

Agreeing to Disagree

Acts 15:36-41 on June 27, 2021

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Please read Acts 15:36-41 before going further in this transcript.

Acts 9:27 says that Paul “preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus.” Acts 11:24 says that Barnabas was “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith.” BOTH of these men were fully devoted followers of Jesus, and YET... they come to a point in their ministry partnership where Acts 15:39 reports that “They had SUCH a sharp disagreement that they parted company....” This verse is particularly difficult to bear because we know just how closely these two brothers in Christ had served together over the years. Arguably, Paul and Barnabas were one of the greatest “Spiritual Dynamic Duos” of all time:¹

> It all began many years earlier, when Barnabas convinced the Jews living in Jerusalem that Paul’s conversion to Christianity was genuine, and that this former “persecutor of the church” wasn’t just trying to TRICK them and draw them in closer, so that he could arrest them.

> A little while later, when the Antioch Church was exploding with brand new believers, Barnabas went to Tarsus to get Paul and bring him back, so that they could teach an ENTIRE year of spiritual formation classes TOGETHER.²

> Paul and Barnabas were then chosen to TEAM UP together, to deliver the famine relief to the believers in Jerusalem who needed benevolence help.³

> Then, during their AMAZING 1st Missionary Journey together they bore SO MUCH gospel fruit! They faced intense persecution, literally running away from one town to the next in Jesus’ name.⁴ Not to mention, the INCREDIBLE miracles that God did through them!⁵

It’s such a shame that they couldn’t just work things out regarding John Mark. AFTER ALL that they’d been through together, AFTER ALL the incredible ways that God had worked through this dynamic duo, they couldn’t manage to work out this one, seemingly, small matter. The thing that separated them wasn’t a theological divide. It wasn’t an issue of clear right from wrong. It was merely a disagreement over a basic ministry decision of who goes. This illustrates the fact that conflict happens in the church, even between good, godly people, even between fully devoted followers of Jesus. We know this to be true in our OWN church, and somehow, it’s an encouraging concession to learn that it was also true, within the Early Church. Even as the gospel continues to go forth, God’s people continually need to learn how/when to work things

¹ Kevin DeYoung’s sermon #37, “Christians in Conflict” from Acts 15:36-41.

<https://www.avisualguide.com/sermons/page/2/>

² See Acts 11:26.

³ Acts 11:29-30.

⁴ For example, see Acts 14:6 where they “fled.”

⁵ For example, see Acts 14:8-10 and 15:12.

out. When to compromise and make concessions and surrender our rights, and when to hold our ground and be insistent, EVEN if it means parting company.⁶

Please turn or click in your Bible to Acts 15:36. **This disagreement between Paul and Barnabas will teach us 3 things about conflict, specifically conflict between fully devoted followers of Jesus...** First of all...

1. ...Conflict happens. Acts 15:36 begins, “Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.” Paul is referring to their 1st Missionary Journey back in Acts 13-14, and a return visit sounds GREAT! Even though they had set up local churches and local elder boards in each of these towns, these believers were still near and dear to their hearts.⁷ Let’s do a quick review of our **[MAP]** which is on the last page of this transcript. Their 1st Missionary Journey had begun in Antioch (the BLUE arrow), on the east side of our map. They traveled west over the water to the island of Cyprus (the ORANGE arrow), and then NW up to Perga (by the GREEN arrow). They then traveled over land to Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and finally Derbe, telling people the Good News about Jesus all along the way! NOW, the plan was to revisit them and see how they were doing. Sounds like a TERRIFIC plan, prompted by a heartfelt interest and concern for their spiritual wellbeing.

