

## **“God Had Called Us to Preach the Gospel to Them” (Acts 15:36-16:15)**

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*Acts 15:36–41 (ESV)*

*<sup>36</sup> And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.” <sup>37</sup> Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. <sup>38</sup> But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. <sup>39</sup> And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, <sup>40</sup> but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. <sup>41</sup> And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.<sup>1</sup>*

I’m going to start today’s message by letting you in on some of my thoughts regarding how I put together a sermon.

We’ve been studying the book of Acts for about four months now. In a long book of historical narrative, which is what Acts is, sometimes it’s very clear how to divide the text into different sermons. There are times when a sermon will explain one chapter. Other times, a sermon can be based on a paragraph or two. Yet there are other times when short paragraphs serve as transitions, or short little episodes, and each one doesn’t seem to merit a sermon of its own. Each bit of the Bible is important and has a purpose, but not every verse or paragraph deserves its own sermon.

So, today, we’re going to look at four paragraphs. We’re looking at these paragraphs together, because it’s hard to break them up. Also, I’m trying to go through the book of Acts fairly quickly. I suppose that’s my style, but I also think that if we go too slowly, everything will start to feel very repetitive.

Every week, when I start to study the passage, I look for big themes. I look for the main points of the passage, to try to understand what Luke, our author, was trying to communicate. And today, I saw one overarching theme that connects these paragraphs together: God is sovereign. The word “sovereign” is used a lot in Christian circles. It simply means “to reign over.” God reigns over his creation. That’s a pretty simple concept. God is king, and he rules over what he has made.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

But there's more to the idea than that. When we talk about God, we often talk say he is Lord. It's basically another way of referring to God as King. According to the theologian John Frame, the best way to understand God's lordship is to think of his control, authority, and presence.<sup>2</sup> Frame says that the Bible shows that God is a lord who controls his creation, is the ultimate authority over his creation, and is present with his people in his creation. Some of that idea isn't very controversial: God is present with his people. After all, another name of Jesus is Immanuel, "God with us" (Matt. 1:23). After Jesus rose from the grave, he told his disciples, "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20). A couple of verses before that quote, Jesus told his disciples, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matt. 28:18). There is no higher authority than God, and the Father has given all authority to his Son.

The bit of John Frame's definition of lordship that might be controversial is God's control. But that's an idea that we find in the Bible again and again. We see it in statements like Exodus 9:16, when God sends this message to Pharaoh through Moses: "But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth."

We see it in Proverbs 16:4:

The LORD has made everything for its purpose,  
even the wicked for the day of trouble.

And in Proverbs 16:33:

The lot is cast into the lap,  
but its every decision is from the LORD.

That could be translated the following way: "A man rolls a pair of dice; the numbers are determined by God." We also see this idea in the New Testament. Paul tells us that God "works all things according to the counsel of his will" (Eph. 1:11).

There are many more verses that we could read, but I wanted to read a few to show you that these concepts are found throughout the pages of Scripture. The Bible also says that all human beings make decisions and we are responsible for them. So both God's sovereignty and human responsibility and agency are affirmed in Scripture. These aren't equal partners: God's power is far greater than mine. Yet both exist and somehow they fit together, even when we don't understand how all of that works.

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<sup>2</sup> John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 20-31.

What I want us to see today is that God directed the early church in various ways. And God guides this church and our lives today. Even when we make mistakes, or even when we feel like we're fumbling through life, everything is somehow part of God's plan. And we trust that in the end his plan is for our good and for his glory.

So, with all of that in mind, let's now look at today's text. Last week, we looked at most of Acts 15. In that passage, we saw that the church in Jerusalem made a decision about what Gentiles (non-Christians) had to do to become Christians. They didn't have to become Jews. They didn't have to obey all the laws that God gave Israel. The men didn't have to be circumcised. They only had to turn away from worshiping idols, or false gods.

The apostle Paul—one of the main figures in Acts—brought this news from Jerusalem to Antioch, the large city in Syria. Along with him were Barnabas and Silas. Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch for some time, “teaching and preaching the word of the Lord” (v. 35).

After that, Paul goes on another journey. Let's read verses 36-41 again:

<sup>36</sup> And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.” <sup>37</sup> Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. <sup>38</sup> But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. <sup>39</sup> And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, <sup>40</sup> but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. <sup>41</sup> And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Here, Paul decides that he wants to visit the Christians in the cities where he preached in chapters 13 and 14. His goal was to strengthen the churches there by teaching them more about the Christian faith. Again, this shows the importance of growing in our knowledge. Barnabas wants to take his cousin, John Mark (see Col. 4:10). If you recall, John Mark was with Paul and Barnabas at the beginning of their journey in chapter 13, but then he left them and went back to Jerusalem (13:13). We're not told why he left. Here, we see that Paul doesn't want to take Mark with them. Paul believes that Mark “withdrew” from them. That verb is sometimes translated as “deserted” (NASB, NIV, HCSB, NRSV). Sometimes, the verb is used of people falling away from the faith (Jer. 3:14; Dan. 9:9<sup>3</sup>). Apparently Paul thought that Mark had betrayed them by leaving that journey.

