is). Christ’s call was a call to make disciples.⁹ And disciples need to be followed up on.¹⁰ Churches and church folk need to be checked on and encouraged to keep doing what they’re doing.

When I was a young church planter in Illinois, we had a group of people from our mother church that would check in on me from time to time. And that was really good for me and for our elders. And

³ Atlas taken from Logos Bible Study, Computer software. *Logos Bible Study Atlas* (Bellingham: Faithlife, LLC), June 7, 2025. Some geographical points added by author.

⁴ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 661: “The reference to ‘many others’ (ἐτέρων πολλῶν) who teach and preach the good news describes the Antioch church as engaged in proclaiming the “word of the Lord” (see on 4:29) both to Christians and to non-Christians; they would have included Simon Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen (cf. 13:1), but evidently other teachers and preachers who had assumed leadership functions when Barnabas and Paul had been sent off by the church (13:2–3) to do missionary work in the cities of Cyprus, Galatia, and Pamphylia.”

⁵ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 670: “Churches do not need to ‘discover’ what their ‘mission’ is—the task of missionary outreach is an integral part of the DNA of an authentic church. An exclusive focus of pastoral activities and financial resources on one’s own local congregation is not only selfish, but a denial of the good news of Jesus that needs to be carried to regions, cities, neighborhoods, and people who had not yet heard, or understood, the gospel.”

⁶ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 661: “If Silas returned from Antioch to Jerusalem, as 15:33 suggests, Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch at least two months, allowing Silas to travel the 335 miles (540 kilometers) twice: from Antioch to Jerusalem and back.”

⁷ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 341: “The imprecise time expression is perhaps more significant as Luke’s way of marking a major new division in the narrative [see 18:1; 21:15; 24:1; 25:1; 28:11, 17].”

⁸ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 519: “God will do far more than Paul plans, as a new journey is launched at Acts 16:6.”

⁹ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 337: “At this point, they were not evangelizing but discipling, showing that there is room in ministry for both.”

¹⁰ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 41: “In an age before email and social media, Paul had little to no information on the well-being of the churches he had planted. He longed to return to them and strengthen them in their faith and see how they had progressed in discipleship.”

they would travel and visit our church and see how we were doing. That was tremendous for me and my church as we were just getting off the ground. That was a shot in the arm for us.

Paul and Barnabas did this in the first century. They decided to go back to the places where they planted churches. Just to be clear, the churches that they planted are autonomous now. They even have their own elders! But they are baby churches full of baby Christians. And they need some checking up on and some encouraging and some strengthening.

So this plan sounds great to Barnabas. They both agree to visit the churches. **But here's where a wrench gets thrown into their gears.** Here's the messiness. Look at **verse 37**.

³⁷ Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark.¹¹

Now just a few details about John Mark. John Mark is Barnabas's cousin (**Col 4:10**). This is the guy who was sent out with Paul and Barnabas from Antioch a few years earlier. But John Mark didn't make it even halfway through their journey. **Acts 13:13** says "John left them and returned to Jerusalem." **He literally went running back to his mama in Jerusalem** (see **Acts 12:12**).

Now we don't know why he deserted the mission, but we can probably guess that John Mark had enough of travel, sickness, sorcerers, and opposition. And he eventually said, **"I can't take this anymore."** And he packed his bags and went home.

And he even left before things got really bad—when people tried to kill Paul and Barnabas in Galatia. And Barnabas is like, **"Let's give the kid another chance. He's grown in the last few years, Paul. He's matured. I want him to go with us."**

Remember now, Barnabas's name was Joseph, but they called him Barnabas, which means "the son of encouragement" (see **Acts 4:36**). He's going to err on the side of grace and encouragement. **This is on brand for him—"give the kid another chance."**

But look at this. Look at Paul's response in **verse 38**.

³⁸ But Paul thought best not to take¹² with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work.¹³

Let me just say this about the Apostle Paul—his nickname wasn't the "son of encouragement." That doesn't mean he never encouraged people. He did! Especially later in life, he did! But that wasn't his natural temperament. Paul was a hardliner. Paul's got a soldier's mentality.¹⁴

I could see Paul saying something like this, **"You don't reward deserters, Barnabas. This guy's not combat-ready. This guy's soft! And we can't afford to have "soft" people on the battlefield. So Barnabas, turn your "son of encouragement" dial down a little bit and think reasonably about this."**

Paul's got a point. I can almost hear Paul say something like this at this time: **"My good opinion once lost is lost forever."**

Now who's right here? Paul or Barnabas?¹⁵ Let me just argue both sides. From Barnabas's perspective, he might have said something like this **"We all need second chances, Paul. Paul, you're being too task-**

¹¹ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 662: "John Mark... may have accompanied the group of Christian leaders that traveled from Jerusalem to Antioch after the Apostles' Council."

¹² Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 519: "Barnabas wants him along, but Paul does not count (ἡξιού, *ēxiou*) it wise, given Mark's past track record. This word appears rarely in the NT (28:22; Luke 7:7; 2 Thess. 1:11; 1 Tim. 5:17; Heb. 3:3; 10:29; 2 Macc. 4:19; 4 Macc. 5:17). The idea is to count something worthy. There is a variation in tense here. Barnabas wants to take (συμπαλαβεῖν, *symparalabein*, aorist) along John Mark, but Paul does not want him to be along (συμπαλαμβάνειν, *symparalambanein*, continuous present)."

¹³ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 662: "The term 'the work' (τὸ ἔργον) denotes missionary work, i.e., the proclamation of the good news of Jesus to Jews and Greeks and the teaching of new converts, and it includes the travels and the travails of missionaries."

¹⁴ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 519–20: "Some scholars argue that the real point of contention was that Barnabas preferred a Jewish Christian style of mission to Gentiles, as did Antioch, whereas Paul wanted a law-free effort... This is most unlikely... There is no indication that Barnabas held to such a view; Paul challenged him not for a theological failure but for hypocrisy (Gal. 2:13)."

¹⁵ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 42: "Is Barnabas or Paul in the right? Luke does not tell us. He makes no judgments. Instead, we can learn valuable principles from this text. First, Christians ought to imitate the kindheartedness and forgiving spirit of Barnabas. Forgiveness flows from a heart which knows it has been forgiven by God. Second, however, we must learn from Paul's conviction and determination. While we must be apt to forgive, we must not let emotional attachments direct our gospel vision. Paul knew the challenges of the road before him and his team, and he did not view Mark as suited for the task. Paul knew the trials that he would

oriented. Our mission is about people not tasks. Show some grace. You need to balance, Paul, your truth-mindedness with some grace.”

And maybe also Barnabas said something like this, “I was in Jerusalem, Paul, when you helped stone Stephen. You made mistakes too, buddy. And yet when you got saved, I vouched for you. When everyone else was terrified of you and wrote you off, I worked alongside of you. Now it’s your turn to show some grace to John Mark.” Makes sense, doesn’t it? How many of you would agree with Barnabas?

In response, Paul might have said something like this, “Barnabas, this kid’s not ready. He needs to grow up a little more. This isn’t a task for just anybody. Missions work is hard. It’s dangerous. John Mark abandoned us when we needed him the most, and I’m not willing to risk that again.”

