

# FINDING THE PATH

**SERIES: SENT: LIVING THE MISSION  
OF THE CHURCH.**



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Acts 15:36–16:10  
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*Acts 15:36–16:10*

When I was a sophomore in college, I heard an InterVarsity staff worker give what he called a “dorm talk.” He would go into a dorm and publicize a talk on a hot topic. His topic was “Christians and Sex.” It drew a pretty good sized crowd. He gave a short message and then took a lot of Q&A. Most of the questions ended up being the really hard questions of faith: what about God allowing pain and suffering? How do you explain the Crusades and events like that?

I couldn’t believe that someone was willing to do this. I was amazed by it. It sounded utterly terrifying. So I concluded that God must want me to do it. This particular person was from a different campus, so there was no one doing dorm talks on our campus. I decided that I had to be the one.

I prepared and planned and eventually I did a few. And as far as I can tell, my dorm talks were terrible. Very few people showed up. I’m pretty sure I completely confused the few people that did attend. No one ended up asking that many questions and the ones that did get asked didn’t get great answers from me. I ended up doing a few and then stopping altogether. I’ve always been curious looking back about what God was going through those times.

Is this what it means to be sent? Find the hardest possible thing and force yourself to do it?

We are currently in the middle of our series in the book of Acts called *SENT: Living the Mission of the Church*. We’re working our way through the story of how the Gospel initially spread throughout the world and the birth and development of the early church.

We’ve seen the church form in Jerusalem. They have faced persecution, internal conflict, and rapid growth. Eventually, a new church was planted in Antioch. That church sent out the first missionaries: Paul and Barnabas. They travelled all around, proclaiming the gospel and then returned home. Back in Antioch, they were met with a fierce theological debate which required them to travel back to Jerusalem for an authoritative answer.

Now that the debate is settled, they are on to the next chapter. Paul and Barnabas decide that it’s time to be sent out again. In our passage this morning we will see them leave for what most scholars refer to as the Second Missionary Journey.

But as they set out this time, we are given some interesting insight into a few areas of what it means to be sent. We are going to see a sharp disagreement between Paul and Barnabas over who to bring along on this second journey. We’re going to see an interesting decision that Paul makes regarding how best to prepare for the journey that lies before them. Also, we’ll see a close-up picture of how God guides them precisely into one direction that he wants them to go. All in all, we’re going to see Paul struggling to figure out what to do next. Eventually, we’ll see him finding the path.

My hope is that the story this morning is very comforting to us. We’ve been talking so much about being sent that I’m worried it is starting to feel like a huge and monumental task that lies before us. In a room of perfectionists and over-achievers, it can sound overwhelming. How do you know where to go? How do you know who to go with? What do you do when you get there? How can I be sent if I’m not even sure about God myself? This morning I think we’ll see that it isn’t as difficult as we sometimes make it out to be. My prayer is that the story this morning can take some of the pressure off.

We’ll see a way of being sent that is organic and natural; a way that means our weaknesses and inadequacies are part of what God will use; A way that takes into account our fears and our failures. Being sent doesn’t have to be terrifying.

## **Choosing a Partner**

Our story begins when Paul decides that he wants to revisit all the churches that were planted during the first missionary journey. But his plans result in a conflict between him and Barnabas.

## Acts 15:36-41:

**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.**

Notice that the second missionary journey begins with a lot less formality than the first one. The first time the church was gathered to pray and fast and decided to send out Paul and Barnabas. This time Paul just has an idea that he runs by Barnabas and they choose to go for it. But then they have a disagreement.

I love this part of Acts. I remember vividly the first time that I heard that the apostle Paul and Barnabas the encourager had such a huge fight that they had to go separate ways. I couldn't believe it was even possible. Paul, I could understand. He seems like he might be a bit difficult to get along with. But how could you get into a fight with Barnabas? That's like hating puppies.

Make no mistake. This fight is not a friendly difference of opinion. The original language is actually quite strong. Paul didn't just “think it best not to take him”—he insisted that they not take Mark. Mark wasn't just the “one who had withdrawn from them”—he was the one who had abandoned or deserted them. Paul had strong feelings about Mark, and Paul was not going to budge on them at all. There was no way he was giving Mark a second chance.

But Barnabas was the “Son of Encouragement”. He was the one who always gave people another chance. So he chose Mark and went one direction. Paul chose someone else: a young man named Silas and went the other direction.

