ACTS 15:36–16:5 | WEEK

WHEN GOD MOVES YOU

Diving Deeper • Small Group Bible Study

Have you ever had God redirect your plans? Maybe He led you to make a decision that was uncomfortable, required you to let go of something familiar, or took you somewhere you never expected to go.

Looking back, how did you recognize God's leading, and what did you learn by saying yes?

LOOK AT THE WORD

Read Acts 15:36–16:5 together.

Paul and Barnabas have just finished their first missionary journey, sharing the Gospel and planting churches throughout the region. After returning to Antioch, they helped lead the church through a significant theological disagreement about whether Gentile believers needed to follow Jewish customs to be saved. The conclusion was clear: we are saved by grace through faith. Jesus plus nothing equals everything.

But as Paul and Barnabas prepare to visit the churches again, they face a disagreement of their own. This time, it isn't about theology. It's about John Mark, and whether he should be given another opportunity to join them. Their disagreement becomes so sharp that they separate and begin traveling with different ministry partners.

Yet God continues to work. Paul returns to Lystra, the very place where he had once been stoned and left for dead, and meets Timothy, who becomes one of his closest ministry partners. Paul even makes a personal sacrifice to remove a potential barrier to the Gospel. The churches continue to grow stronger and increase in number.

This passage reminds us that following Jesus requires us to remain movable, extend grace, pursue unity, and be willing to surrender our preferences for the sake of the Gospel.

DISCUSS

1. Sometimes staying the course means changing directions

Read Acts 15:36 and Proverbs 3:5–6.

Paul and Barnabas had a plan to revisit the churches they had planted. But as the story unfolds, their plans change. What began as one missionary team becomes two. Later, Paul returns to Lystra and meets Timothy, a relationship he likely never anticipated when he first set out.

Sometimes following Jesus means changing directions. We may have plans, expectations, and even opportunities that seem perfect, but God may have something different ahead. The question isn't simply whether we are willing to follow Jesus where we want to go, but whether we are willing to let Him lead us somewhere unexpected.

Have you ever experienced a season when God redirected your plans? What was difficult about saying yes?

Why is it sometimes harder to surrender something good than to walk away from something obviously wrong?

What does it look like to remain open and movable when God leads you outside your comfort zone?

2. Everyone makes sense in light of their story

Read Acts 15:36–39 and Romans 12:18.

Paul and Barnabas had a sharp disagreement over John Mark. Paul was concerned about the mission and didn't believe Mark could be trusted after abandoning them during their previous journey. Barnabas, whose name means "Son of Encouragement," wanted to give Mark another opportunity.

Both men had reasons for seeing the situation differently. Paul understood the risks of the journey and had experienced the consequences of being abandoned. Barnabas saw potential in Mark and wanted to offer him another chance. Their experiences shaped how they responded.

Everyone makes sense in light of their story. Understanding someone's story doesn't necessarily mean agreeing with their decisions, but it can help us respond with greater patience, grace, and compassion.

Think about a disagreement you've had with someone. How might understanding their story have changed the way you viewed the situation?

Why is it so easy to assume the worst about someone's intentions without understanding what they may have experienced?

How can we disagree with someone while still demonstrating love, humility, and respect?

What does Romans 12:18 teach us about taking responsibility for our part in pursuing peace?

3. Don't let disagreements distract you from the mission

Read Acts 15:39–41 and Ephesians 4:3.

Paul and Barnabas eventually went their separate ways. Their partnership ended, but their ministry didn't. Barnabas took Mark to Cyprus, while Paul chose Silas and continued strengthening the churches.

God continued working even through a painful disagreement. What had been one missionary team became two. This doesn't mean God endorsed the way everything happened, but He was able to redeem the situation and continue advancing His mission.

Here's an important reminder: God reserves the right to use people you disagree with. Just because someone isn't on Team You doesn't mean they aren't on Team Jesus.

Unity doesn't mean we agree on everything. It means we remain committed to loving one another and putting the mission of Jesus above our personal preferences.

Why do you think disagreements between Christians can sometimes become bigger than the mission we're called to accomplish?

Have you ever struggled to celebrate what God was doing through someone you disagreed with?

What does it look like to pursue unity without pretending that disagreements don't exist?

How can we keep our personal preferences from becoming more important than helping people find and follow Jesus?

4. Don't let what happened to you keep you from what God wants to do through you

Read Acts 16:1–2 and Philippians 2:3–4.

Paul returned to Lystra, the very place where he had previously been stoned and left for dead. But this time, something unexpected happened. He met Timothy, a young believer who would become one of his closest friends and ministry partners.

Think about that. The place where Paul experienced some of his greatest pain became the place where he found one of his most important relationships.

