

Acts 15:36-16:15

Outward Church: Strangely Comforting

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In today's text, I want to tell you about three things. I want to tell you about something I find strangely comforting, something I find oh so convicting, and something I find incredibly hopeful.

In that way, it kind of reminds me of 495. I find the sound of I-495 strangely comforting. When I wake up in the morning, if I listen carefully, I can hear the white-noise buzz of 495. When I hear the cars whizzing by, the truck beds jostling, and the sound of traffic, I know the world hasn't ended yet. Things are still happening. It's strangely comforting. Today, in the Bible, I want to tell you about...

Something I find strangely comforting...

Just like I find the sound of traffic strangely comforting, I find today's passage strangely comforting. Paul and Barnabas just wrapped up one of the biggest church fights of all time, the Jerusalem council. The early Christians were debating over whether non-Jewish Gentiles had to be circumcised to become Christians or not. Paul and Barnabas and Peter argue that they don't need to be circumcised, and their side wins.

The council writes a letter about the freedom the Gentiles have, and Paul and Barnabas take the letter to Antioch where they read it and then stay there teaching and preaching. Then Paul wants to go back to visit some of the churches they started before. There's no Tik Tok, or Facebook, or Instagram, or email back then, and they want to know how the churches are doing. But then they get in a big fight.

Acts 15:36-41 (ESV)

36 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." 37 Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. 38 But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. 39 And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, 40 but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. 41 And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

On their first missionary journey, right after leaving Cyprus, Paul, Barnabas, and John Mark sailed north to Perga in Pamphylia, the shores of modern-day Turkey. But as soon as they arrive, John Mark abandons them (Acts 15:13). He turns around and goes home. We don't know why. Many think this John Mark is the same as the young man who ran away naked in the garden when Jesus was betrayed (Mark 14:51-52). So maybe he has a history of running away when things get hard. Paul doesn't want to take him.

Paul and Barnabas get in an all out fight in the church. I don't think it went as far as fisticuffs, but the word for "sharp disagreement" (paroxysmos) means they had it out. They had "a huge row." The Greek says they were provoked, it was like the church was convulsing, writhing, thrashing. Have you ever thrashed around in your bed because you felt sick to your stomach? That's what happens to their friendship.

How did they get to here? To get to that point of anger, you have to feel pretty justified. Barnabas probably felt angry for several reasons. First, John Mark was his cousin (Col 4:10). "When you mess with my family, you mess with me." Second, Barnabas gave Paul the benefit of the doubt when he converted from murdering Christians to becoming one of them (Acts 9:27). Surely, what John Mark had done was not so bad? How

could Paul judge John Mark so harshly, and forget their history? Barnabas meant encourager. He's like one of those perpetually nice people, who when they finally get mad, you know it must be bad. He must be right.

How about Paul? Why did he get so mad? Because he loved the gospel, and he might be holding some resentment in his heart. Remember when the pro-circumcision party traveled from Jerusalem northward to Antioch to tell them they all had to be circumcised to be Christians, even the Gentiles? Well, in Galatians 2, it says that "even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy" (Gal 2:13). Even though Barnabas ended up on the right side of things, Paul probably questioned Barnabas straying from the gospel. And now when Barnabas says they should bring John Mark, someone who isn't reliable, Paul gets angry, maybe even questioning if Barnabas cares about the success of their mission to share the gospel with the Gentiles.

Just because the Bible records their fight happened, doesn't mean it approves how Paul or Barnabas handled themselves. They messed up. They sinned. So why do I find this strangely comforting?

If God still worked through Paul and Barnabas even though they had a huge fight and broke up, God can still work through you and me even when we mess up.

If God can work through those mess-ups, he can work through these mess-ups. I'll admit, part of the comfort comes from watching two perfect people make a really big mistake. Do you have someone in your life who's never wrong about anything, and then they do something stupid, and you kind of laugh a little bit with glee, but then look around to make sure no one saw? Or maybe your that person? When you mess up, your spouse seems to relish it just a little too much? Let's all take a moment and relish that Paul, author of 13 books of the Bible, most famous missionary in the history of Christianity, loves to tell Christians how to behave, wasn't perfect. He was human, like the rest of us.