I love this story because it shows us two very mature believers who are entirely dedicated to the work of God. They have a strong difference of opinion. They get into a debate about it. They can't resolve it, so they separate it. And God uses the whole process. God uses this conflict that can't be resolved for his purposes.

When I got to college as a freshman, I was really excited to meet other Christians in my dorm. I wanted to work together with them to reach people for Christ. But then something strange happened. I met one of the other Christians in my dorm. She was energetic and outgoing. She was attractive and friendly. She wanted to tell everyone about Jesus.

But I didn't like her. Something about her personality just rubbed me the wrong way. I just didn't like her and I didn't know what to do about that. It didn't make sense to me. She was a sister in Christ. We had so much in common. But I just didn't like her.

And it took me a long time to realize that this was okay. I didn't have to like every other Christian that I met. This realization turns out to be a great freedom. It's okay if you don't like the person sitting next to you. It's okay if you don't get along with every other follower of Jesus in the world.

This realization can take some of the pressure off. You don't have to be sent with someone you don't like. Or someone you don't trust. Or someone you don't think is qualified.

It's even okay if you're wrong about the person. The apostle Paul was completely wrong about John Mark. John Mark ended up being a great asset to the early church. He wrote the Gospel of Mark. He was a faithful leader for decades. Paul was wrong to think John Mark would bail on them again. But God still used this misconception.

Paul didn't want to go again with John Mark, but that didn't mean he went alone. We don't have to be sent with people we can't stand. We aren't sent alone. Find someone you want to be sent with. Find a partner. Or a team. Or a friend. Or a community.

Following Jesus is not like taking your medicine. It doesn't have to be terrible. Yes, God will call you to get outside of your comfort zone. Yes, it will be surprising and challenging. Yes, it will probably even hurt. But you don't need to make it harder than it needs to be. At least you can do all of that with someone you like being around.

Follow Jesus into the hard places. But go with a friend.

I'm sometimes concerned with the way that I hear Christians talking about how God is sending them. God wants to break them. God wants to challenge them beyond what they can handle. God wants them to face their fears and work through the conflict in their relationships and step up to the plate and do the hard things and die daily to their flesh. I just get tired and exhausted and want to give up just listening to people talk like that.

But this isn't how it has to be. God can work through our relationship conflicts that aren't resolved. You don't have to be sent with someone you don't like. But find someone. Find a partner.

## Get Prepared

Paul and Barnabas went opposite ways when they left on their journeys. Barnabas went to the churches that they visited first. He sailed to Cyprus. Paul went to the churches that they visited last. I wonder whether they expected to cross paths at some point. I wonder what happened to Barnabas on his part of the journey. These are things that we'll never really know.

When Paul gets to the first church, he finds someone that he wants to add to his team.

### Acts 16:1-5:

**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.**

Paul starts his journey with the last cities that he visited on the first missionary journey. He meets a believer named Timothy, and Paul invites him to join with his mission and travel alongside him. Timothy ends up playing a significant role in the early church. Paul leaves him in charge in Ephesus. He writes the letters of 1 and 2 Timothy to him. And Timothy eventually will become the first bishop of Ephesus.

Timothy had an interesting background. His father was Greek, but his mother was a Jewish believer. That's a fascinating mix. Having mixed ethnic marriages in the first century wasn't all that common. Jewish Law prohibited marrying a non-Jew, so Timothy was a bit of a unique person.

In light of that, Paul's decision to circumcise him is extremely curious. Last week we heard about the Jerusalem Council, which held serious deliberations and made it clear that you did not need to be circumcised to be saved. Now Paul is circumcising Timothy. What is the deal?

Wouldn't Timothy have been a perfect example of the radical grace offered through Jesus if he had remained uncircumcised? Wouldn't he have been an ideal model to challenge the beliefs of legalistic Jews, so they understood the freedom of the Gospel? Paul spent so much time writing against the need for circumcision. Why would he do this?

Paul didn't have to. He could have fought this battle like he did in Galatians; like he did at the Jerusalem Council; Like he did with the Romans. But Paul chose not to fight this battle. He chose to circumcise Timothy to make it easier for Jews to receive him and listen to him.

To be fair, Paul was caught in a no-win situation. Timothy would be "officially" Jewish because he had a Jewish mother. But it would have been a great offense for an uncircumcised Jew to speak in synagogues. This would have immediately put up barriers to the Gospel.