“And you know what, Barnabas, I think you might be favoring him right now because he’s your cousin. Blood is thicker than water, eh? He needs to stay here and grow up a little bit before he heads out on another mission trip. Barnabas you need to balance your grace-mindedness with truth.” That makes sense too, doesn’t it?

Also, by the way, Paul’s the apostle, right? Shouldn’t Barnabas submit to Paul’s authority here even though he’s younger? How many of you would agree with Paul? How many of you would agree with Barnabas?¹⁶

So what happens? Who wins the argument? Look at **verse 39**.

³⁹ And there arose a sharp disagreement [here’s the Greek word **παροξυσμός**] so that they separated from each other.

Yuck. This is messy, isn’t it? This is heartbreaking. Paul and Barnabas, the dynamic duo! These guys were an amazing team! How can they let this little disagreement, this **παροξυσμός** come between them?

Actually it wasn’t a “little disagreement,” it was a “sharp disagreement.”¹⁷ The word **παροξυσμός** means a “state of irritation expressed in argument.”¹⁸ It connotes “incitement” or “extreme aggravation.”¹⁹ This was a tense and acrimonious disagreement among two good friends.²⁰

By the way, we have a similar English word that is derived from this Greek word, *paroxysm*, which denotes violent action or emotion.²¹ **“This wasn’t just a mild gentlemen’s disagreement but an intense and passionate conflict.”**²²

face on this journey. He knew the suffering that would come. He needed, therefore, a team of people of proven conviction and determination, who would be ready to die for the gospel.”

¹⁶ CHRYSOSTOM: “Luke has already described the apostles’ character to us, showing that one was more tender and forgiving and the other more strict and austere. For the gifts bestowed on them were different. That this is indeed a gift is clear. One befits one set and the other another set of characters. And if they should make an exchange, harm would result.... Likewise in the prophets we find different opinions and different characters. Elias, for example, is austere, while Moses is meek. Thus here Paul is more vehement. But notice even so his gentleness. ‘He thought best,’ it says, “not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia.” ... Although there appears to be a sharp contention, in fact it was part of the divine plan that each man should receive his proper place. Besides, it was necessary that not everyone have the same honor but that one should lead and the other be led.” Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 193.

¹⁷ JUSTUS JONAS: “*paroxysmos* means more than dissension, as can be seen from the verb *paroxino*, that is, to irritate, to provoke, to exasperate. For Luke wishes to indicate that those men had disagreed to the point of agitation in this matter.” Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 219.

¹⁸ BDAG, **παροξυσμός** #2, 780.

¹⁹ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 519: “In Heb. 10:24 it is used positively of stimulating or stirring someone to love, but it is also used of God’s wrath and of how Paul was provoked at seeing idols [Acts 17:16].”

²⁰ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 341: “It is possible that there was an additional source of tension between Paul and Barnabas. Galatians 2:11–13 speaks of an incident that took place in Antioch, evidently after the Jerusalem Conference, in which Peter and Barnabas gave in to pressure from “certain men” from James and withdrew from table fellowship with Gentiles. Paul sharply confronted Peter on that occasion for his ‘hypocrisy’ and was none too happy with Barnabas for following Peter’s example.” I agree with Polhill that this might have been a point of tension between the men. But I believe the timing of this Galatians 2 event took place before the Jerusalem Council not after.

²¹ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 24.

²² Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 24.

Let me speculate just a bit. There were probably some angry words between Paul and Barnabas with this little dispute. There were probably some hurt feelings. There were probably some emotional outbursts... some weeping... some grieving... some repenting... some sleepless nights.²³ **Conflicts are hard! Aren't they?**

And you might say to that, **"Tony, I'm so glad that nothing like that ever happens in churches today!"** Doesn't it, though? **Let me ask you something, have you ever had a παροξυσμός with your spouse, with your family, with a coworker, with a fellow church member, with a trusted friend?**

"None here, Pastor Tony. I haven't had a conflict since 1987." Okay. Well for the rest of us mere mortals, conflict is inevitable. It's not fun. It's not ideal, but it's a necessary part of life in this fallen world.

You know as I read **verse 39**, I have some mixed emotions. On one side, I feel heartbroken. I'm sad that Paul and Barnabas had to separate over this matter.²⁵ These two guys were such an effective team. **They were like Michael Jordan and Scottie Pippen together.** They traveled the Roman Empire together. They preached the gospel and planted churches.

On the other side, another part of me feels... maybe this'll sound odd to you... I feel comforted by this story. Even apostles get into conflicts. Apostles have hurt feelings and emotional outbursts just like the rest of us. They're men, not messiahs... which is strangely comforting. They're sinners like us, even though God used them to do incredible things.²⁶ **I take comfort in that.**²⁷

And here's another reason to take comfort in what's happening here. God is going to use this "not-so-great" thing called conflict to bring about his greater work.

So watch this! Look at **verse 39**.

Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus,

That makes sense. Barnabas was from Cyprus. He's familiar with that region. And he and Paul went there first on their previous journey. And Barnabas heads back in that direction to revisit and encourage those churches.

And look what Paul does in **verse 40**.

²³ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 42: "Paul and Barnabas could have separated on good terms, still disagreeing, but with a cordial, Christ-honoring attitude. Instead, it seems they left each other in bitterness. Disagreements will come, even to the house of God's people. Christians still inhabit a world of sin and bodies prone to rebellion. We must not be surprised when disagreements come. We must, however, learn from this episode between Paul and Barnabas. Separation in the mission might be the right course of action but it must be done in godliness and in holiness." CHRYSOSTOM sees the separation differently: The point is not that they differed in their opinions but that they accommodated themselves to each other. Thus a greater good resulted from their parting, for which this provided an excuse. What then? Did they withdraw in enmity? God forbid! Recall how after this Barnabas received much praise from Paul in his epistles. 'There arose,' it says, 'a sharp contention,' not hatred or rivalry. The contention grew so great that it parted them. For what each supposed was advantageous, this he did not admit after this because of his association with the other. I think that the parting took place advisedly and that they said to each other, 'Since I wish to, but you do not, let us distribute the places so that we should not fight.' Therefore it was because they yielded to each other that they parted. For Barnabas wanted Paul to prevail and so withdrew. Likewise Paul wanted Barnabas to prevail and he, too, withdrew. Would that we should part such partings to go forth for preaching." Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 193–4

²⁴ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 82: "Their partnership dissolved not amicably but with violent emotions."

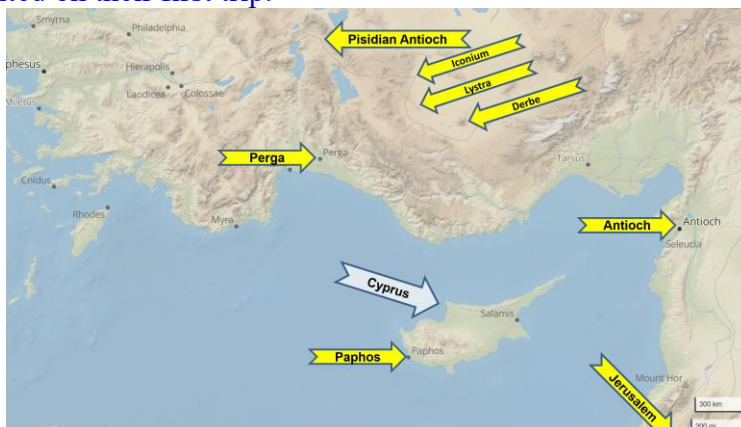
²⁵ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 431: "Though the word Luke uses for the resulting conflict is a strong one (*paroxysmos*), it does not give us a hint about who was right and who was wrong. That the team should have broken up because of this conflict is sad."