If God can use someone like Paul, he can use someone like me, because I mess up. I'm not perfect. And I bet neither are you, but God can still work through you to do amazing things for his kingdom. If you're waiting to become a perfect Christian before you'll let God work through you, you're never going to get there. Christianity is rooted in grace. God doesn't save perfect people. He saves rotten people. He saves rotten fruit. He buries it in the ground with Jesus, and out comes a beautiful fruit-bearing tree.

Maybe you're not a Christian, and you've always had the impression that Christianity is full of a bunch of perfect people. Or the Christians you have met somehow make you feel less than. I'm sorry. We're not perfect. Christianity is full of messed-up broken people who need redemption. The savior comes in and completely transforms our lives. Jesus so transformed Paul one day he wrote:

Romans 12:18 (ESV) If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

1 Corinthians 13:4-6 (ESV) Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;

We hear later that Paul forgave John Mark and says how much he appreciates him (2 Tim 4:11). We don't know if Barnabas and Paul became best buddies again, but I'm sure they forgave each other (2 Cor 5:18). Paul mentions him in 1 Corinthians 9:6. *I find it strangely comforting that God used people like Paul and Barnabas. If he can use them, God can still work through you and me even when we mess up.*

I want to show you a map. Paul and Barnabas split at Antioch. Barnabas and John Mark go to Cyprus. Paul and Silas go north to Derbe and Lystra, where they meet Timothy. And here is...

Something I find oh so convicting...

Let me read what happens and see if you can guess what I find convicting.

Acts 16:1-5 (ESV)

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. 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. 4 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. 5 So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.

For those of you who have been with us, you might be feeling kinda shocked. Wasn't the battle of the believers, the whole fight at Jerusalem about not having to circumcise the Gentiles in order to become Christians. Didn't Paul win that argument? Why is he turning around here and circumcising Timothy? This passage in 1 Corinthians gives us a clue.

1 Corinthians 9:22b (ESV)

I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.

Timothy was not a Gentile, he was an uncircumcised Jew. His father was Greek but his mother was Jewish, so he was culturally Jewish. We don't know why Timothy's parents didn't circumcise him, but they didn't, and that would pose a problem wherever they wanted to go and share the gospel. If Timothy was going to have any authority to preach the gospel to his fellow Jews, he had to get circumcised. Otherwise, if he wasn't, his fellow Jews would either not give him the time of day, or they'd be sitting there wondering why he wasn't circumcised when he was trying to tell them about Jesus. His lack of circumcision would hinder the gospel. On the other hand, Paul does not circumcise Titus, who was entirely Greek, as that would have been contrary to the gospel (Titus 2:3). Titus, as a Gentile, did not need to become Jewish to be saved. Neither did Timothy, but he did it for the mission. So what do I find convicting here?

Timothy, a young man, was willing to go through the painful act of circumcision for the sake of the gospel. His level of commitment really convicts me.

Today, when they circumcise little boys, there's sugar cubes and medical devices. But Timothy had a nice knife that he had to go under. No anesthesia. No sugar cubes. Just something no guy ever wants to do. It doesn't say Timothy argued with Paul. He just did it.

I don't like pain or discomfort. I don't like having to sacrifice. I don't like things being difficult, and look at how far Timothy was willing to go because of his love for Jesus and the gospel. That's powerful. That's convicting. What won't you do for Jesus because it makes you uncomfortable? Did you know that 80% of churchgoers believe it's important to share their faith, but 61% have not done so in the last 6 months? ([source](#)) Have you shared your faith in the last six months? In the last year? Does Timothy's commitment challenge you? Please pray for your frontline, the people you're normally around who don't know Jesus. Sometimes I sense the Holy Spirit leading me to pray for someone, right then and there in person. That can make me really uncomfortable, but I never regret it when I follow the Holy Spirit's prompting.

What won't we do for Jesus as a church body because it makes us feel uncomfortable? I'm really proud of our church for doing our Christmas Eve service on our town common. That was risky, and it took courage, but that was only a step. What courageous step might God be calling us to take next?