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<sup>3</sup> The verb is found in these verses in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament.

So we're told Paul and Barnabas have a "sharp disagreement." I imagine that voices were raised. Perhaps things became rather heated. The two men didn't see eye to eye on this issue. So they part ways. Paul goes with Silas back to the churches in Syria and Cilicia, and, later, Galatia, and Barnabas and Mark go to Cyprus, where Barnabas was from (Acts 4:36).

Here's what I want us to see: Regardless of who was right and who was wrong in this "sharp disagreement," something good came out of it. Now, instead of having one team of missionaries, there are two. More people can be reached. More churches can be strengthened. And, in the end, we learn that Paul and Barnabas and Mark are reconciled. In one of Paul's later letters, Colossians, Paul writes, "Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, welcome him)" (4:10). It would appear that Paul later considered Mark and Barnabas his colleagues. In the last letter that Paul wrote, 2 Timothy, he writes, "Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry" (4:11). Clearly, Paul later came to value Mark.

Let's assume someone was wrong in these disagreements. Let's say that Mark was wrong to leave Paul and Barnabas in Acts 13. Let's also assume that Barnabas was wrong in his "sharp disagreement" with Paul. Even though they were wrong, God used all of this for good. Somehow, God can use divisions within the church to bring about good things.

This is good news. We don't want to have disputes. We should strive for peace. But when there are disagreements about how to do things, or even how to interpret the Bible, it doesn't mean that all is lost. In fact, God can often produce gain through such things.

I'm sure there are a number of examples of this kind of thing happening throughout church history. But I'll give a more personal example.

Before I came to pastor this church, I lived in Washington State with my family. We moved there so I could work at a church. I started out as the worship leader but I started taking on pastoral responsibilities. After a year of being there, my title was changed to Associate Pastor, and I was on staff there for another five years. During my time at that church, we had to look for a new senior pastor, and we found one after a year-long search. He and I got along very well and we served together there for over four years. Then, very abruptly, he decided that he didn't want me to be at the church anymore. I don't want to get into all the details, but the point is that we had our own sharp disagreement. I'm not aware of anyone who agreed with him, but instead of making things difficult at that church, I decided to leave. I didn't want there to be a division

within the church, and it was clear that he didn't want to work with me there. I started applying for a new position, and that is how I got here.

I don't really want to delve into the details of that situation here, but I bring that up because it's a somewhat similar situation to what we see here in Acts. I'm sure this disagreement was difficult for both Paul and Barnabas, not to mention Mark. It might have brought on emotional distress, but something good came of it. And in a similar way, what I went through two years ago was a very painful experience. But if it hadn't happened, I wouldn't be the pastor of this church. So, if you've experienced any benefit from my being the pastor, you can thank God for the way he arranges these things, even using disagreements to bring about good ends.

Now, let's move on to the next few verses in chapter 16. Here we see that Paul comes back to some cities he visited in chapter 14. In Lystra he just so happens to meet a young man named Timothy, who becomes very important to Paul.

<sup>1</sup>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. <sup>2</sup>He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem. <sup>5</sup>So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.

This passage perhaps doesn't fit the theme of God's sovereignty the way the other ones do. But it is an important passage, because it says something about the way Paul went about his missionary work. When Paul returns to the cities he had visited earlier, he encounters Timothy. Timothy must have become a Christian when Paul visited the city a year or so earlier. There's nothing strange about that. But we're told that Paul wanted Timothy to come with him, so he had him circumcised. This is odd because in chapter 15, we're told that men didn't have to become circumcised in order to become Christians. Is this a contradiction?

No, it's not. The reason why Paul circumcises Timothy is stated in verse 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." Paul was going to continue to preach the good news of Jesus to Jews. He was going to go into synagogues to tell them that the Messiah, the anointed king, the son of King David, had come. Paul wanted Timothy to come

with him, probably because Paul could use all the help he could get, and he saw something promising in Timothy. The problem was that Timothy was Jewish, but he wasn't circumcised. In a sense, he was half-Jewish. He had a Gentile father and a Jewish mother. But Jewish people would have viewed him as Jewish, and because he was uncircumcised, they would have viewed him as an apostate Jew. There would be no way that they would listen to Paul if Paul was going around with someone like that.