⁶ **Let’s contrast this disagreement in Acts 15:39 with the decision of the Jerusalem Council earlier in Acts 15.** Last week we watched all of the key church leaders come to full agreement on Navigating Middle Ground. They found a way forward together. However, at the end of Acts 15, the only way some key church leaders find a way forward, is APART. As sad as this may seem to us, it once again reveals the humanity and frailty within the Early Church. Despite their devotion to Jesus and the deep love for one another, it wasn’t always easy to get along. Sometimes getting along meant separating, it meant parting company. **This should cause us to appreciate the wisdom of verses like Romans 12:18,** “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” **Matthew 5:9 says,** “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” **James 3:17-18,** “But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.”

It’s debatable whether this “parting of company” was pleasing to God. Be that as it may, God worked, in spite of their inability to work it out. One could certainly argue that God used it to split Paul and Barnabas into two teams. **As I was preparing this message, I couldn’t help but think of the Serenity Prayer:** God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, Courage to change the things I can, And wisdom to know the difference. In light of our discussion on “agreeing to disagree,” it’s a helpful prayer for all of us to consider. **I also found a longer version:** “God, give me grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, Courage to change the things which should be changed, and the Wisdom to distinguish the one from the other. Living one day at a time, Enjoying one moment at a time, Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace, Taking, as Jesus did, This sinful world as it is, Not as I would have it, Trusting that You will make all things right, If I surrender to Your will, So that I may be reasonably happy in this life, And supremely happy with You forever in the next. Amen.” “The prayer has appeared in many versions. Reinhold Niebuhr’s versions of the prayer were always printed as a single prose sentence; printings that set out the prayer as three lines of verse modify the author’s original version.” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serenity_Prayer. “The Serenity Prayer is the common name for a prayer written by the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971)... Niebuhr, who first wrote the prayer for a sermon at Heath Evangelical Union Church in Heath, Massachusetts, used it widely in sermons as early as 1934 and first published it in 1951 in a magazine column. The prayer spread through Niebuhr’s sermons and church groups in the 1930s and 1940s and was adopted and popularized by Alcoholics Anonymous and other twelve-step programs.” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serenity_Prayer However, it would be a shame if we were to think of this prayer, as something only for people who are trying to overcome drug or alcohol addiction.

⁷ In other words, their concern for these dear brothers and sisters in Christ hadn’t waned, even though they had been separated by time and distance. Just because they couldn’t stay in each of these towns didn’t mean that they didn’t deeply care about these people. One author notes that Paul and Barnabas’ attitude wasn’t ‘gone and forgotten’ but rather of “a family that is left behind for other responsibilities but that is still precious enough to care for [whenever] possible.” Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 484.

Acts 15:37-38 says, “Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work.” John Mark got connected with Paul and Barnabas back in Jerusalem, right after they’d delivered the benevolence gift to the believers there.⁸ Then, back in Acts 13:13 we learned that “From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia, where John left them to return to Jerusalem.” So, just as the 1st Missionary Journey was getting warmed up, John Mark went back to Jerusalem. Acts 13:13 says he “left them,” but Acts 15:38 clarifies, he “deserted them.” We aren’t told exactly WHY, but we could hazard some guesses.⁹ One guess might be...

1) Homesickness. This would be understandable. It’s tough to be out on the field, so far away, for such long periods of time. It’s understandable that John Mark may have been missing his family and friends, who knows, he may have even had a romantic interest back in Jerusalem. (The text doesn’t tell us.) A 2nd guess might be...

2) A change in leadership from Barnabas to Paul.¹⁰ Back in Acts 13:1, Saul comes last in the list of the key leaders of the church in Antioch. And it’s quite possible that the names are listed in order of importance. In other words, Barnabas’ name was listed first, and Saul’s was listed last, therefore this could indicate that Barnabas, not Saul, was the primary leader at the time. Then, as we work our way through the chronological progression of the book of Acts, we’ll notice that Luke, the author, begins to list Paul’s name BEFORE that of Barnabas.¹¹ In fact, it’s worth noting that Acts 13:13 refers to, “PAUL and his companions.” Barnabas is there, but his name isn’t even listed. Acts 13:13 is the same verse that tells us, that this is when John Mark deserted them. In other words, it may have been a lot easier for John Mark to follow Barnabas, the “Son of Encouragement,” rather than Paul, who by many accounts seemed to be more... how should we say it... “abrasive.”^{12 13} A 3rd guess as to why John Mark abandoned them might be...