²⁶ JUSTUS JONAS: "The Spirit of God places before us these examples of the imbecility of the saints, so that we may be comforted from this, not so that we may defend our vices. Therefore, they were foolish who appointed such people as saints for us, as if they endured nothing of humanity, as if they were not people but angels. For this is the particular counsel of the Spirit, so that he may comfort us by these examples and make us alive in this kingdom of Satan and sin, so that he may deposit the fullness of grace with us and show how powerful a thing is faith, which is in the middle of the world. In the middle of sin, among so many snares of Satan, in such unbelievable weakness of the flesh, the Spirit nevertheless sanctifies, nevertheless supports and guards us. For without a doubt, this dissension was a great scandal." Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 218–219.

²⁷ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 433–4: "We can be grateful that Luke did not gloss over crises in the early church and hide the weaknesses of its leaders. It was not an ideal church, with saints whose perfect lives leave us panting with frustration over our failures and imperfections. It was a church with people just like us but who nevertheless were available to God and were used to do great things for him."

⁴⁰ but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord.²⁸ ⁴¹ And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.²⁹

So let me just show you on the map where these two missionary teams go. These are the destinations that Paul and Barnabas visited on their first trip.



Paul's First Missionary Journey³⁰

Paul goes northwest by land through Syria and Cilicia. Barnabas goes southeast of Antioch by sea to the island of Cyprus.³¹ Barnabas chooses John Mark. Paul chooses Silas. And here's what God does after this conflict. Here's the silver lining in this story. God doubles the work of the ministry.³² Does everyone see that?

Once you look past the sadness... once you look past the hurt feelings... once you look past this not-so-great thing called "conflict" you can see God's greater work accomplished. The missionary teams splits, but it also doubles.³³ And God uses this to accomplish his purposes.³⁴

Go ahead and write this down as the first point in your notes. I'll give you today...

Three "not-so-great" things that God uses to accomplish his greater purposes:

1) **Conflict** (15:36–41)

Now listen, this is not an admonition; this is a comfort.³⁵ This is not me saying to you go out there and create as much conflict as you possibly can because God will use that for his greater purposes. No.

²⁸ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 335–6: "Paul and Silas were sent out by the church of Antioch, just as earlier, in Acts 13:1–3, Paul and Barnabas were sent out on the first missionary journey by the same church. The Scripture does not say that the church of Antioch commended Barnabas and Mark, which may imply that the congregation sided with Paul in his disagreement with Barnabas. However, this is not necessarily so. More likely, the church stayed neutral on the issue, since it was a personal matter between Paul and Barnabas over the question of whether Mark was qualified for such a ministry, in light of his previous actions. Luke simply chose not to record the fact that the church may have also commended Barnabas and Mark to their area of ministry, as they were now commending Paul and Silas. He probably did so because he primarily recorded the acts of Peter and Paul, and Barnabas was now separated from Paul."

²⁹ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 663–4: "Paul would have traveled from Tarsus north, crossing the Taurus mountains on the road through the Cilician Gates, then traveling westward on the major Roman road called Via Sebaste, passing through Podandos, Tynna, and Kybistra in Cappadocia, and Sidamaria, before reaching Derbe and Lystra (see on 14:8, 21) in southern Galatia, two cities in which congregations existed (14:8–20, 21). As Paul traveled in a westerly direction, he arrived first in Derbe before reaching Lystra."

³⁰ Atlas taken from Logos Bible Study, Computer software. *Logos Bible Study Atlas* (Bellingham: Faithlife, LLC), June 7, 2025. Some geographical points added by author.

³¹ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 335: "One positive outcome of this split was that there were now two missionary teams instead of just one."

³² Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 520: "Here is an example where a disagreement was so great that the ability to work side by side was affected. What resulted was a solution that allowed the advance of the gospel to continue, but in a way that recognized a need for distinct ministries. Sometimes this is the best solution."

³³ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 341: "Though disagreements are regrettable, at least in this instance there was a fortunate outcome. Now there were two missions instead of one."

³⁴ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 43: "Despite the sharp separation between Paul and Barnabas, neither one of them gave up on the mission or the task to which God had called them."

³⁵ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 436: "While it is true that this passage does not give us an excuse to quarrel, it does give us comfort if we have disagreements that do not end in amicable resolutions."

Don't misunderstand me in this. God can and does use "conflict" for his greater purposes. God can and does use the "butting of heads," the "locking of horns," the "hurting of feelings," the inevitable conflicts that are produced in this fallen world... for his greater good. So we don't pat ourselves on the back for being great at conflict.

"Pastor Tony, I'm really good at conflict. I can lock horns with the best of them!" That's not a skill we need more of! But we do praise God for accomplishing his purposes even in our fallen state.

And listen, hear me on this. One of the most important things that you need to learn as a disciple, as a follower of Christ is how to manage conflict well. We need to fight clean and not dirty. Everyone listening to this? This is so important! You need to learn how to conflict clean and not dirty with your spouse, with your family, with your coworkers, and with your brothers and sisters in Christ. Fight clean, not dirty! And if at all possible don't fight at all.

The Bible says, "Let your reasonableness be made known to everyone" (Phil 4:5). The Bible says, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all [men]" (Rom 12:18). The Bible says, "Blessed are the peacemakers" (Matt 5:9) not **"Blessed are the warmongers."** Not **"Blessed are those who are really, really good at starting conflicts."**

So when you conflict, you need to conflict well. When you conflict, conflict well, in a way that can produce a good result. A kinder, gentler Paul later in life said it this way, "Let all that you do be done in love" (1 Cor 16:14).³⁶

Actually it was later in life that Paul said this of John Mark, "Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry" (2 Tim 4:11). You know that kid, that deserter, who Paul didn't have time to bother with in Acts 15. When Paul was about to die in 2 Timothy, Paul spoke well of him as someone "very useful" to him for ministry.³⁷ Maybe Barnabas was right to give him a second chance.³⁸

Now watch what happens next. Barnabas and John Mark sail off into the sunset. We don't hear from them again in the book of Acts. Paul and Silas, on the other hand, go by land through Syria and Cilicia.

Look again at verse 40.

⁴⁰ but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord.³⁹

The church in Antioch was like, **"Paul, I know you've had some conflicts with Barnabas. And you've dealt with Judaizers too. You've had a rough go of it lately. But we're still behind you. We support you."** And Paul and Silas were commended and sent out again in the grace of the Lord. I'm sure Paul was comforted by this after a season of messiness.