Sometimes when we've experienced pain, we make decisions based on what happened to us. We decide we'll never trust someone again, never put ourselves out there again, or never get involved again. While wisdom and healthy boundaries matter, we must be careful not to let past hurt close the door to what God may want to do next.

Just because one relationship ended painfully doesn't mean every relationship will end the same way. Just because someone failed in the past doesn't mean their story is over.

Have you ever allowed a painful experience to make you hesitant to trust, serve, or step into something new?

What is the difference between learning from past hurt and allowing past hurt to control your future?

Who has been a Timothy in your life—someone God brought into your life unexpectedly who strengthened your faith or helped you grow?

Is there an area of your life where God may be inviting you to open your heart or take another step forward?

5. What are you willing to surrender to help someone come to Jesus?

Read Acts 16:3–5 and 1 Corinthians 9:19–23.

Paul wanted Timothy to join him on the journey. Timothy had a Jewish mother and a Greek father, and his background created a potential barrier with the Jewish people they would encounter. So Paul had Timothy circumcised—not because it was necessary for salvation, but because it would help remove an obstacle to the Gospel.

This is important. Paul had just helped establish that salvation comes through grace, not religious performance or circumcision. He wasn't changing the Gospel. He was willing to surrender a personal preference for the sake of helping others hear it.

Paul understood that the mission was bigger than his comfort. He was willing to become all things to all people so that by all possible means some might be saved.

The question for us isn't whether we have to surrender the Gospel. It's what we are willing to surrender to help someone come to Jesus.

What stands out to you about Paul's willingness to make this sacrifice for the sake of the Gospel?

What are some personal preferences, comforts, traditions, or resources that can become barriers between people and Jesus?

How can we distinguish between compromising the truth of the Gospel and being willing to adjust our preferences to reach others?

Is there something you're holding onto that God may be asking you to surrender for the sake of someone else?

6. Your past doesn't have to be the end of your story

Read 2 Timothy 4:6–11 and 2 Corinthians 5:18–19.

Remember the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark? At the time, Paul didn't believe Mark was dependable enough to join the journey. But years later, near the end of Paul's life, he writes something remarkable:

"Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry." — 2 Timothy 4:11

What changed? We don't know everything that happened between these two moments, but we know the relationship changed. Mark grew. Paul grew. What once seemed like an irreparable disagreement was no longer the end of their story.

That's the power of the Gospel. Through Jesus, we have been reconciled to God and given the ministry of reconciliation. The same grace that restores our relationship with God can transform how we relate to one another.

Maybe you've written someone off. Maybe someone has written you off. Maybe you've made a mistake and believe that one chapter will define the rest of your life. But God is still at work, changing hearts, restoring relationships, and giving people new opportunities.

Why do you think Paul's words about Mark in 2 Timothy 4:11 are so significant when you consider what happened in Acts 15?

Have you ever experienced a relationship that was restored after a difficult season? What made restoration possible?

Is there someone you've written off who you need to begin praying for again?

How does knowing that Jesus has extended grace to you change the way you extend grace to others?

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Take a few minutes to reflect silently:

1. Is there an area of my life where God is asking me to change directions or step outside my comfort zone? Am I movable?
2. Is there a disagreement or fractured relationship where I need to pursue peace, extend grace, or better understand someone else's story?
3. Have I allowed something that happened to me in the past to keep me from what God wants to do through me?
4. What preference, comfort, or expectation might I need to surrender to help someone come to Jesus?
5. Is there someone I have written off who needs to know that their story isn't over?

TAKE IT WITH YOU

This week, take one step:

- **Be movable:** Pay attention to where God may be redirecting your plans. Take one step of obedience, even if it feels uncomfortable.
- **Extend grace:** Make an effort to understand someone's story before making assumptions about their intentions.
- **Pursue peace:** Take responsibility for your part in a disagreement and make an effort to move toward reconciliation.
- **Remove a barrier:** Identify one personal preference or comfort you could surrender to help someone feel welcomed and hear the Gospel.
- **Give someone another chance:** Encourage someone who may feel defined by a past mistake. Remind them that God is still at work in their story.

Challenge: Think of one person who has been difficult for you to understand, trust, or extend grace toward. This week, take one intentional step toward them. Pray for them, reach out, or look for an opportunity to encourage them. Ask God to help you see them through the lens of grace.

PRAY TOGETHER

Pray that God would help your group:

- Remain movable and willing to follow Jesus wherever He leads, even when it means changing directions.
- See others through the lens of grace and remember that everyone makes sense in light of their story.
- Pursue unity, extend forgiveness, and keep the mission of Jesus bigger than personal disagreements.
- Find healing from past hurts without allowing those experiences to close the door to future relationships.
- Be willing to surrender personal preferences, comforts, and expectations so that others can come to know Jesus.
- Believe that God can redeem painful experiences, restore broken relationships, and give people a new chapter.

"I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some." — 1 Corinthians 9:22