3) Fear. John Mark and the others had many reasons to feel apprehensive about the strange new places they were headed to. Certainly, there must have been times of anxiety over the impending challenges that lay ahead.¹⁴ One thing that most of us

⁸ Acts 12:25 records, “When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission [of delivering the benevolence gift], they returned from Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark.”

⁹ See *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 2011, p. 1852 footnote on Acts 13:13.

¹⁰ One of the coolest character traits that we find in Barnabas, is how he seems to humbly allow Paul to take the lead. It’s subtle, but we can find it if we read between the lines of the text a little.

¹¹ Consider also Acts 14:12, where Barnabas is called Zeus and Paul is called Hermes because he was the main speaker.

¹² In other words, it seems to be more and more clear, that Paul takes the lead role in their missionary endeavors. (See helpful discussion in *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1851 footnote on Acts 13:9.) One author summarizes it this way: “Barnabas was able to share the stage with Paul and eventually trained him to be able to step ahead. Good leadership can often be measured by whether it leaves a trail of successors behind it. Barnabas not only encouraged Paul; he also enabled him. Barnabas did not feel the need to be always the front man. So, although Paul is the focus in [Acts], in many ways Barnabas is a hero in the [text] because of the way he teamed with his partner.... leaders lead by replicating.” (Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, pp. 466-467.)

¹³ Colossians 4:10 tells us that Barnabas also happened to be John Mark’s cousin. To be fair though, Luke, the author of Acts, doesn’t mention this fact here, perhaps because his original readers would have already known this, but perhaps more likely because he doesn’t see this as particularly relevant to the conflict. See Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 519.

¹⁴ Quite likely John Mark had never been to many of these places to which they were headed. On the one hand, the Island of Cyprus probably sound fun; after all, this was his cousin Barnabas’ hometown. On the other hand, places like Pisidian

Bemidji folks probably aren't aware of, is that in addition to all of the other hardships and persecutions that these missionaries were about to face, they were also in danger from BANDITS. If we look closely at our map, we'll see that this is a mountainous region of the country.¹⁵ John Mark deserted them, right before they traveled through the regions of Pamphylia and Pisidia. These mountainous pathways offered great cover for bandits and "roving marauders," who were frequently active in this area.¹⁶ Paul actually mentions this in 2 Corinthians 11:26, "I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers."¹⁷ This may have been FAR more than John Mark thought he'd signed up for!¹⁸ All of this illustrates the very real kinds of challenges and inconveniences that are faced by our Global Partners, so we need to pray/pray/pray for them!

Alright, back to the question at hand. Acts 15:37-38 says, "Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work." Barnabas' argument may have gone something like this: "Look Paul, being a fully devoted follower of Jesus, means giving people a 2nd chance. After all, aren't we out here preaching a gospel of GRACE!?! (Ever heard of grace Paul!?) Paul's argument may have gone something like this: "Look 'Barnie', I believe in grace as much as the next guy, but being a fully devoted follower of Jesus means being DEVOTED... FULLY! I can't work with a guy who's half-hearted in his commitments; I just don't think it's wise to take him. He DESERTED US last time, left us high and dry! He needs to learn that once he puts his hand to the plow, there's no turning back!"^{19 20} So what do YOU think: Was Paul was right or was Barnabas right? They can't do both; they either take him OR they don't. Well... actually... there IS a 3rd option, they could... split up the team.

A 2nd thing this disagreement teaches us is that...

2. ...Conflict sometimes means agreeing to disagree. Acts 15:39-41 concludes,

Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe were strange, unknown quantities. They presented opportunities for exciting adventures, to be sure, but they also presented many challenges for leaving his comfort zone.

