

THE GRACE AWAKENING
STUDY TEN

The Grace to Disagree . . . and Press On

Acts 15:36–40

There will always be opposing viewpoints. Perspectives will be as varied as the number of people in the room. Certainly, not all will think as you or I think. If you cannot live with that tension, you won't be as competent a leader as you could be. Disagreements are inevitable.

—Charles R. Swindoll

ONE of the marks of maturity is the ability to disagree without becoming disagreeable. And that takes grace. In fact, handling disagreements with tact is one of the crowning achievements of grace.

The account of the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15:36–40 is a case study in handling conflict with grace. As we step into this passage, let's acknowledge four realities to enlighten our study. First, although we may try to avoid conflict, *disagreements are inevitable*. Tastes and opinions vary from person to person. Pick any divisive subject—parenting, politics, economics, fashion, diet, music, or theology—and you'll find people positioned on both sides of the fence.

Additionally, *even the godly will sometimes disagree*. Does this fact surprise you? Two people who wholeheartedly love the Lord and His Word can stand divided on certain issues.

Speaking of “issues,” *in every disagreement there will be a root issue and opposing viewpoints*. The issue involves principles and is usually objective. Viewpoints involve personalities and tend to be subjective. By calmly defining the issue and seeking to understand both points of view, we can navigate most disagreements.

Here's a final thought—*in many disagreements, each side is valid*. Often, conflicts are not a matter of who's right and who's wrong. Both sides can be equally right though they hold different perspectives. It's possible to agree about the essentials of the faith but to disagree over the nonessentials. Strongly held beliefs can even lead to separation in a relationship—as in the case of Paul and Barnabas.



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Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

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PREPARE YOUR HEART

Take a moment to bring before the Lord a disagreement that you've had or that may arise with a certain individual if you state your point of view. What was or could be the central issue?

What are your viewpoints regarding this issue?

Tell the Lord your concerns about your relationship with this person and ask Him to reveal principles from His Word that can guide you.



YOUR TURN IN THE SCRIPTURES

We open the case file of Paul versus Barnabas as the two missionaries discuss a plan to “go back and visit each city where [they] previously preached the word of the Lord, to see how the new believers [were] doing” (Acts 15:36).¹ On this plan, they agreed. But then they hit a reef of conflict, as even godly friends do.



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What was their point of disagreement (*Acts 15:37–38*)?

Paul and Barnabas' argument related to some rough seas they encountered on their first missionary journey. Among the many troubles on the trip was the heartbreaking desertion of "their assistant" John Mark (13:5). He abandoned the mission in the port town of Perga on the coast of Pamphylia. The text doesn't mention the reason, just the fact: "John Mark left them and returned to Jerusalem" (13:13).

Let's do a little digging to discover who John Mark was and some possible motives for him abandoning ship.



Observation: Background of the Disagreement

In our *Searching the Scriptures* method, a handy tool to help unlock the meaning of a passage is a map of the region during that period of history. Visualize the physical backdrop of the story by locating Pamphylia on a map. We recommend *Zondervan Essential Atlas of the Bible* by Carl G. Rasmussen, which you can purchase in the Insight for Living Ministries online store. This resource contains an excellent set of maps of the missionary journeys of Paul. You can also find Paul's journeys in the maps section of your Bible.

Trace the route of Paul's first missionary journey from Antioch in Syria through the island of Cyprus and then north to the coast of Pamphylia and beyond. Find the city of Perga, noticing its location in the Cestrus River plain at the foot of the treacherous Taurus Mountains.

Next, go to the website [Bible History Online](#) and read the article "Pamphylia" in the *ISBE Bible Dictionary*. What do you learn from this intriguing discussion of the history and conditions of the region?



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Why Did John Mark Leave?

Bible commentators have offered various theories to solve the puzzle of why John Mark deserted the team to return to Jerusalem. One clue was his destination. To whom in Jerusalem may John Mark have longed to return, and how may that longing have played into his decision (*Acts 12:12*)?

Another clue is buried in Paul's comment to the Galatian believers about Paul's poor health when he first met them (after John Mark left). Read *Galatians 4:13* in light of what you learned about "excessively hot" Pamphylia above, and then surmise a reason for John Mark calling it quits.

Other possibilities are listed in Constable's Notes on Acts 13:13 at lumina.bible.org. Go to Constable's Notes in the right column and locate the comments at verse 13 under the heading "Arrival at Pamphylia." Whether one or all of these motives prompted John Mark to leave, the bottom line is that in the heat of battle, the young soldier went AWOL.



Interpretation: Some Biblical Guidelines That Magnify Grace

What meaning can we find in Paul and Barnabas' disagreement over John Mark? Notice the words used to describe the intensity of their argument. "Paul disagreed *strongly*" (*Acts 15:38*, emphasis added). And "there occurred such a *sharp disagreement*" (*15:39* NASB, emphasis added). This was no calm conversation in a coffee shop!

The issue that sparked the clash between Paul and Barnabas was this: *Should someone who had deserted them in the past be given a second chance?* Barnabas said, "Yes!" Paul countered, "No way!"