To be clear: Timothy didn't need to be circumcised. There was nothing immoral in not being circumcised. He didn't have to be circumcised in order to be a Christian. But so that Paul could use Timothy to reach Jewish people for Christ, it was best that Timothy be circumcised. This lines up with what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 9. There, he says, "To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. . . . I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some" (vv. 20, 22). Paul didn't want to have any unnecessary roadblocks that got in the way of the gospel. He didn't want to offend his fellow Jews before he could even talk to them. So he was willing to follow laws even if he didn't have to, just so that he wouldn't turn away people before they could consider the gospel.

I honestly never thought about this until now, but in 2 Corinthians, there's a passage where Paul describes all the things he has endured for the sake of the gospel. At one point, he writes, "Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one" (2 Cor. 11:24). This was a penalty given to those who were found guilty by a synagogue. They flogged or whipped a person 39 times, because Deuteronomy 25:3 says the penalty should be "forty stripes . . . but not more." Why would Paul receive such a harsh sentence? Because he kept going to synagogues and telling the Jews there about Jesus. He was probably sentenced for blasphemy. Now, Paul could have avoided all this by not going to the synagogues. But he chose to risk danger in order for the sake of the gospel and for the sake of the souls of his "brothers . . . according to the flesh" (Rom. 9:4).

And this shows that we must be willing to forgo our "rights" for the sake of the gospel. We need to be willing to give up convenience and comfort and safety in order to reach people for Christ. Timothy had to undergo surgery. Paul made a series of difficult journeys and he risked—and eventually gave—his life for the gospel. And all of this is part of God's plan.

After all, Jesus himself left the comfort of heaven to come to earth as a man. And even though he was innocent, he didn't stand on his "rights." Instead, he allowed himself to die an unjust death. Though he had never done anything wrong, he was put to death for the sins of others. He died because sinful people betrayed him and doubted him and hated him.

But Jesus also died because it was part of God's plan. We've already seen this teaching twice in Acts. In Acts 2:22-24, Peter says,

<sup>22</sup> "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—<sup>23</sup> this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. <sup>24</sup> God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.

Jesus was "delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God." God knew in advance what would happen because he planned for it to happen. But this act was also the work of "lawless men," who were responsible for their sins. This is made clear when the disciples pray in Acts 4 and say this to God:

<sup>27</sup> for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, <sup>28</sup> to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

Sinful people like Pontius Pilate put to Jesus to death because God had predestined for this to take place. These people are responsible for their sin. They desired to have Jesus killed. But, somehow, this was God's plan all along.

God's plan doesn't just include Jesus' death. It also includes where the gospel will be preached. We see that in the next few verses in Acts 16, which show Paul and his companions traveling through what is now known as Turkey, but what was then known as Galatia and Asia. Paul has a plan to go to the province of Asia—again, this is what is now known as Turkey; Paul wasn't going to India or China. Yet we find that the Holy Spirit has other plans. Let's read verses 6-10:

<sup>6</sup> And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. <sup>7</sup> And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. <sup>8</sup> So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. <sup>9</sup> 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 help us.”<sup>10</sup> And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

It seems that after Paul went through Galatia, he wanted to go west to the region known as Asia. Perhaps he wanted to go to Ephesus, a major city. But the Holy Spirit says “no” to him. We don’t know if the Holy Spirit spoke through another person, or if Paul simply had an inward sense of what the Holy Spirit wanted him to do. At any rate, then Paul has the idea to go north into Bithynia, where there were other significant cities such as Nicaea and Chalcedon. Again, the Spirit says “no.” So, finally Paul goes to Troas, a city on the coast. Troas was a Roman colony, which meant it had a special status within the Empire. It was also an important center of commerce and travel. Paul generally went to the important cities of the Roman Empire to preach the gospel, so after his other options were denied by the Spirit, this seemed like the next best place to go.

But then Paul has a vision at night. This was probably a dream. A “man of Macedonia” appeared to Paul and told him to come help the Macedonians. Macedonia was another Roman province. It was to the west, across the Aegean Sea. The point of the dream is that the good news of Jesus Christ needed to be preached to the Macedonians. Paul realizes that this vision was God’s way of telling him to go there.

So Paul sails from Troas to a small island called Samothrace and then on to the port city of Neapolis. Neapolis was the port city of Philippi, a significant city in the Roman Empire and also a colony. Roman colonies were like parts of Rome, though they were outside the land of Italy. The citizens of a colony had Roman citizenship, a special status. Roman citizens could demand a trial, they couldn’t be punished in certain ways, and they were free from poll taxes and land taxes.

While in Philippi, Paul, Silas, Timothy, and someone else encounter a woman named Lydia. Let’s read about this in verses 11-15:

<sup>11</sup> So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, <sup>12</sup> and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city some days. <sup>13</sup> And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. <sup>14</sup> One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. <sup>15</sup> And after



she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.” And she prevailed upon us.