By the way, Silas, proved to be just as good a companion for Paul as Barnabas. Probably better! Silas was a native Greek speaker. He was a Roman citizen which becomes important later in Acts. He was one of the men sent by the church in Jerusalem to Antioch to stop the Judaizing. So not only has God doubled the

³⁶ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 436–7: "We must be sure that during the heat of a conflict we do not do or say things that complicate a final resolution. All too often when people are hurt and disappointed, they make public statements that are difficult to live down. Perhaps they write strongly accusatory letters that cannot be erased once written."

³⁷ See also Philemon 24 and 1 Peter 5:13.

³⁸ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 341: "Paul did eventually become reconciled to Mark and mentioned him as a coworker in several of his letters (cf. Col 4:10; Phlm 24; 2 Tim 4:11). Standing in the background was Barnabas, always the encourager, showing faith in Mark when others had lost theirs and eventually redeeming him—ironically, *for Paul*." Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 434: "Barnabas's hopes were not unfounded, for Mark did live up to his expectations. The first desertion did not automatically mean continued desertions. Later, Paul came to value Mark, and he seems to have become an assistant to Peter, who sends greetings from "my son Mark" at the close of his first letter (1 Peter 5:13)."

³⁹ JOHN CALVIN: "We may gather from the context that Paul's decision was pleasing to the church. For Barnabas hurries off and sails with his companion for Cyprus. No mention is made of the brothers, as if he had gone away in secret, without greeting them. But the brothers commend Paul to the grace of God by their prayers, which makes it evident that the church stood by his side.... However, it is possible that both men went beyond the score, as things that are nonessential may often spoil an otherwise good situation. Paul was correct and duly acting in accordance with disciplinary authority in being unwilling to accept the companion whose unreliability he had once experienced, but when he saw Barnabas insisting more stubbornly he could have given in to his request." Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 219.

missionary work, but he's partnered Paul with an even better partner than Barnabas.⁴⁰ Isn't that great? God used that conflict for his greater purposes.

Look at **verse 41**.

⁴¹ And he went through Syria and Cilicia,⁴¹ strengthening the churches.⁴²

Now **chapter 16, verse 1**.

¹ Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra.

Lystra. Remember that place? That's where Paul almost kicked the bucket. First they thought he was a god, and then they changed their mind and tried to kill him. And then when they dragged him out of the city thinking he was dead, Paul got up and went back into the city. And now he's going back to that city again a few years later. Paul is "crazy for Jesus," what can I say.

¹ 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. ² He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium.⁴³

So Paul and Silas come across this young man named Timothy, who was half Jewish and half Gentile.⁴⁴ He was ethnically mixed. But you also get the impression that Timothy's parents were unequally yoked. **2 Timothy 1:5** says that Timothy's mother "Eunice" and even his grandmother "Lois" were believers, but his father's faith is never mentioned.⁴⁵ And by the way, Eunice and Lois had a radical impact on Timothy's life.⁴⁶ Paul says about Timothy that "from a child you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise unto salvation" (**2 Tim 3:15**).

Moms, listen to me for a second. That wasn't Timothy's dad teaching him the Scriptures. His dad was probably an unbeliever. So who taught him the Scriptures as a child? His mama taught him the Scriptures. His grandmama taught him the Scriptures. Let me ask you a question, "Can great Christian kids come out of homes with unequally yoked parents?"⁴⁷ Yes they can, and I've seen it with my own eyes.

Moms, whatever your marital status: single, unequally yoked, or equally yoked to a godly man, don't underestimate the impact that you can make on your children. Engrave God's Word on the hearts of your children.

So, Timothy's mom was a believer. Timothy and his mom both probably saw Paul stoned and left for dead in Lystra. They saw Paul get up bloodied, wounded, broken, and limp back into town. And I guess Timothy figured, **"Whatever that guy has, I want some of that. I want something I believe in so strongly**

⁴⁰ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 24.

⁴¹ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 663: "Paul traveled with his associates through Syria and Cilicia, visiting the congregations that he had established... in the nine years between AD 34–43... Luke's brief reference to 'the congregations' (αἱ ἐκκλησίαι) in v. 41d confirms that Paul's earlier missionary work in these areas had resulted in the conversion of people—presumably both Jews, God-fearers, and Gentiles—who gathered in local congregations."

⁴² Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 342: "Since the 'apostolic decrees' were originally addressed to all the churches in Syria and Cilicia (15:23), one would assume that Paul and Silas shared these with them. This is all the more likely since Silas was one of the two originally appointed by the Jerusalem church to deliver the decrees (15:22)."

⁴³ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 342: "Luke added that Timothy was well spoken of by the Christians in Lystra and Iconium. Derbe is not mentioned because it lay some sixty miles southeast of Lystra. Lystra was only twenty miles or so from Iconium, and a close relationship between the Christians of the two cities would have been natural." Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 664: "Luke's comment indicates that there were at least personal connections between the believers in neighboring congregations."

⁴⁴ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 522–3: "Mixed marriages were forbidden in Judaism, but when they occurred, children were still to be raised as Jews. A later text, *b. Yebam*. 45b, makes the mother's nationality determinative for the children: 'And the law is that if an idolater or a slave cohabited with the daughter of an Israelite, the child [born from such a union] is legitimate, both in the case of a married, and in that of an unmarried woman' (also *y. Yebam*. 2.6)."

⁴⁵ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 664: "Children born to mixed marriages in which the mother was Jewish and the father was a Gentile were considered Gentile according to Old Testament law (patrilineal principle), but Jewish according to Mishnaic law (matrilineal principle, which may have been followed as early as the first century)."

⁴⁶ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 664: "The Greek name of Timothy's Jewish mother is consistent with the fact that her family allowed her to marry a Greek man—a mixed marriage that was highly problematic according to Old Testament law and precedent—indicating that her family had assimilated to Greek culture."

⁴⁷ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 523: "First Corinthians 7:14 shows that spiritual benefits can flow to the child through either the father or the mother, whichever one is 'closer' to God. Galatians 5:11 shows how Paul can speak positively of circumcision, and Gal. 5:6 and 6:15 state that it is an indifferent matter."

that I'd be willing to die for it." And Timothy became a disciple and started to grow. And when Paul comes back to Lystra, Timothy's reputation was such that Paul wanted to take him along with him as an understudy.

And **verse 3** says,

³ Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him,

This is actually the beginning of something amazing. **Think Humphrey Bogart in "Casablanca" saying, "This is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."** That's what this is between Paul and Timothy.

Paul becomes a lifelong mentor to young Timothy.⁴⁸ Timothy becomes for him a *de facto* son in the faith. Timothy becomes for Paul more important than Barnabas, more important than Silas, more important than any other friend or co-laborer.⁴⁹ But I don't want to say any more than that. We're getting ahead of the story here.

I do wonder this, though. What were Timothy's mother (Eunice) and grandmother (Lois) thinking when they heard this? **"Our baby Timothy wants to go on mission with Paul... That crazy guy who got stoned and left for dead!"** Maybe they said that. Maybe they didn't. I'm just speculating. **I just know what my mama would say in a situation like that. And I know what my son's mama would say in a situation like that.**

And besides that, look at **verse 3**. This is surprising.

³ 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.

