

WHAT IF . . . ?

What If You Need a Second Chance?

Acts 13:2–5; 15:36–41



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Imagine a world in which second chances were not allowed. One chance would be all we would get, and a single mistake would disqualify us from trying again. No do-overs. No appeals for leniency. One misstep, and done!

What a harsh world that would be! And yet we can put ourselves into that world whenever we fail and decide to give up rather than try again. Perhaps we quit because, in our shame, we think we don't deserve a second chance. Or maybe, we give up because no one ever came alongside us with a consoling embrace and an offer to help us succeed.

In this study, we'll read the account of a young man whose failure landed him in the harsh world of no second chances . . . until a man whose name means "Son of Encouragement" ushered him into the kingdom of grace, where no sin is beyond forgiveness and no failure is final.



YOUR TURN IN THE SCRIPTURES

We enter the story as Paul and Barnabas discuss plans to "go back and visit each city where [they] previously preached the word of the Lord, to see how the new believers are doing" (Acts 15:36). On this plan, they agreed. But then they hit a reef of conflict, as even the best of friends sometimes do.

What was their point of disagreement? Read Acts 15:37–38.

Quotable

*We talk today
about second
chances, but what
we're really dealing
with is forgiving
someone again and
again and again
and again and
again.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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Their argument spilled over from the rough seas they encountered on their first missionary journey. Among the many troubles on the trip was the heartbreaking blow when John Mark, who accompanied Paul and Barnabas “as their assistant” (Acts 13:5), deserted 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.



Searching the Scriptures Study Tools

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. 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 Web site, Bible History Online (www.bible-history.com), click the “Tools” tab, open the *ISBE Bible Dictionary*, and read the article “Pamphylia.” What do you learn from this intriguing discussion of the history and conditions of the region?

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)?



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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 at lumina.bible.org. Find Acts 13 in the left column and click on Constable's Notes in the right column, locating the comments on verse 13. 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.

Issue and Viewpoints

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

In *Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary: Acts*, Chuck peels back the English biblical text to reveal their 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" (*paraxysmos* [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.¹

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. 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*.²



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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.

| Barnabas' Viewpoint Psalm 103:8–10; Acts 9:26–30; 11:25–26 | Paul's Viewpoint Proverbs 25:19; Luke 9:62 |
|---|---|
| | |

Each view aligns with Scripture. Both sides have merit. But 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, and write down what happened and how God brought good out of a difficult circumstance.

Epilogue

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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Bring It Home

What if, like John Mark, you need a second chance because of a past failure or sin? First, open Christ's door of forgiveness to enter God's throne of grace, where you will receive mercy for sinners in need (Hebrews 4:14–16). Second, pray for an encourager like Barnabas to mentor you. And third, follow these steps to maturity: humbly admit your wrong without making excuses, seek forgiveness from those offended, make restitution, accept any consequences, and, most of all, be teachable.

What if, like Paul and Barnabas, you disagree with someone about the wisdom of offering someone a second chance? If so, Chuck offers this path: work hard at seeing the other point of view, seek a wise compromise, care enough to work through it rather than stomp out of the room in anger, and, if you can't find resolution, determine to disagree without becoming disagreeable.

Are you in either of these situations currently—deciding whether to give someone a second chance? Review the points of this lesson, pray, and write down the direction you need to go.



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 fail, help me not to quit in shame but to accept Your second chances and find encouragers who will guide me to a better way. Amen.

Endnotes

1. Charles R. Swindoll, *Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary: Acts* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale House, 2016), 311. You can purchase this commentary at our online store, <https://store.insight.org>.
2. 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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SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

STUDY



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For the 2017 broadcast, this *Searching the Scriptures* study was developed by the Pastoral Ministries Department in collaboration with Mark Tobey, based upon the original outlines, charts, and sermon transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll's messages.



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