Some people have wondered how anyone would have known whether Timothy had been circumcised. I don't think this something you checked when you arrived at someone's house. It is more likely that word would have spread. For Timothy to have been circumcised as an adult would have been a kind of conversion. It's a fixing of what misunderstand at his youth. His circumcision would have proved him to be more faithful to have this done as an adult.

Circumcising Timothy removes the barrier for meeting Jews, and it gives him more of an "in." Timothy is such a good Jew that he was willing to get circumcised as an adult. But, it goes completely against one of the main issues of people not having to be circumcised to follow Jesus.

There was no good solution for Paul to pick. The easiest thing to do would have been just to avoid Timothy. But Paul doesn't do that. Paul takes Timothy along and he makes a decision to circumcise him, even though he knows that this decision is going to be misunderstood.

We know that Paul was misunderstood because people still misunderstand this passage today. Many critical scholars conclude that Acts isn't historical because the Paul who wrote Galatians and Romans would never have had Timothy circumcised.

This willingness to be misunderstood amazes me. Paul is willing to make a decision that he must know will result in people misunderstanding him, not just on a minor point, but on a major theological issue like the freedom of the Gospel. Paul faces a situation that he can't possibly win and he makes a decision. He knows his decision will cause problems, but he does it and moves forward.

The other day I was driving, and I pulled out in front of someone because there was another car blocking my vision and I didn't see them. The driver acknowledged my mistake with a less than friendly gesture out the window. I felt this crazy urge to stop that person and explain myself. I was sure if they could just hear my side of the story, they would understand. It drove me crazy because I felt misunderstood.

Many of us are very scared of being misunderstood. We like to do things right. We like to find the right answer. We want people to "get us" and approve of what we do. We're terrified of situations that practically guarantee someone will disagree with our decision.

And yet, the truth is that life is full of those kinds of decisions. If you live your life with the goal of not being misunderstood, then you are in for a world of hurt. You are going to be misunderstood.

You are going to be misunderstood especially if you follow Jesus. If you claim to worship someone who was misunderstood, despised, and rejected, why would you expect to be treated any better? Be willing to be misunderstood.

You might be thinking that this doesn't seem to take the pressure off. It only makes being sent sound worse. But here's the good news: You're going to be misunderstood no matter what you do. You can't win. People are going to misunderstand you no matter what you do. And it won't destroy you. You can handle it.

So you might as well be sent. You might as well follow Jesus. You don't have to get it right. Just make a decision and stick with it.

Paul wanted to make things go a bit smoother. He was picking his battles. For Jews who hadn't heard of Jesus, he didn't want to shut the door before it had opened. Paul was doing this for the sake of the Gospel. But it would be easy to accuse him of violating the very Gospel itself in order to spread the Gospel.

And yet he does it anyway.

There is something that holds me back from being friendlier with people I don't know. I'm worried they will think I'm pushy or annoying. I don't want to ask about what's really going on because I don't want to be misunderstood as prying. I want to respect their privacy and not make things uncomfortable.

But I realize that then people can assume that I don't care, or that I want to have a shallow conversation without really engaging. How do I make it clear that I really do care, but I don't want to be pushy? I'm interested in what is going on, as long as you want to share.

It's a trap that can't be escaped. We're going to be misunderstood, so accept it and take action. Do something—whatever seems best to you—and move forward. If people misunderstand, you can explain yourself. If you don't have the opportunity, don't worry. God knows the truth.

Don't be paralyzed by perfectionism. Take action and be willing to be misunderstood.

## **Finding the Right Place**

Paul has split up with Barnabas. He has made a decision that is bound to confuse people. Paul needs to figure out where to go next. And it isn't that easy.



## Acts 16:6-10:

**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.**

They found Timothy in Lystra. From there, they travelled through the Phrygian Galatian region, which would have included Antioch of Pisidia where they travelled earlier. We are told that the Spirit somehow forbade them from going to Asia at this point. In this era, Asia would have referred to the Western portion of what is modern day Turkey, where Ephesus was located.

We don't know why God forbade them from going there or how. All we know is that Paul kept travelling, but without any particular idea of a destination. God won't let him go to Asia, so he tries to go to Bithynia, but that doesn't work either. He keeps travelling and gets to Troas.

Finally he receives this vision of a Macedonian man asking for help. Now he knows what God wants him to do. Troas also happens to be a port city, which sets the stage for his trip to Philippi that we'll hear about next week.