What? Are you serious? In other words, Timothy was half Jewish and half Gentile. His father didn't allow him to be circumcised as a kid, even though his mom was Jewish.⁵⁰ And Paul decides that "because of the Jews who were in those places," and because of the fact that "they all knew his father was a Greek," Timothy should get circumcised. What?

"Hey Paul, didn't you read Acts 15 and the judgment of the Jerusalem Council?"

"Yeah, I was there. I argued that circumcision isn't necessary for salvation."

"Hey Paul, Haven't you read the book of Galatians?" "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything" (Gal 5:6).

"Yeah, I actually wrote that letter, thank you very much."

"Then why would you circumcise Timothy in order to appease the Jews?"

I can only imagine what Timothy said in this moment. **"You want me to do what? Can we just not do that... and say that we did it?"**

If you don't know, circumcision is the cutting off of the male foreskin. It was a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham. It was a symbol that was extremely important to Jewish people, so important that the Judaizers, as we saw in **Acts 15**, couldn't envision a salvation from God that didn't involve circumcision.⁵¹

Now watch what happens next, because things are going to get even stranger. Look at **verse 4**.

⁴ As they went on their way through the cities,⁵² they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem.

⁴⁸ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 46: "With respect to Timothy's age, the book of Acts is silent. Scholars believe Paul wrote 1 Timothy approximately 14 years after their initial meeting. Even then, Paul encourages Timothy to 'let no one despise you for your youth' (1 Timothy 4:12). By the best reconstructions, Timothy was either in very late adolescence or young manhood in Acts 16, probably somewhere around the age of 18."

⁴⁹ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 522: "Timothy is a major figure in the Pauline circle (16:1; 17:14–15; 18:5; 19:22; 20:4; Rom. 16:21; 1 Cor. 4:17; 16:10; 2 Cor. 1:1, 19; Phil. 1:1; 2:19; Col. 1:1; 1 Thess. 1:1; 3:2, 6; 2 Thess. 1:1; 1 Tim. 1:2, 18; 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:2; Philem. 1; Heb. 13:23)."

⁵⁰ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 665: "Since fathers had authority over their children, it was evidently the pagan father who had prevented Timothy's circumcision after birth; he may have thought that looser contacts with the Jewish community such as God-fearers had was sufficient for both himself and for his son(s)."

⁵¹ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 435: "Circumcision was a painful experience for an adult in days before the use of anesthetics. This is probably one reason why many Gentiles preferred to remain God-fearers without becoming full Jews"

⁵² Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 666: "If Paul indeed wrote his letter to the Galatian churches a year or so earlier—before the Apostles' Council—a letter in which he warned the Gentile believers in the strongest term to refuse to be subjected to circumcision and the law (suggested by Jewish Christian teachers as necessary for salvation), he would have introduced the decisions of the Apostles' Council

So not only did Paul circumcise Timothy to accommodate the Jews in that region, but he also delivered the judgment of the apostles in Jerusalem that Gentiles don't need to be circumcised. Remember what James said about circumcision? "My judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles" (**Acts 15:19**). Remember what Peter said about circumcision? "Why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples" (**Acts 15:10**).

So here's the question—why, Paul, in light of all that you've fought for, in light of what this letter from the Jerusalem Council says, would you give in to local custom and circumcise Timothy? Why, Paul? Why?⁵³ Is anyone else wondering about this?⁵⁴

I've wrestled with this a lot over the years. And I'm going to give you some reasons why I think Paul did this in just a moment. But can I give you an obvious reason from the text? Part of the answer is in **verse 5**.⁵⁵ *So the churches were strengthened in the faith,*⁵⁵

Uncircumcised Gentiles in the church were strengthened in their faith. And circumcised Jews in the church were strengthened in their faith. And now there was newfound unity since this issue had been settled. *and they increased in numbers daily.*⁵⁶

Does everyone see that at the end of **verse 5**? "They increased in numbers daily." Do you think that maybe, just maybe, part of the increase in growth of the church was a result of Timothy's circumcision? In other words, is it possible that once that stumbling block, that potential objection was removed from Timothy's Jewishness, that more Jews were able to come to Christ and join the church? I think so.⁵⁷

And I think that's why Paul did this. He conceded. He consented to custom. He voluntarily gave up his rights... or more appropriately Timothy voluntarily gave up his rights, his freedom... in order that some tender-conscience Jews might come to Christ.⁵⁸

Listen, here's the principle: **"What cannot be required for salvation, can be offered to others for unity and for ministry."** Let me say that again: **"What cannot be required for salvation, can be offered to others for unity and for ministry."**⁵⁹

Here's how Paul wrote about this in **1 Corinthians**. "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

as confirming his teaching: Gentile Christians have salvation and are members of God's messianic people without circumcision and wholesale obedience to the entire Mosaic law. The fact that Paul makes the decisions of the Apostolic Council known in the churches in south Galatia, which were not included in the address of the apostolic letter (which had mentioned only Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia), underscores the general validity of the decisions, which were to be followed wherever Jewish believers and Gentile believers met in community."

⁵³ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 343: "The Jerusalem Conference agreed on that. Gentiles would not be required to become Jews in order to be Christians. The converse was also true: Jews would not be required to abandon their Jewishness in order to become Christians. There is absolutely no evidence that Paul ever asked Jews to abandon circumcision as their mark of membership in God's covenant people."

⁵⁴ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 522: "Even though Paul holds a view of freedom regarding the law (Gal. 5:2; 1 Cor. 7:18), he is sensitive to how it works in a mixed community and in the context of the gospel (1 Cor. 9:19–23). So, out of respect for the customs of his prospective evangelistic audience, he acts to render moot any debate over Timothy's lineage."

⁵⁵ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*,: "To clarify, when the book of Acts refers to 'the faith,' it refers to the Christian faith—the message of the gospel and life lived according to it."

⁵⁶ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 85: "The goal of evangelism is not to rack up huge numbers of converts. Yet it is true that strong churches, established in the faith, will increase in numbers."

⁵⁷ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 523: "But Titus, who is Gentile, is a different case and principle. He is not to be circumcised (Gal. 2:3–5; 1 Cor. 7:17–24); there is no mixed-ancestry question, so there is no circumcision. This principle of sensitivity reflects what we see Paul say elsewhere about food practices (Rom. 14–15; 1 Cor. 10:23–30)."

⁵⁸ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 47: "Timothy's lack of circumcision was a potential stumbling block. It was a hindrance to the gospel, so Paul took Timothy and circumcised him... while circumcision made Timothy more of a Jew, it did not make him any more of a Christian."

⁵⁹ JOHN CALVIN: "Luke makes it quite clear that Timothy was not circumcised because it was necessary, or because the religion of that sign still continued in existence, but so that Paul might avoid a scandal. Therefore regard was paid to humans, although there was freedom in the matter in the sight of God. Accordingly the circumcision of Timothy was not a sacrament, such as had been given to Abraham and his descendants, but a neutral and indifferent ceremony, which was of use only for the fostering of love, and not for the exercise of godliness." Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 223.

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” (9:19–23).⁶⁰

Write this down as the second point in your notes.