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In his commentary *Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary: Insights on Acts*, Chuck peeled back the English biblical text to reveal the argument's passionate intensity as reflected in the Greek:

In Acts 15:37–38, the phrases “wanted to take” and “kept insisting” both use imperfect tense verbs, which indicates ongoing or repetitive action. Barnabas wanted to take John Mark and wouldn't let the issue go. Paul felt equally determined and refused to relent. Neither man would back down, which caused the argument to escalate to the point of “sharp disagreement” (*paroxysmos* [3948]). We derive our English word “paroxysm” from this Greek term. . . . Classical Greek medical writers use the word to describe a sudden, violent spasm, such as a body-racking cough or an epileptic seizure. The air grew thick with passion as each man convulsed with fiery emotion in response to the other.²

As with most heated disagreements, *aspects of both viewpoints can be valid*. On the one hand, Barnabas was concerned about his cousin. Yes, John Mark was his *cousin* (Colossians 4:10)! On the other hand, Paul was concerned about the mission.

In the following space, write your understanding of Barnabas' position. And write your understanding of Paul's position.

For Barnabas, the issue involved his own flesh and blood and the future of a promising minister. For Paul, it was a matter of the salvation of souls and the future of Christianity. In Barnabas' sight line was the *man*; in Paul's, the *ministry*.³



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 **Correlation: A Biblical Case for Both Sides**

Correlating Scripture validates the truth we’ve discovered in one passage with a text from another. As you consider Barnabas’ and Paul’s points of view, list the reasons for and against giving John Mark a second chance. To prompt your thinking, we’ve included a few Bible verses that the men could have referenced to support their case.

| <p>Barnabas’ Viewpoint <i>Psalm 103:8–10; Acts 9:26–30; 11:25–26</i></p> | <p>Paul’s Viewpoint <i>Proverbs 25:19; Luke 9:62</i></p> |
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Each view aligns with Scripture. Both sides have merit. Even so, neither man backed down. Unable to find middle ground, these two missionaries whose relationship held the closest of filial bonds chose the only course on which they could agree. Read *Acts 15:39–41*, then write down what happened.

How did God bring good out of a difficult situation? Paul went on to plant churches through Asia and Europe, and Barnabas mentored John Mark, who later became the writer of the gospel of Mark and the object of Paul’s highest regard (Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11; Philemon 24). The separation strategy worked. John Mark got his second chance *and* Christianity spread!



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Application: Modeling Grace through Disagreeable Times

We will always encounter people with whom we disagree. We can't escape that. But we can learn to disagree graciously. Here are four suggestions to help you model grace when those disagreeable times come.

- *Always leave room for an opposing viewpoint.* Few attitudes in relationships are as destructive as a completely closed mind.
- *If an argument does occur, don't insult or assassinate the other person's character.* An argument is one thing. Character assassination and name-calling is another. If you must spar with someone over an issue, fight fair.
- *If you don't get your way, get over it and get on with your life.* If you lose an argument even though you believed you were in the right, don't bear a grudge. Take it on the chin, as the saying goes. Life is too short to be petty and pouty after losing an argument.
- *Sometimes the best solution is separation.* The situation with Paul and Barnabas set a biblical precedent for separation, even permanent separation. We never read of Paul and Barnabas ministering together again. Separation is never easy, but it may be God's way of moving you on to another dimension of ministry.

What application point based on the principles from this study can you apply to your life?

Reflect on the situation you prayed about in the "Prepare Your Heart" section on page 2. How might the principles and application points from this study help guide you?



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What next step is God telling you to take in your difficult relationship?

How you handle disagreements will determine the health of your relationships. Take it from the example of Paul and Barnabas: disagreements happen. And when they do, handle them with grace.



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, help me to see issues from all points of view. Deliver me from being closed-minded and disagreeable. Make me both a “forgiver” like Barnabas and an “achiever” like Paul—a person who balances forgiving grace and missional passion. And when I get involved in a conflict with another person, shine the light on our path together so we both know our next steps are in Your will. Amen.

ENDNOTES

1. For another study on the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas, see the *Searching the Scriptures* study “What If You Need a Second Chance?” from the sermon series, *What If . . . ?* by Charles R. Swindoll, https://insightforliving.swncdn.com/pdf/retail/series/What_If_STS_Studies.pdf.
2. Charles R. Swindoll, *Swindoll’s Living Insights New Testament Commentary: Insights on Acts* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2016), 311. You can purchase this commentary at our [online store](#).
3. For an insightful imaginary dialogue between Paul and Barnabas, see Charles R. Swindoll, *The Grace Awakening* (Nashville: W Publishing, 2003), 171–72.



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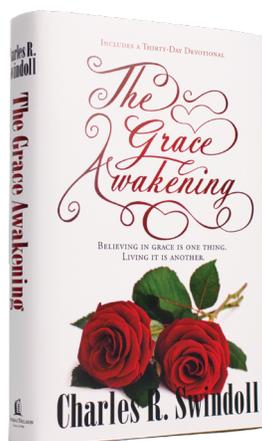
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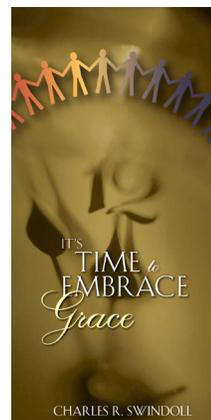
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For the 2019 broadcast, this *Searching the Scriptures* study was developed by Bryce Klabunde, executive vice president of Pastoral Ministries, based upon the original outlines, charts, and transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll's messages.

