

# Explore the Bible: Strengthened

December 13, 2017

- The Explore the Bible lesson for Dec. 31 focuses on Acts 15:36-41; 16:1-5.

One of the main roles we should carry out within our local church communities is to strengthen the body of believers. This task teaches us individual humility, seeing the needs of others as greater than our own. In the church, there is no room for anything less.

When members focus on tearing down the local body, they are replicating the world more than they are following Christ. This is why the word “edify” should be our aim—to build up and not tear down. *Ask your group: How can we edify each other?*

For example, Paul exhorted the Ephesians to use their words in an edifying manner: “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen” (Ephesians 4:29). We see that edification and strengthening go hand in hand.

## Parting Ways (Acts 15:36-39)

Coming from the most edifying letter (15:23-29) and the most strengthened response (15:30-35), we sadly turn to a harsh reality. Separation happens, and there is no pretty way to look at it. Up to this point, the message of *Acts* clearly was being driven by this dynamic duo of Barnabas and Paul.

Yet, disagreements have a way of interrupting what is going well. I encourage you to not try to beautify this picture, and at the same time do not venture into exasperation. Even two upstanding and faithful servants may disagree.

Their disagreement was whether or not to re-include a deserter, and the word for “deserted” is affiliated with “apostasy” (J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, 276). We are not to judge whose preference was right. We may, though, look to how they responded. They simply went their different ways to further the gospel and strengthen the congregations.

Consider these questions: *How may we disagree and still strengthen the church? At what point—if any—is it the right decision to part ways in light of a disagreement? What are current issues in churches that are causing significant disagreements?*

## **A New Team (Acts 15:40-41; 16:1-3)**

Antioch once again launched missionaries, but this time in new groups. Luke, the author of *Acts*, continues forward with the work of Paul rather than Barnabas, and so we are introduced to new characters who become more familiar—Silas and Timothy.

Silas was introduced to us briefly as one of the believers who brought the letter from Jerusalem (15:22), who was well qualified to “encourage and strengthen the believers” (15:32) as a prophetic voice. As an encourager, he was a much-needed succeeding voice to the absent presence of Barnabas.

Timothy, however, was a discovery to this new team, a prospect discovered by a talent scout in a spiritual sense. His background as being both a Greek and Jew would serve well in light of Paul’s call as a Christianized Jew to the Gentiles.

The question comes up about Timothy’s circumcision and why Paul would do this. In Paul’s letters we see Timothy referred to as “his son,” so it makes sense that they would both have mutual appeal to Jews and Gentiles. Both were seen as teachers of “grace over law,” and both would be found

faithful to each audience's present belief.

## **Growth Seen (Acts 16:4-5)**

“So the churches were strengthened in faith and grew daily in numbers” (16:5). By the witness and encouragement of servants, these churches that Paul, Silas, and Timothy visited were given strength to continue in their good work.

This brief vignette encapsulates our lesson today, showing that believers who serve the congregations by edifying them will be a part of something alive and real. The natural reaction to edification is growth. *How does this reality stir us to engage our churches as encouragers and strengtheners?*

Consider starting here: *Ask your group members to speak an edifying word to your group. Next, after hearing these words, ask you group to describe how these edifying words spoke to them.* It is amazing to see how edification births edification, and strength gives more strength.

## **Conclusion**

Since it is through words that we see edification at work in our passage, allow me to share a post I noticed on social media recently: “Before you speak, T-H-I-N-K. Is it *True*? Is it *Helpful*? Is it *Inspiring*? Is it *Necessary*? Is it *Kind*?”

While this post may not be directly from the Bible or a theologian or philosophical thinker, it is a good reminder that if we are to strengthen others, we need to pause and consider what we say and do to ensure that we are strengthening others.

Have your group answer this question: *What do I need to change in me so that I will be a person who strengthens others, and strengthens the*

*church?* Encourage everyone to think critically about this. Considering this may be the key to a stronger group, a stronger church and a growing body of believers.

*Heath A. Kirkwood is lead pastor of First Baptist Church in Lorena.*