Three “not-so great” things that God uses to accomplish his greater purposes:

- 1) **Conflict** (15:36–41)
- 2) **Concession** (16:1–5)

I wish concession wasn’t necessary. I wish that we didn’t have to bow to social custom. But more important to Paul than flaunting his freedom in Christ is dying to self in order to win people to Christ.

Some people might look at what Paul did with Timothy and say, “Isn’t Paul being hypocritical?” “Isn’t Paul compromising the faith?” “Isn’t Paul just people-pleasing?”⁶¹

Here’s a good response from the commentator, John Stott: “Little minds would have condemned [Paul] for inconsistency. But there was a deep consistency in his thought and action. Once the principle had been established that circumcision was not necessary for salvation, he was ready to make concessions in policy. What was unnecessary for acceptance with God was advisable for acceptance by some human beings.”⁶² And so what could not be *required* of Timothy for salvation was *willingly* conceded for an opportunity to win people to Christ.⁶³

Now here’s the thing, Paul could have said, “Absolutely not. We’re not yielding to social pressure. Get offended. Get angry all you want. We’re not doing that.” Timothy could have said, “Under no circumstances. I’m not doing that. Put your knife away. God doesn’t require that of me.”⁶⁴ But Timothy willingly laid down his rights, in order to win people to Christ.⁶⁵ Paul didn’t circumcise Timothy so that Timothy could be saved; he circumcised Timothy so that more circumcised Jews could get saved.⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 337–8: “They knew Timothy’s Jewish origins were on his mother’s side, not on his father’s side. So, the fact that Timothy was uncircumcised was public knowledge among the Jewish population. Having Timothy circumcised was not a violation of Paul’s own teachings in Galatians 2:3–4 and 5:2–11 or Acts 15:19. Rather, it is a clear example of Paul’s policy, stated in 1 Corinthians 9:20, that to the Jews, he became as a Jew.”

⁶¹ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 665: “Paul’s loyalty to the Mosaic law expressed in Timothy’s circumcision does not contradict his basic theological position regarding the salvation-historical role of the law in view of the death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus as Israel’s Messiah and Savior, but remedies the ambiguous ethnic and social status of Timothy. If his Jewish mother made him legally Jewish (matrilinear principle), Timothy is an uncircumcised Jew, a status that is untenable for Jews, constituting a violation of the covenant, and strange for Gentiles, who knew that Jews are circumcised. The belated circumcision thus becomes plausible.”

⁶² John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church & the World*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 254.

⁶³ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 524: “In sum, what is seen here is Paul’s cultural sensitivity. Instead of making Timothy a sideshow to the gospel in terms of whether he was a Jew or not, Paul permitted circumcision so that the gospel would remain the main topic. Knowing which principles are worth standing up for and which ideas are not worth elevating to an importance they do not deserve is a sign of discernment and leadership. Not every issue is worth starting a war over when it comes to the gospel and the ethnic unity of the church.”

⁶⁴ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 671: “Missionary accommodation is, for Paul, not a rigid principle which needs to be employed at all costs in order to achieve missionary success—a stance that itself would be nothing more than the enslavement to a law—but closely tied to the truth of the gospel, which cannot be compromised, and is tied to the freedom of faith and to the love among believers in Jesus. Some principles are worth standing up for, while other principles are opinions that are of lesser importance; to know the difference between the two is a sign of discernment and leadership.”

⁶⁵ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 522: “Timothy will not become a matter for debate. Paul may be pragmatic here, as he will be in Acts 21:21. Having just gone through one council, why immediately head into another major dispute? If Timothy honors his Jewish background, then there is no question... Paul is already pushing the boundaries, in the view of some, by being so aggressive in how Gentiles should be included. Would he want to negate the Jewish identity of a person of mixed background in the process? Does Jewish heritage mean so little to him? That is the problem Paul’s solution avoids.”

⁶⁶ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 343: “To have had a member of his entourage be of Jewish lineage and yet uncircumcised would have hampered his effectiveness among the Jews. It was at the very least a matter of missionary strategy to circumcise Timothy (1 Cor 9:20). It may have been much more. Paul never abandoned his own Jewish heritage. He may well have wanted Timothy to be true to *his* (cf. Rom 3:1f.). In any event, Paul had no missionary companion more thoroughly involved in his subsequent work than Timothy. Paul considered him a ‘son’ (cf. 1 Cor 4:17; 1 Tim 1:2).”

Now let's talk practically. Some of you might be saying, "This is fascinating, Pastor Tony, but what does this have to do with me? What's the modern day equivalent to this action that Paul and Timothy took?" Good questions. Here's another one, "What are some ways that we could voluntarily give up our rights in order to see people in our community come to Christ?" That's a great question

Here are some things that you could willingly concede for the sake of the gospel:

- 1) **Your right to live wherever you want** – Some of you might say, "I'd rather live somewhere else. I'd rather live closer to a beach or to a mountain. I'd rather live closer to my parents or to my children." Well, God has you here. Lay down that right for the sake of the gospel. Some of you might say, "No, I'd rather live farther away from my parents or farther away from my children." But this is where God has you. So be fully invested here for the gospel. **Bloom where you are planted.**
- 2) **Your right to work where you want** – Some of you might say, "I could make more money over there. I can get a promotion over there. But this is where God has me. This is where God is using me for the gospel. I'm going to stay here." You're giving up your right to work wherever you want.
- 3) **Your right to free speech** – You might say, come on Tony, that sounds downright un-American. But hear me on this. If you say everything that you think all of the time, without any filter, without any discernment... and if you frontload all of your conversations with your views on politics, family, school, morality, and finer points of theology, you are not going to be effective as an evangelist. Remember, this is voluntary concession. I'm not trying to censor you. I'm just asking you to consider giving up your freedoms in order to win people to Christ.
- 4) **Your right to be healthy and wealthy** – I'm not even sure that right exists for Christians.
- 5) **Your right to self-determine** – There's another right that I'm not so sure Christians have.
- 6) **Your right to "me-time"**
- 7) **Your right to fairness**
- 8) **[For missionaries] Your unalienable rights as an American** – When you pack your bags and head off for Bangladesh or Yemen or Uganda, you can't claim your right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. **Those countries don't have a Declaration of Independence, and they don't promise those things to their people, let alone a foreigner who comes there and tries to preach the gospel. But some missionaries willingly give up those rights because they love Jesus and they want to share his love with people who have never heard about him.**⁶⁷

So there's my attempt to applicationally process what Scripture teaches us here. Timothy voluntarily gave up his rights for the gospel by being circumcised.⁶⁸ Now Paul can bring him into the synagogues. Now Paul can work with him to minister to Jews, and lead Jews to Christ.⁶⁹ That would've been much more difficult, if Timothy had stayed uncircumcised.⁷⁰

My desire for you is to take that list that I made of ways we can die to our rights, and add to it. That question is in your application questions in your notes. Process this yourself with a friend or with your small group. And let's be doers of God's Word together.

Okay, one more thing. Write this down as #3 in your notes:

⁶⁷ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 439: "One who loves to eat meat may need to become a vegetarian if he finds that eating meat will be a stumbling block to the Buddhists he is trying to reach."

⁶⁸ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 47: "He was willing to endure the procedure for the sake of the gospel... Timothy demonstrated the heart of an evangelist and servant of Christ, willing to do whatever it took to see people come to saving faith."