We learn something important watching Paul: You don't have to go everywhere.

When my wife and I applied to become foster parents, we had to specify to the county what kind of care we were willing to provide. We had to fill out a very long survey with all sorts of categories and indicate whether we'd be willing to care for children with different conditions. Would we care for a child who is in a wheelchair, or blind, or missing a limb, or with a history of violence, or a victim of sexual abuse? Dozens of categories were listed.

It was pretty overwhelming. We signed up to adopt to share what God had given us. We wanted to help. We knew there were limits to how and in what ways we could help, but to set down on a list and map them out felt really odd. How do we decide what we can and cannot help with?

If you are going to be sent somewhere, you need to know that you aren't sent everywhere else. That there are dozens of ways that should not be sent. It might seem like we spend a lot of time telling you about all the things that God wants you to do.

God didn't want Paul going to Asia, and the Spirit didn't let him go to Bithynia. God didn't want Paul doing those things.

Let me assure you that there are lots and lots of things that God does not want you to do. God is not leading some of you to become foster parents. God is not leading some of you to become missionaries. God is not leading some of you to work on homelessness or the housing crisis. God is not leading some of you to teach our children or help with youth ministry or volunteer with Beautiful Day. God isn't sending some of you to share about Jesus in public schools or quit your job to do ministry or start a Bible study at your workplace.

God doesn't want you to force yourself into some grim-faced task of being sent to people you don't like in a way that drives you crazy. God doesn't want you to be going where he hasn't sent you. There are so many ways that you aren't being sent, but there is some way that you are.

God won't let Paul go to Bithynia or Asia, but Paul keeps moving. He's wandering around because he doesn't know where to go. So he picks the place that makes the most sense to him and goes to Troas.

You don't have to go everywhere, but you should go somewhere.

If you don't know where to go, pick something you like. Follow your interests. Start going where it makes the most sense to you. Chances are that there are people there. Talk to them. Be sent to them.

You don't have to everywhere, but you can start by going somewhere.

Don't worry. You don't have you go to Bithynia. God may not want you to go to Asia. And maybe you don't know where to go. So go to Troas. Go wherever it seems to make the most sense. And see if God leads you from there.

For Paul, that resulted in a vision of a Macedonian man asking for help. And with that invitation, the Gospel crosses the Aegean Sea and a whole new group of people will hear the Good News of Jesus Christ.

You don't have to go everywhere, but you should go somewhere. God will guide you on your way. Start walking and listen to God's leading if you don't know where to go. Just start. Walk and listen.

I have a terrible time making decisions. I always want to choose the absolute best thing, so it's easy for me to find myself frozen by options and uncertainty about the best choice. Online reviews are the worst for me. How can you choose something when someone somewhere said it was the worst decision they ever made?

But one of the ways that God has been growing me is by giving me permission to make decisions and start moving in certain directions. Just start moving toward something and see if God redirects me. It's given me a lot more freedom to be decisive with the understanding that God might guide me as I make decisions rather than giving me the perfect decision before I start moving.

Your job is to find out where God is leading you. Not where he is leading me. Not where your spouse thinks you're being led or your children or your pastor or your family. Your job is to find your calling from God. We can be a part of that. But ultimately, it is God that will guide you.

I hope you can see how that takes the pressure off. God will lead you. You don't know to do everything. He will send you where he wants you to go with the people he wants you to go with to do the things that he has prepared for you to do.

Find your path. Or at least start moving in some direction. God will guide you. He will make your destination clear.

## Conclusion

I think back on those days in college when I was trying to give dorm talks. The day before the dorm talk, I would go door to door to invite people to come. I hated it. I completely had to force myself to do it.

I'm not sure if God was calling me to do that or not. I'm not certain it's even worth it to try to figure that out. It was a part of my path and if nothing else, it has prepared me for what came later.

Brothers and sisters, God is sending all of us somewhere. But if that idea terrifies you and sounds like a task too big to handle, then you're probably making it harder than it needs to be.

God isn't trying to get you to do something crazy. He doesn't want you to save the world; he already has done that. God isn't insisting that you find the Christians that annoy you the most and buy a ticket to the place that makes you the most scared so that you can do the thing that you hate above anything else. He doesn't want you to agonize over what to do because you're afraid you might get it wrong.

Find someone you like. Start going somewhere, even if people misunderstand you. Let God show you the way. He will guide you. You will find your path.