¹⁵ Darrell L. Bock quoting Polhill, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 483.

¹⁶ *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1855 footnote on Acts 14:24.

¹⁷ In **2 Timothy 3:10-12** Paul warns young Timothy, "You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."

¹⁸ Philippians 1:29 warns us, "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him." One author summarizes it this way, "No cross, no crown." (F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, Rev. NICNT, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1988, p. 280.)

¹⁹ Consider Jesus' words in Luke 9:62 and 14:25-30.

²⁰ "Barnabas, you know how rough things got last time – they tried to stone me to death in Lystra!" I need a guy on our team I can count on when the going gets tough!" Consider Paul's words near the end of life in **2 Timothy 4:16-17**, "At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth."

“They had SUCH a sharp disagreement^{21 22} that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord. He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.” Despite their mutual love and deep respect for each other, despite all their many years together as a spiritual “Dynamic Duo,” they parted company.^{23 24} Ultimately, what happens here then, is that “They reach a solid compromise and create two missions instead of [just] one.”²⁵ In other words, there’s no direct indication here as to who was right or who was wrong in this disagreement. Although, I suppose someone could argue, that verse 40 does specifically mention that Paul and Silas were “commended by the believers.”²⁶ Be that as it may, they respectfully agreed to disagree, they parted company, and ALL FOUR of them went out to proclaim the gospel.^{27 28 29}

Since Barnabas and Mark headed off in a different direction, it causes us to wonder: do their paths ever meet up again? Well, it’s encouraging to learn that the answer to this question is “YES.” The 3rd thing this disagreement teaches us is that...

3. ...Conflict is redeemable. Later on in history, 1 Corinthians 9:6 tells us that Paul actually goes to bat for Barnabas, indicating that he still thinks highly of him. This also seems to indicate that they did indeed serve in ministry together again, in one capacity or another.³⁰ But the bigger story on redeeming conflict, is the restoration of Paul’s relationship with John Mark. John Mark was a REMARKABLE Christian in the Early Church, more REMARKABLE than most of us probably realize.³¹ We were first introduced to him back in Acts 12:12, “[Peter] went to the house of Mary the mother

²¹ “sharp disagreement” = παροξυσμός “a state of irritation expressed in argument, sharp disagreement.” Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 780). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

²² The original Greek for “sharp disagreement” suggests that this was a “major disagreement.” See Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 519.

²³ Paul ABSOLUTELY refused to take John Mark along on the 2nd Missionary Journey. The New Testament records another time when there was likely friction between Paul and Barnabas. In Galatians 2:11-13, Barnabas is led astray by the hypocrisy of the Apostle Peter, as both of them caved in to the pressure from the circumcision group. Barnabas was among the Jewish believers who drew back and separated himself from the Gentile believers. Paul was deeply upset by this hypocrisy.

²⁴ “Paul is thinking strategically and does not want to risk a second desertion that might jeopardize their mission.” *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2252 footnote on Acts 15:36-41.

²⁵ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 519.

²⁶ F.F. Bruce notes, “Luke does not relate the dispute in such a way as to put Paul in the right and Barnabas in the wrong. In view of Luke’s restraint, it is idle for the reader to try to apportion the blame.” *The Book of the Acts*, Rev. Ed., NICNT, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1988, p. 301.

²⁷ “Thus the end result of the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas was four missionaries instead of two.” *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 2011, p. 1857 footnote on Acts 15:39-40.

²⁸ **Let’s take a quick look at the alternate traveling companion Paul chooses. Acts 15:39-40 says, “...but Paul chose Silas...”** **Silas was an interesting choice.** If you heard last week’s message, Silas was one of the two men who was chosen by the Jerusalem Council to deliver the letter to the new Gentile believers in Antioch. **In fact, Silas was the perfect choice to be Paul’s traveling companion for his 2nd Missionary Journey.** That’s because, Acts 16:4 tells us, that one of the things that they will do on this journey, is deliver the letter from the Jerusalem Council to these churches. **We’ll also talk about this more next week.**

²⁹ Consider Paul’s words in Philippians 1:15-18.