I just said that “someone else” was with Paul at this point in the journey. We see, beginning in verse 11, the mention of “we.” The narrator writes, “We made a direct voyage. . . . We remained in this city some days. . . . we went outside the gate,” and so on. It seems that Luke, the author of Acts, is with Paul at this point.

There weren’t many Jewish people in Philippi. It seems that there were not enough to have a synagogue. Apparently there was a Jewish law that said that ten men were required to have a synagogue, and we don’t read about Philippian men or a synagogue in this passage. But there is a “place of prayer,” and this might have functioned as a substitute for a synagogue. However, it was outside the city gates and along the riverside, which shows that it wasn’t an official place of worship. Still, Paul and his companions go to this meeting and speak to the people there.

Among the Jewish women named Lydia. She was a “worshiper of God,” which indicates that she was a Gentile who had come to faith in the God of Israel. She was also a “seller of purple goods.” She was from an area famous for its purple dye, which was desirable and expensive. (This was before inexpensive, chemical dyes.) You may remember the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, which begins with these words: “There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day” (Luke 16:19). Lydia was a successful business woman, a person of some status, and she was one of the women who listened to what Paul said.

Though there were a number of women there, it was Lydia who came to faith. Why did she trust that the message of Jesus is true? “The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.” This is another indication of God’s sovereignty. Though several women were listening to the same message, apparently only one came to faith, and the reason was because God opened up her heart. We understand she came to faith because she was baptized and she invited Paul and his companions to stay with her.

For anyone to trust Jesus, God needs to open up their hearts. Jesus said that “unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). He said that being born again is the work of the Holy Spirit, which, like the wind, blows where it will (John 3:5-8). At the beginning of John’s Gospel, John writes, “to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave

the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:12-13). Those who are born again become children of God because it is God’s will. A number of people can hear the same message, but unless God opens up their hearts, they won’t come to faith.

Paul writes the same thing in 2 Corinthians 4. He says “the god of this world”—the devil—“has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (v. 4). But “God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (v. 6). When God wants to recreate a person, it’s like when God created the universe. He created the universe out of nothing at his word, by his will, and he recreates people through his word and his will.

That should actually give us hope. In fact, all of this should give us hope. If God is sovereign, that means that in the end we cannot fail. If God is the one who directs our steps, who uses our good efforts and corrects our bad choices, or even uses our failures to produce something good, then we can be confident that his will is going to be done.

That doesn’t mean we don’t try hard to do what is right. We should do our very best to tell people about Jesus. We should be faithful to what God wants us to do. We should make decisions at the church that line up with what the Bible says. She would work hard and be wise. But we should never think that everything rests on our abilities. If we thought that, we would be deceived. We might become proud of ourselves and our abilities and, if we had success, we might credit ourselves and our efforts. If we didn’t have success, we would despair and perhaps lose heart.

Think about evangelism. If we thought people came to faith based on how persuasive we were, or how many questions we could answer, or how smart we were, we might despair. Some of us would never tell another person about Jesus. And the reality is that if God didn’t open up some people’s hearts, no one would believe. Paul says in Romans that “no one seeks for God” (Rom. 3:11; Ps. 14:2; 53:2).

But, on the other hand, if we understand that there are some who will come to faith in Jesus when we share the gospel, we can be confident. We don’t know who those people are. We may have to share the gospel many times before we see someone come to faith. But we trust that God has people around us whose hearts he will open. Later in Acts, we’re going to see Paul in

another city, called Corinth. There's conflict there, and Jesus comforts Paul by appearing to him in a vision and saying, "Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people" (Acts 18:9-10). Jesus was telling Paul, "I have many people in this city who haven't heard the gospel yet. They aren't believers yet. But when you tell them about me, I'll open up their hearts to believe. You have to stay to reach these people.

This should give us hope for our church. We should try our best to make good decisions and to make all the changes we're making in order to reach others. But, in the end, everything doesn't depend on how smart or how rich or how skilled we are. We call on the almighty God who made everything out of nothing and who raises the dead to give new life to this church. And even if we make the wrong decisions, or even if we have disagreements in the church, God can bring good out of all of that. He may redirect our steps, just like he redirected Paul to go to Macedonia. Or he may bring about something good through a division in the church. But, in the end, God's will is going to prevail, and it will produce something good.

The same is true of our own lives. God can bring good out of our own failures. God can bring good out of our broken relationships. We need to trust that he can and will do this. We should do everything we can to be obedient to God's Word. We should pray that God would guide us, that he would give us wisdom. And we should believe that even if there are sharp disagreements, or something worse in our lives, he will use everything for our good and his glory. As Paul writes in Romans 8:28, "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."