⁶⁹ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 665–6: "Paul's focus on the proclamation of the gospel among Gentiles does not mean that he has abandoned the Jewish people, whom he continues to introduce to the good news of Jesus, Israel's Messiah and Savior."

⁷⁰ CHRYSOSTOM: "The wisdom of Paul is indeed amazing. He, who fought so many battles against circumcision, who moved everything for this, who did not give up until he had carried his point, once the decision was confirmed, he circumcised his disciple. Not only did he not forbid others, but he himself did this... Nothing could be wiser. So in all things he looked to what was advantageous." Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 195.

Three “not-so great” things that God uses to accomplish his greater purposes:

- 1) **Conflict** (15:36–41)
- 2) **Concession** (16:1–5)
- 3) **Closed Doors** (16:6–10)

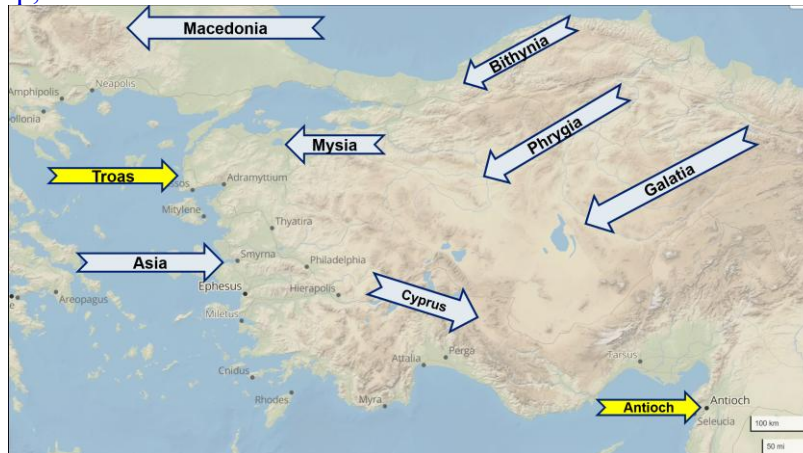
And let me clarify on this last point. From God’s perspective, “closed doors” are a good thing. And from our perspective long-term, “closed doors” are a good thing. I can think right now of about a dozen “closed doors” in my life that I praise God for.

But when you’re in the middle of experiencing a closed door... when you put a ton of energy and hope and effort into something and then God closes the door on it... emotionally, viscerally in the midst of that thing, it’s not great. But it’s a “not-so-great” thing that God uses to accomplish his greater purposes.

Case in point, look at **verse 6**.

⁶And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia,⁷¹ having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia.

Here’s another map, this time focused on Paul and Silas and the Second Missionary Journey.



Paul and Silas at the beginning of the Second Missionary Journey⁷²

So they travel through the region of Phrygia and Galatia. This is the territory that includes Pisidian Antioch and Iconium, the places where Paul has already planted churches. And the Bible says that as they were doing that, they were...

*forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia.*⁷³

So I guess Paul and Silas wanted to go down to Asia (not modern day Asia, but the Asia of the Roman Empire that included Ephesus and Smyrna and Pergamum), and the Holy Spirit was like “**No, we’re not doing that.**”

Paul and Silas: “**But don’t they need to hear about Jesus.**”

Holy Spirit: “**Trust me they will someday, but not now.**”⁷⁴

⁷¹ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 528–9: “16:6. A textual issue is part of the geographical discussion. Byz with E, H, L, and P points to two distinct regions and reads τὴν φρυγίαν καὶ τὴν Γαλατικὴν χώραν (*tēn Phrygian kai tēn Galatikēn chōran*). This reading would favor the north Galatian view. The better MSS indicate a combined region: τὴν Φρυγίαν καὶ Γαλατικὴν χώραν (*tēn Phrygian kai Galatikēn chōran*). In the latter reading, the second definite article is missing before Galatia, pointing to a combined Phrygian-Galatian region. In favor of this reading are P⁷⁴, 8, A, B, C, and D. The older hesitation for accepting this reading concerned the long-unattested use of Phrygia as an adjective (noted in Metzger 1971: 441). Hemer (1989: 280–99), however, extensively documents this use, citing about thirty examples (Bruce 1988a: 306 and n18).”

⁷² Atlas taken from Logos Bible Study, Computer software. *Logos Bible Study Atlas* (Bellingham: Faithlife, LLC), June 7, 2025. Some geographical points added by author.

⁷³ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 344: “Just what is intended by “Asia” is uncertain. The term was used in various ways. It could refer to the Roman province of Asia, which included Lycia, portions of Phrygia, and Mysia, as well as ancient Asia. It could be used in a much narrower sense as the cities along the Aegean coast, with Philadelphia as the eastern limit. It probably is in this narrower sense that Paul determined to go to Asia, perhaps to the major city of Ephesus, where he eventually did spend the greater part of his third mission.”

Paul and Silas: “**Alright well, let’s try something else.**”

⁷And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia,⁷⁵ but the Spirit of Jesus⁷⁶ did not allow them.

Now just for the record, I don’t distinguish between “the Holy Spirit” and “the Spirit of Jesus.”⁷⁷ Some people do. I don’t. Paul decides to go preach in Bithynia and the Holy Spirit says again, “**No dice. You’re not doing that.**”⁷⁸

Now here’s the tension. They want to fulfill the great commission. They want to tell people about Jesus. But God is impeding their efforts to do that! Why?

What’s going on here? Why is God doing this? Well, God has a plan for them and he’s closing doors, so that he can open up doors elsewhere.⁷⁹

Now I don’t know how the Holy Spirit communicated these things to Paul, Silas, and Timothy. Maybe it was through the gift of prophecy or the gift of discernment. Maybe it was through the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Maybe it was something more intuitive than that, like an uneasiness in their soul. I don’t know. And Luke doesn’t specify.

But whatever the case, God said “**No, not yet.**” By the way, the gospel did eventually get to those places. Ephesus in Asia Minor, became a great hub for the gospel in the years to come. Paul spent an extended time there later. And Bithynia included the cities of Nicea and Byzantium which became incredibly important centers of Christianity later.⁸⁰ The Nicene Creed was written from the city of Nicea. So God wasn’t saying, “**No, not never.**” He was saying, “**No, not yet.**”

So now as a result of the Holy Spirit’s leading, they can’t go south towards Asia. They can’t go north towards Bithynia.⁸¹ “**Where do you want us to go, Lord? What now?**” Here’s what he wants them to do. He wants them to wait and he wants them to trust him.

⁷⁴ MARTIN LUTHER: “Here you see that although it is certainly the greatest vocation to preach God’s Word and there can be no greater service to God than to retrieve and save souls, still here it is written that Paul was prepared to do this and yet the Spirit would not allow him to do so!... Paul wants to press on, but God will not let him go.... It is not his will that is lacking but rather God’s will... it is forbidden in the very most important task not to follow our will but God’s... We must stand before God with such hearts: ‘If it is your will, honors your name and furthers your kingdom, then I will do it, not because it seems so good to me.’ ... If we act otherwise, it is from the devil, even if it seems excellent... Paul’s will is good, but it was not yet the time. For he went there later and preached to them... He does not quash the task of preaching; instead, he prevents and postpones it for a time, for they were not yet ripe.” Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 224.