³⁰ The timeline of Paul’s life on pp. 1844-1845 of *The NIV Study Bible* is an immensely helpful tool in thinking through the probable chronology between some of these key events. (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011)

³¹ “The ReMARKable John Mark!”

of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying.”³² Do you remember this prayer meeting? It was a hum dinger! It was right after King Herod had had the Apostle James beheaded. Then, he threw Peter in prison, and while Peter was awaiting his trial, the church was praying for his release. In answer to these prayers, an angel springs Peter out of jail. Peter then goes to “the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark.” In other words the Apostle Peter came to John Mark’s house. Now, here’s the cool part: the CHURCH met at JOHN MARK’S house!³³ You see, back then the church didn’t have buildings like E-Free Bemidji does; the Early Church met in people’s homes. One of those homes, was John Mark’s. Can you even begin to imagine the sermons that John Mark had opportunity to listen to? On Sunday mornings, as a young boy, John Mark got to hear 1st-hand sermons from people like the Apostles Peter, James, and John.³⁴ He likely had first-name relationships with many, if not all, of the 12 Apostles. Not to mention Barnabas, and the Apostle Paul, and who knows who else!³⁵

This morning, we learned from Acts 15:39 that John Mark’s earlier desertion, cost him his opportunity to go along with Paul on his 2nd Missionary Journey. What a bummer! However, let’s not miss the fact that he still got to go along with Barnabas. And everything we know about Barnabas is that he was a really cool, godly Christian man to hang out with! Now the fact is, John Mark will NOT show up again in the book of Acts.³⁶ And we might conclude from this, that the Lord was done with him. However, we’d be WRONG! Let’s keep in mind, that as Christ-follower’s, our spiritual growth and maturity is not always smooth/steady; in fact, it tends to come with fits and starts. What we discover about Mark’s later life and ministry, is that he “evidently returned from his work with Barnabas and became associated with Peter.”³⁷ In fact, more than just an associate but a CLOSE associate. 1 Peter 5:13 reveals that “Peter regards Mark with such warmth and affection, that he calls him his son.”³⁸ John-Mark’s ultimate spiritual legacy was to leave us with one of the four Gospels. Perhaps you’ve heard of it? It’s called “the Gospel According to Mark” (Mark as in this John Mark!) Not only is His Gospel, one of the four gospels in the Bible, but it is considered by many scholars, to have priority among the synoptics. What this means is that Mark’s Gospel, likely led the way in the formation of both Matthew and Luke’s Gospels as well. What all of this is driving at, is that whatever struggles and shortfalls John-Mark may have had in his early years of following Jesus, he eventually matured to the point where God used him MIGHTILY. Therefore, we shouldn’t despise someone else’s bumpy beginnings, nor should we allow our own bumpy spiritual journey, to hold us back from what God has for us, for OUR future.^{39 40}

³² In other words, this Mary was Barnabas’ aunt.

³³ See *The NIV Study Bible* footnote for Acts 12:12 on p. 1849 (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 2011).

³⁴ We don’t know his actual age, but we can assume he was a boy at the time since he was still living at home.

³⁵ Acts 13:5 tells us that John-Mark got to go along with Barnabas and Saul as their helper on the very 1st Missionary Journey. Even though he only stayed with them as far as Perga, that’s far more than any of us can say!

³⁶ Nor will Barnabas for that matter.