Does Timothy convict us? Let's pray the Lord would help us raise our level of commitment to the level of Timothy, to whatever it takes to share the gospel, not sacrificing the gospel itself. Maybe Timothy remembered that Jesus himself was circumcised (Exod 13:2; Luke 2:23). Maybe he remembered how Jesus

bore the cross unto death, and circumcision seemed kinda small in light of what Jesus did. I find his commitment convicting. But we're not stopping here because of...

Something I find incredibly hopeful...

I want to put back up the same map as I read. As you listen along, you can see where Paul, Silas, and Timothy go.

Acts 16:6-10 (ESV)

6 And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. 7 And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. 8 So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. 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 help us." 10 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.

Paul, Silas, and Timothy are now setting out through Asia, and they think they're going to be sharing the gospel throughout the region, but the Holy Spirit keeps stopping them. Can you imagine how discouraging that must have felt? Lord, I thought you brought us all the way here to share the gospel? Why won't you let us in? Timothy had to get circumcised for this. Why is it going wrong? We don't know exactly how the Spirit said no, circumstances or a vision, but we know he said no. Also, I don't want you to miss it, but verse 10 has the first use of the first-person-plural pronoun "we." This is when the author of Acts, Luke, joins Paul, Silas, and Timothy. I imagine he was a huge encouragement to them in their discouragement. Then God gives Paul a vision of a Greek man from Macedonia inviting him to come preach. So the four of them set out.

Acts 16:11-15 (ESV)

11 So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, 12 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. 13 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. 14 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. 15 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.

They make it across the Aegean sea and arrive in Philippi. Some think there's no synagogue in Philippi, which is why they go to the place of prayer down by the river. Either way, they find a group of women there and Paul preaches to them. And Lydia, a woman from the city of Thyatira, comes to faith. The Lord opens her heart and she believes. Don't miss that she is from Thyatira. Thyatira is in the heart of Asia. The Spirit told them not to stop in Asia. Instead, the Spirit brought Asia to them. Here's what I find incredibly hopeful.

God saved Lydia, a woman from Asia, after he wouldn't let Paul enter Asia. God knows what he's doing and will bring his plans about.

God had a different plan, a better plan, than they could have orchestrated. It gives me incredible hope. She is quite the believer. The Lord opens her house, she gets baptized, her household and her believe and are baptized as well. And then she makes Paul and team stay with her. She seems to have a big leadership presence in Philippi going forward. Who's the Lydia in your life you want to see come to faith? Who's the

person you are praying for God to open their heart? I have a Lydia, do you? Let's pray for our Lydias, and that God would save them and use them to grow his kingdom. If God can save that Lydia, he can save your Lydia. That gives me hope. God knows what he's doing.

I find God's grace over Paul and Barnabas strangely comforting. I find Timothy's commitment convicting. And I find Lydia's conversion hopeful.

Here's the good news. Paul and Barnabas may have had a blow-out fight, but Jesus never did. He never lost it. He never sinned against his brother or sister. His life counts as your life. I find that strangely comforting.

Jesus was so committed to our salvation that he went to the cross and at the cost of his own life. He died because he knew we would never live up to God's standards apart from him. I find that oh so convicting, but also comforting. I don't have to earn my salvation. It's a gift. I believe in Jesus and follow him.

Jesus died to save women like Lydia. He died to open hearts and bring businessmen and businesswomen, seekers and learners, salvation through faith in him. I find that so hopeful.

I hope you're strangely comforted, oh so convicted, and yet hopeful. Let's pray.

1 Peter 1:3-5 (ESV)

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, 5 who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

Pastor [Jonathan Romig](#) preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above. You can also listen on [Apple Podcasts](#). Read the [story of our church here](#).

Discussion Questions

1. How do you feel about Paul and Barnabas's blowout fight?
2. What can Timothy's example teach us?
3. How can Lydia's conversion encourage us?
4. What is the gospel and how does it apply here?

Sources

Gospel Saturation Primer from Christ Together.

Wright, N.T.. *Acts for Everyone, Part Two: Chapters 13-18: 2* (The New Testament for Everyone) (p. 52). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.