⁷⁵ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 668n712: “Christians in Bithynia are attested in 1 Pet 1:1—the fruit of the missionary work of unnamed missionaries in the region (possibly Peter’s?).”

⁷⁶ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 527: “The expression ‘Spirit of Jesus’ is unusual (Phil. 1:19 has ‘Spirit of Jesus Christ,’ which is its only other NT occurrence; but see Rom. 8:9; Gal. 4:6; 1 Pet. 1:11 for variations).”

⁷⁷ The best Greek manuscripts have τὸ πνεῦμα Ἰησοῦ “Spirit of Jesus” while the Textus Receptus simply has “the Spirit” (so KJV and NKJV). Bruce Manning Metzger, United Bible Societies, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament, Second Edition a Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies’ Greek New Testament (4th Rev. Ed.)* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1994), 390–1: “The expression τὸ πνεῦμα Ἰησοῦ (ⲡ⁷⁴ ⲕ A B C² D E 33 69 81* 326 467 vg syr^p, ^h cop^{bo} arm^{mss}), which appears nowhere else in the New Testament, is so unusual that various attempts were made to modify it, such as replacing Ἰησοῦ with κυρίου (C* it^{gig} al) or with τὸ ὄγιον (arm^{mss} Epiphanius), or omitting the modifier altogether (H L P 81^c and most minuscules cop^{sa} arm^{mss} Ephraem Chrysostom al, followed by the Textus Receptus).”

⁷⁸ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 526: “The direction of the Spirit is common in Acts (4:31; 8:29, 39; 10:44; 13:2, 4). Here, as in the case of Peter with Cornelius and of Philip with the Ethiopian eunuch, the Spirit leads the outreach.”

⁷⁹ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 669: “They now understand that the ‘negative’ guidance of the Spirit regarding missionary work in the provinces of Asia and Bithynia (vv. 6–7) was meant to prepare them for the ‘positive’ guidance through the vision, causing them to accept the challenge of a new missionary initiative—the evangelization of Europe.”

⁸⁰ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 527: “It is about the Christians in Bithynia, worshipers of Jesus as divine, that the Roman Pliny the Younger writes in the early second century (*Ep.* 10.96; Johnson 1992: 285). The major cities there included Nicea and Byzantium (previously called Constantinople and subsequently Istanbul), which became important for the church in the fourth century and beyond, especially in the East.”

⁸¹ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 433: “Paul had ministered in the east, he cannot go north or south, so he can only go further west and comes to the seaport Troas.”

Now I know from personal experience just how painful “closed doors” can be. And I could go on and on about some “closed doors” in my life that have left me heartbroken, bewildered, and frustrated. I’ll spare you those sad stories.

But here’s what I believe. **God is sovereign. God demands submission to his plans and his ways. And when he closes doors, we need to submit to his will and wait for doors to open elsewhere.** Just by way of personal testimony, I have journals full of emotional outpouring at my home where I prayed and prayed for God to open a door in one matter or another. And for whatever reason, the door was slammed in my face. That wasn’t fun.

But God has always been faithful. And God has redirected my heart and my emotions in the direction he wanted me to go. And in response, I say, like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Not my will, but yours be done.” Paul and Silas had to come to that place here.

And watch what happens. Look at **verse 8**.

⁸ So, passing by Mysia,⁸² they went down to Troas.⁸³ ⁹ And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help⁸⁴ us.”

That was God’s plan! That’s what God was preparing them for—a whole new continent of people who had never heard the gospel. Paul wanted to go to Asia or Bithynia, but God had something different in mind. Something greater!

If you look on the map above, you can see Macedonia. Between Macedonia and Troas is the Aegean Sea, the Sea of Marmara, the Black Sea, and the Bosphorus Strait that marks the dividing line between Asia and Europe.⁸⁵ This divides modern-day Turkey from Greece, and the Asian continent from the European continent. So Paul is now being drawn even deeper into Gentile territory. He’s going even farther from home and farther from Jerusalem. The Lord wants him to open up a whole new mission field in a completely unreached region on the European continent. That’s why the doors were closed elsewhere.

Look at **verse 10**.

¹⁰ And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we⁸⁶ sought to go on⁸⁷ into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us⁸⁸ to preach the gospel to them.

Who would have guessed? Who would have known that all this messiness... the conflict with Barnabas in Antioch... the concession of having Timothy circumcised... and the confusion of the closed doors to Asia and Bithynia would have led to this... one of the greatest moments in history... the beginning of the evangelization of the European continent?⁸⁹

Once again, let me say it again in case it hasn’t sunk in just yet—God uses not-so-great things like “conflict” and “concession” and “closed doors.” God uses these not-so-great things to accomplish his greater purposes.

⁸² Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 345: “The missionary group must have been thoroughly perplexed as they were led away from the cities of Bithynia through the wild backwoods country of Mysia over to the coast and down to Troas.”

⁸³ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 346n14: “A church may have been established at Troas as early as this first visit of Paul. Acts 20:5–12 indicates a Christian community existed there. Paul spoke of his witnessing there on a later occasion (2 Cor 2:12; cf. 2 Tim 4:13).”

⁸⁴ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 528: “A call to help is often a cry to save in the Bible (Gen. 49:25; Exod. 18:4; Deut. 33:26; Ps. 9:35 LXX [10:14 Eng.]; Isa. 41:10; Johnson 1992: 286). If so, it would mean to bring the message of salvation.”

⁸⁵ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 528: “Troas was located on the northwestern tip of Asia Minor, near ancient Troy, which was about twenty-five miles to the north (2 Cor. 2:12–13; Pliny the Elder, *Nat.* 5.124; Fitzmyer 1998: 579). It was often used as a port of embarkation for Greece. It was about 585 miles from Antioch in Syria. They are now heading west.”

⁸⁶ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 528: “References to ‘we’ now enter the narrative... They occur until 16:17 and then resume in 20:5. Luke has now joined the group.”

⁸⁷ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 669: “Paul and his associates decide to travel to Macedonia. Paul had seen the vision, but he did not make the decision to act on what he had seen and heard by himself: he evidently presented the content of the vision to his coworkers, and together they ‘came to the conclusion’ (συμβιβάζοντες) that the vision represented God’s guidance. This verb denotes rational reflection and inference, the plural indicates the involvement of others.”

⁸⁸ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 49: “Luke, however, does not tag along as a disinterested journalist or historian. He serves as a fellow member in Paul’s missionary team who affirms the mission: ‘God had called us to preach the gospel to them’ (v 10).”

⁸⁹ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 346: “Now four [Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke] shared the vision of evangelizing Macedonia.”

Final thought. Here it is. God is sovereign over our messiness. Amen? God is good. God is glorious. If you are going through as season of doubt right now... if you've experienced some recent closed doors... if you find yourself struggling with conflict around every corner, conflict that you don't want, conflict that you are trying to avoid... Hear me on this. God is not going to waste that. God is not indifferent to your messiness. And he's going to use it for his purposes and his glory.