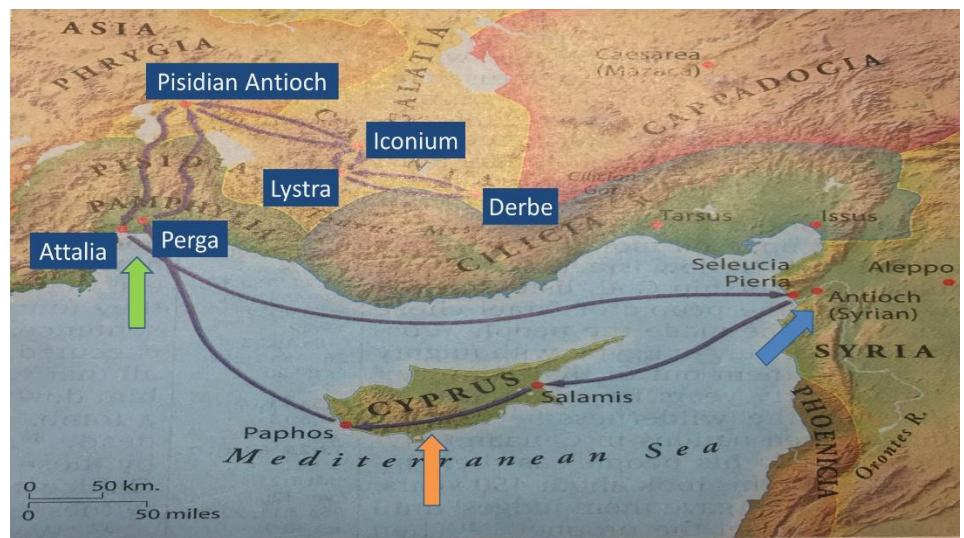
³⁷ *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 2011, p. 1857 footnote on Acts 15:39.

³⁸ *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 2011, p. 2110 footnote on 1 Peter 5:13.

³⁹ This is why I absolutely LOVE Paul’s words to the Philippian believers in Philippians 3:12-14.

What about Paul and John Mark though? You'll be encouraged to know, that later on in life, Paul lists Mark among his ministry PARTNERS. In Philemon 24, Paul refers to Mark as his "fellow worker." In Colossians 4:10 Paul sends greetings from Mark, who is there with him. And Paul writes that the Colossian Church should welcome Mark if he comes to see them. The fact is, "By the end of Paul's life he came to admire Mark SO MUCH that he requested him to come to be with him during his final days."⁴¹ When Paul is writing to Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:11, he says, "...Get Mark and bring him with you, because HE is helpful to ME in my ministry." Who knows, God may have very well used Paul's tough love earlier in John Mark's life, as a KEY part of his spiritual formation.⁴² Be that as it may, "Ultimately Mark proved himself to Paul."⁴³ Whatever conflict had caused them to part company, was now resolved. All was forgiven, relationship had somehow been restored. Praise the Lord!⁴⁴

Brother or sister in Christ, conflict is redeemable; restoration is possible through the cross of Jesus Christ! I don't know about you, but I STILL have a few unresolved conflicts out there, that I'd really like to see God redeem. I've got some dear brothers and sisters in Christ with whom I've had to part company, and I still deeply grieve that separation. Oh that God would help ALL OF US, to remain open, and available, to restoring our relationships with one another. If not today, perhaps sometime down the road....



⁴⁰ Consider Zechariah 4:10 and also 4:6.

⁴¹ *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 2011, p. 1857 footnote on Acts 15:39.

⁴² This is my best guess as to the backstory here, but it's just a personal theory. Frankly, we could see it both ways. On the one hand, we need to develop young leaders and let them make a few mistakes along the way, giving them 2nd chances. On the other hand, we need to develop young leaders and hold them accountable for their mistakes along the way, by sometimes disciplining them. This is why we need to pray for discernment on a case-by-case basis.

⁴³ See p. 2050 footnote on 2 Timothy 4:11 in *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 2011.

⁴⁴ I'm mindful of Paul's description of himself and Barnabas back in Acts 14:15, "we too are only human."